

Conversion, Penance, Reconciliation

Vatican City (NC) — Here is the Vatican's English-language translation of Pope John Paul II's speech in Latin at the closing of the 1983 world Synod of Bishops Oct. 29.

Venerable brothers,
 "Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo" (Ps. 89:2).
 (I shall sing of the Lord's mercies forever.)

At the conclusion of the synod, which has seen us united to reflect on the theme "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church," the sentiment which rises spontaneously from our hearts can only be that of praise and recognition of the infinite goodness of the Lord "who reveals his omnipotence especially in mercy and forgiveness" (cf. Collect of the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time.)

It is a sentiment which we express with a spirit deeply aware of our own personal weaknesses as well as those of the faithful entrusted to our pastoral care. Perhaps we do not stray far from the truth if we see in the very difficulties and tensions which emerged during the discussions, the manifestation of that which must be reconciled and healed in the ecclesial body, through penance for one's own sins and for those of all men. In fact, the pastors bear the sufferings and the wounds of their flock, even though they may not realize it. The grace of the synod is to be able to give a name to these sufferings and to these wounds, to receive healing and salvation, to do penance through the grace of reconciliation. In their discussions the synodal fathers have lived that which must constitute the object of penance, that which is necessary in order to obtain the forgiveness from God.

Motivated by this knowledge, more than once during the sessions of the synod, the idea repeatedly emerged of manifesting externally, through a communitarian act of penance, that which constitutes the theme of our work during the last weeks.

Such an act of penance took place during the "Via Crucis" at the end of the synod. Through meditation on the passion of Christ, we were inserted in the current of the year of redemption, which is being manifested in the individual churches. In Rome, we encounter this in each parish, in each basilica of the city and in a special way in St. Peter's.

I thank all the brothers of the episcopate who, together with me, "opened" the jubilee of redemption on March 25th, and who preside over its realization in their dioceses.

I also thank those who come to Rome this year. The number of pilgrims, especially during these last months, has increased greatly. The fact that many people are frequenting the "sacrament of penance" is also consoling. We are likewise ensuring a sufficient number of confessors.

The idea of the extraordinary jubilee linked with the 1950th anniversary of redemption emerged relatively late. The first announcement was published only in November of last year, during the plenary meeting of cardinals. Despite the relatively modest preparations, the initiative had as it seems, "great resonance." It would seem that this corresponds to a greatly felt need. This need concretizes itself around the mystery of redemption as the source of reconciliation and penance in the church and in the contemporary world. And it certainly reflects the anxieties which accompany man in this second millennium as it draws to an end.

The idea of the year of redemption came after the decision to call the synod on the theme: "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church." At the same time it would be difficult not to observe that these two initiatives "complete each other" in a special way. Their encounter should be recognized as a providential circumstance. In this way the synod springs in a certain way from that which, in the year of redemption, the church tries to live, and at the same time the extraordinary jubilee finds in the work of the synod a particular theological and pastoral deepening.

In a special way I wish to thank divine providence for this.

At the same time I wish to thank you, dear brothers and the entire episcopate of the church. I already did this on the day of the inauguration of the synod; today I repeat it once again, at the moment of its closure. I give thanks because our "thoughts and our solicitudes were concentrated on a great cause": "reconciliation and penance." On my part, I felt the deep need to confront this problem, of vital importance for Christian "existence itself." I also manifested this in a special way in the encyclical "Dives in Misericordia," whose most important passages are dedicated to the problem of "metanoia," that is to say of penance as conversion, or rather continuous conversion towards God. Reconciliation is the fruit of this conversion, whether it be reconciliation with God or reconciliation with men as brothers.

In this way, penance (metanoia) and reconciliation reveal themselves as a dimension — indeed the fundamental dimension — of the entire Christian existence. The synod on "reconciliation and penance" has above all an existential importance. In it we touch in a certain sense the roots of the Christian being in the contemporary world. From this point of view the crisis of penance in its diverse forms must be a source of anxiety. We are dealing here also with penance as a determined complex of symptomatic ways of acting in the entire tradition of the people of God, be it in the Old or in the New Covenant. The trinomial "fasting-alms-prayer" — this trinomial expresses not only certain actions (deeds of penance), but also bears witness to a vital reference to God in the very manner of the existence of the believing person. It is a reference "imbued by 'metanoia.'" Conversion to God, the turning to him, is manifested not only through prayer but also through the "detachment" and "breaking away" from creatures (fasting), especially when they impede union with God. And parallel to this emerges the opening of man towards others (alms).

Our pastoral anxiety concerns these same interior attitudes which can be noted among Christians, especially

in certain circles, surroundings and societies. The dimension of penance is lacking in them. The practice of the "sacrament of penance" is not an isolated problem. It finds its roots — or else does not find them — exactly in this fundamental manner of the existence of man, when he is reached by the call from Christ which echoes from the first words of the Gospel:

"Convert — Poenitemini."

There is the preoccupation that, ceding to the current of change, one may detach oneself from the attitude of penance, and also from the "penitential" practice of Christian life, which was at one time defined in detail, without being able to introduce to its right place a new practice which responds in a better way to the needs and the possibilities of our era, and is also rather expressive and vital. In other words: there is the preoccupation that in this field, so fundamental for the entire Christian existence, "metanoia-penance," one risks reaching a void "sui generis," a lack. This lack, if it should really occur, would concern the integral "mystery" of Christian life and as a consequence would manifest itself in the way of considering the sacramental life, in particular the sacraments of penance and Eucharist. In the encyclical "Redemptor Hominis," I already tried to call attention to this point.

This is precisely the solicitude — I believe our common solicitude — which has found its manifestation in the Synod of Bishops of 1983. At the same pace as this, a second solicitude appears which is linked to the multiple significance of the expression "reconciliation" not only in the religious sense but also in lay terminology.

Here we have found ourselves in the environment of those circles of dialogue, about which Paul VI already wrote during the council (encyclical "Ecclesiam Suam"): dialogue in the area of Christianity (ecumenism); dialogue in the area of "non-Christian religions," and finally dialogue with "the world." Paul VI embraced all these circles of dialogue with the concept of "dialogue of salvation," and he inscribed this in the context of the mission of the church and of evangelization ("Evangelii Nuntiandi"). Posing the problem of reconciliation and penance, the synod confronted it on the terrain of the proper mission of the church and of evangelization properly so-called. Both ecumenism and the search for the ways of coming closer to the non-Christian religions found themselves in the context of the theme of reconciliation and penance.

As far as the contemporary world is concerned, we are witnesses of growing contrasts and menacing conflicts of varying scale. They also "cry with raised voices" in favor of reconciliation — with raised voices because the eloquence of the disasters and the cataclysms with which these contrasts menace humanity becomes ever more limpid.

In your interventions you have expressed a vivid preoccupation for world peace. The international situation is very tense and I am also very troubled. The church must commit herself to use every means at her disposal to ward off the dangers which menace world security and solicit those responsible in the nations to resolutely address themselves in the directions which lead towards a guaranteed and stable peace.

In these days I sent a pressing appeal to the presidents of the United States and of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union asking them to not turn away from negotiation as the only way to recompose differences and the conflicts of interest and to put an end to the arms race, which keeps the whole of contemporary humanity in apprehension.

In this field the church has the acute conscience and never ceases to announce the message of justice and peace in a manner proportionate to the needs of and the threat to the contemporary world. This is being done by the bishop of Rome and by each bishop, the Apostolic See as each episcopate recognizing this chapter of their preaching and activity as a part of evangelization.

This problem has been placed in a new light at the synod: It constitutes the integrating part of "reconciliation and penance," of that "metanoite" which is in a certain sense the first word of the Gospel. If one may and must speak in an analogical sense about social sin, and also about "structural sin" — since sin is properly an act of the person — for us, as pastors and theologians, the following problem arises: Which penance and which social reconciliation must correspond to this "analogical" sin?

The synod has only undertaken and delineated this problem in relationship to the Gospel calling.

In fact, the way to radically overcome sin, of every kind and in every measure, is the Gospel way, called "metanoia": the way of reconciliation through repentance, that is to say, conversion.

It would seem that both the problems delineated form the elements of the contemporary penitential catechesis of the church. The penitential catechesis is at the same time a preparation for the sacrament of penance. We, in the contemporary church, must prepare ourselves for the sacrament of penance on basis of an adequately integrated catechesis of penance. Contemporaneously, we must always have before our eyes the profoundly personal character of this sacrament, which does not exclude in any way the social dimension of sin and of penance. We must also keep before our eyes its central position in the entire economy of the work of salvation, its particular link with the paschal mystery of Christ and of the church.

In fact, immediately after his passion and his death, on the very day of his resurrection, on the occasion of the first visit to the apostles gathered in the Cenacle, Jesus Christ pronounced these words: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (Jn. 20:22-23). The importance of these words and of this event is such that they should be considered alongside the importance of the Eucharist itself.

During the synod we spoke a great deal about the sacrament of penance in the post-council period, in the

light of the dispositions contained in the "Ordo Poenitentiae." All these voices were marked by the knowledge that we are dealing with a very deep question. There is no other desire in us than that of carrying out the will of our Lord, who transmitted and entrusted this sacrament to us in a particular way for the good of the church and for the salvation of man. This desire was manifested in all the stages of the discussion and is finally expressed in the "proposals" of the synod.

The brief time at our disposal does not consent us to dwell any longer on the various questions which were dealt with in the synodal assembly regarding "penance and reconciliation," both under the doctrinal aspect and in the applications to concrete situations. The document in which, with God's help, all the richness of the elements which emerged during the synod will be gathered together, will see that these concepts are adequately deepened.

The ecclesial event which today reaches its conclusion was prepared with great care in everything which regards its important theme. I would like to express my warm thanks to all those who have contributed to this in an especially active way. In this context I am very happy to recall explicitly the three cardinals who acted as presidents delegate, the relator, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the secretary general, Archbishop Jozef Tomko, and the special secretary, Father Jose Saraiva Martins. My thought also goes out to embrace the auditors and the various commissions, committees and the services. All have worked with great dedication and merit gratitude and praise.

In the preparation there has also been some emphasis on a reflection on the Synod of Bishops as such, on a more correct and perhaps broader concept of its operation, on the possibilities of changes and improvements in its procedure.

All these problems have been presented by the secretary general of the synod in his introductory report. A new step also was the report by Bishop Javier Lozano Barragan, who allowed us to see, within the dimension of each single country in the various parts of the world, that which could be called the "implementation" of the preceding session of the synod in 1980 on the theme of marriage and the family in the mission of the church.

On my part, I wish to express my thanks in a particular way for all these initiatives. The Synod of Bishops, which the church inherited from Vatican Council II, is truly a great good. We are ever more convinced of this. Each session confirms this conviction. I believe that in expressing these words I am expressing the common thought, but above all I desire to manifest my own.

The Synod of Bishops is a particularly precious manifestation of the episcopal collegiality of the church, and one of its most effective instruments. Perhaps this instrument could also be improved. Perhaps collegial pastoral responsibility could be expressed in the synod even more fully. Nonetheless one must note that, in the form in which it exists and presently operates (in the Year of Our Lord 1983), it renders an enormous service to the church. This service is important from the point of view of the life of the church, of its self-realization. It is important from the point of view of our pastoral ministry, of our ministry which is precisely collegial ministry.

The structure of the synod permits us to obtain, in a relatively brief period of time, a synthetic and at the same time sufficiently differentiated image of a specific problem ("voir") and arrive at conclusions ("juger"), important for the action of the church ("agir"). The synod is, one might say, an instrument that is humble and at the same time sufficiently effective.

If formally the consultative character of its work prevails, it is difficult not to perceive to what extent this "counsel" at the same time carries important ecclesial weight. It is therefore even more important that the documents, which appear after the synod, reflect the common thought of the synodal assembly and of the pope who presides over it "ex officio."

In this spirit today I wish, venerable brothers, to say to each of you and together with all, how highly I appreciate the synodal communion of our last four weeks. The love of the church demands that this mother of ours be ever better known, because in this way we may serve her in an ever more effective manner. From this point of view the synodal experience, the possibility of encounter with the bishops of the entire world, the possibility of listening to so many competent assertions, is for me an especially precious and important occasion. Thanks to this event I can better understand the church which Christ our Lord entrusted to all of us when he entrusted her to the apostles and to Peter.

The happy and fraternal experience lived within the synodal community brings spontaneously to my mind the recollection of those brothers in the episcopate who, despite their own desire and despite the active concern shown by the Apostolic See, could not be here among us. The absence of their representatives has prevented the episcopates of Lithuania, of Latvia and of Laos from participating directly in this important event of the Catholic Church. The episcopate of Czechoslovakia, also, was represented by only one of the two prelates designated. This synodal assembly has thus been deprived of the contributions which could have emerged from these brothers on the pastoral reality of their countries.

The synodal community always preserves something of that first gathering of the apostles around the mother of Christ as they waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

May our synodal community also, gathered to reflect on "reconciliation and penance," marked by the canonization of St. Leopold Mandic, great servant of the conational, prepare the church, through the work of the mother of Christ, to receive the Holy Spirit: Spirit of conversion and Spirit of peace.

Fr. Paul Cuddy

On the Rig

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