

Vatican Absolution Recommendation Criticized

Theologian: Goes directly against 'what Paul VI was trying to do'

By Jerry Filteau
NC News Service

Several American theologians have criticized a recommendation from the Vatican's International Theological Commission that it would be better for priests not to use general absolution even in legally sanctioned circumstances, but to substitute non-sacramental communal penance.

Jesuit Father Francis Buckley, a theologian at the University of San Francisco, summarized the view of several when he asked, "Why are non-sacramental forms to be preferred to sacramental forms in a church which rejoices in the sacraments?"

"Theologically it doesn't make sense," said Jesuit Father Ladislav Orsy of the Catholic University of America, a canon lawyer and theologian who has written extensively on the history and theology of penance.

The view of the commission goes directly contrary to "what Pope Paul VI was trying to do" when he expanded the use of general absolution, said Msgr. Frederick McManus, academic vice president at the Catholic University of America and a canon law and liturgy expert.

The theological commission, a papally appointed group of 30 theologians, meets yearly to discuss major doctrinal and theological questions posed to it by the pope or by the Vatican's doctrinal congregation.

Its reports are only advisory, but they are not made public unless they are released by the prefect of the doctrinal congregation, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who is also the ex officio president of the commission.

In its latest report, "Penance and Reconciliation," published in the United States in January, the commission argued against use of general absolution even in most of the "extraordinary emergency situations" in which church norms permit its use.

Instead, it suggested, a non-sacramental communal penance service should be used, in which any participants in a state of serious sin should be urged to make an act of perfect contrition.

The commission argued that there is confusion about the later obligation to confess serious sins after general absolution, but the perfect contrition approach makes this obligation "psychologically more understandable to most of the faithful."

"That's like saying that when people attend Mass, at times they should not take Communion in order to increase the psychological impact of the presence of Christ," Father Orsy commented.

At issue, said Msgr. McManus, is "the deprivation of the sacrament of penance."

Msgr. Richard Malone, director of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, acknowledged that the commission's position on general absolution was controversial. But he defended the document, saying that it is "aimed at reviving the whole sacrament of penance" and "intent on saving the sacrament from being gobbled up by general absolution."

(In Rome, American Passionist Father Barnabas Ahern, a Bible scholar and member of the commission, expressed essentially the same views as Msgr. Malone. The document's main purpose is to tackle "the fundamental crisis of penance stemming from the loss of a sense of sin," and its stand against general absolution was an attempt "to bring people alive to the basic elements which go to make up contrition and penance," he told the NC News Rome bureau.)

Father Buckley saw a different pastoral issue at stake, however.

"If somebody is in a state of mortal sin, to deprive him of the sacrament for a long time is unpastoral," he said. The

document "shows a shocking disregard for the horror of remaining in serious sin," he said.

Msgr. McManus and Father Orsy noted the commission's focus on the mortal sin issue and suggested that for the average Catholic not in serious sin the question of general absolution should be viewed through a different prism.

"If we urge people to frequent the sacrament, should we not under some extraordinary circumstances offer general absolution?" asked Msgr. McManus. If the sacrament can be made available, "one can't argue that it is desirable" to substitute a non-sacramental service, he said.

Father Orsy said he found several positive points in the total document of the commission, notably that it "faces the problem of what is a mortal sin."

A clearer understanding that mortal sin is a "serious break" with God and his grace would help people to understand that when this happens, "individual reconciliation is necessary," he said.

"On the other hand, for the so-called 'ordinary sins'...general absolution can be used," he added.

This theological view, he noted, coincides with church law that requires individual confession only for mortal sins but recommends frequent reception of the sacrament whether one is in a state of serious sin or not.

He noted that the church trusts people to come to their own decision about their spiritual state regarding the reception of Communion.

If the church showed the same trust in administering the sacrament of penance, he suggested, it would continue to offer individual confession to all those who "wish or need it," but could also provide penitential services with general absolution as a form of the sacrament for those who wished it and were not in need of individual confession.

Today's Message: Forget It! Columnist Spurns Horoscopes

Vatican City (NC) - A priest-columnist for the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano has said reading horoscopes is contrary to Christian faith and morality.

The opinion piece, which appeared in the Jan. 19 issue, was written by a Franciscan theologian, Father Gino Concetti, who is on the paper's staff.

"Christian morality," said the priest, "warns not only not to put faith in horoscopes, but also not to use them, so as not to subject the faith to the risk of pollution and not to offer the occasion of scandal to believers who are weak and insufficiently developed."

The theologian criticized those who put their trust implicitly in horoscopes, because this contradicts providence and free will, and those who read them merely out of curiosity, because this can increase their popularity and lead others to believe in them.

The columnist said horoscopes were "increasingly becoming the object of wide interest" and that they had moved from women's magazines to large daily newspapers and then to radio and television.

"Science," said the priest, "...has always denied the foundation of horoscopes... (by demonstrating) that persons born under the same constellations have had diverse inclinations and lives that were totally different."

"While not wishing to deny that the stars exercise an influence on the balance of the universe, on plants, on animals and on other things, and even on human beings," the columnist observed, "...the influence of the stars is never so determinative as to condition the freedom of the person, his self-knowledge, his responsibility."

"So much less," he added, "can it constitute material for foreseeing the future of one person alone, of persons

together, or of the entire human race."

Father Concetti said that belief in horoscopes is contrary to Christian teaching on theological and on anthropological grounds because it rejects divine providence as the guardian of a person's future and because it clashes with the essential self-determining factor of free will.

The increased popularity of horoscopes, the priest observed, "is in proportion to a decline in the authentic sense of religion."

St. Patrick's Pupils Observe Schools Week

Seneca Falls - A host of activities is centered on St. Patrick's School here this week.

Today is scheduled as a "Public Day." Grandparents and parents are invited to the facility. Visitors may purchase books at a book fair which opened Monday. And walking tours of the school, an open house at the computer center, and a family-student hot dog lunch are also featured.

Tomorrow the school will honor special school helpers,

to demonstrate appreciation of the services rendered by the room mothers, the coffee break mothers, the monitors, crossing guards and office volunteers.

Friday will be "Teachers Appreciation Day." A Mass will be celebrated which will include a service in which teachers will rededicate themselves to their work in Catholic Education.

Yesterday's activities included service projects for shut-ins and those in nursing homes.

Sung Latin Mass Scheduled Feb. 5

A sung Latin Mass will be celebrated at 3 p.m., Sunday, Feb. 5, at Corpus Christi Church, East Main and Prince streets.

Celebrant will be Father Robert G. Smith, pastor of St. Margaret Mary Church, assisted by Deacon Kenneth Scarciotta. Lector will be the Rev. Dr. M. Alfred Bichsel.

The Mass provides an opportunity to Eastman School of Music graduate students to sing the traditional Gregorian chants which they are studying. The Kyrie and Gloria

from Mass IX along with the Sanctus and Agnus Dei of Mass IV will be sung.

Chants for the propers have been selected from among the most significant for the season between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent. A booklet will be provided for the congregation which gives various translations and congregational responses.

Lay Carmelites

Rochester Lay Carmelites regular monthly meeting will begin 2:45 p.m., Sunday, Feb. 5 at St. Ann's Home. Rosary will be recited and Mass will be celebrated at 3:05 p.m., with a business meeting following. Visitors are welcome.

Catholics on Cable

Jesuit Father John Powell's "American Catholic" broadcast this week features the New Testament. He describes the New Testament as a special interaction between an individual and God. Starting Monday, he explains the meaning of the Mass.

Father John Bertolucci of Albany hosts a national program, "The Glory of God," listed here for the first time. Weekly program details were not available at press time.

| Program | Cable Company | Channel | Thurs. (2/2) | Fri. (2/3) | Mon. (2/6) |
|---|---|---------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|
| American Catholic with Fr. John Powell, S.J. | American Cable (Rochester) | 5 | 10 a.m. | 7 p.m. | 2 p.m. |
| | American Cable (Webster) | 5 | | | 8 p.m. |
| | Peoples Cable (Subr. Rochester) | 19 | | | 8 p.m. |
| | Channel 12 West (Greece, Gates, Chili) | 12 | 8 p.m. | | |
| The Glory of God with Fr. John Bertolucci | American Cable (Rochester) | 5 | 12 (noon) | 9 p.m. | 4 p.m. |
| | American Cable (Webster) | 5 | | | |
| | Peoples Cable (Subr. Rochester) | 19 | | | |
| | Channel 12 West (Greece, Gates, Chili) | 12 | 7:30 p.m. | | |

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