

Along The Way

With Bishop Matthew H. Clark



Sao Paulo, Brazil, Sunday, Dec. 9

I am on the way home from a visit to Brazil where I joined with our Sisters of St. Joseph in celebration of 20 years of God's blessing on their mission in this country. Sister Elizabeth Anne LeValley and I have a six-hour wait for our flight to New York.

The central event of these days was the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in the town of Paranaiguara. This act of praise and thanksgiving expressed in great measure the joy experienced by our Sisters and the people among whom they have worked during these two decades.

Bishop Benedict Coscia, a Franciscan from Brooklyn who invited our Sisters to Brazil, presided and preached at the celebration. Townsfolk from several of the villages where the Sisters work, religious men and women from the Benedictine and Franciscan communities, and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate came together to share in the liturgy and to express

their affection for their good friends.

Sister Katherine Popowich told the story of the mission from 1963, when the General Chapter of the Sisters of St. Joseph voted to establish a mission in Latin America to the present day when for the first time the congregation has received three Brazilian women as postulants. The story was shot through with references to the providential care of God and expressions of thanks for those who have assisted them including you, the people of the Diocese of Rochester, who, since 1969, have given your generous support.

The liturgy, which began at 11 a.m., was followed by a dinner in the parish hall. We enjoyed many good things, including rice and beans as only the people of Latin America can prepare them.

I had a chance after the Mass and again at the dinner to congratulate and thank the Sisters in your name and to thank those who have treated them so lovingly.

I traveled to Brazil with Sister Rosalma Hayes SSJ who led

the first mission. It was a joy to hear her speak of the early days and to share something of the elation she obviously felt at returning to Brazil for this celebration.

Others told me of the courage and serenity with which Sister faced the challenges of the early years. She and her companions had to adjust not only to the great difficulty of establishing a mission in a foreign country, but they had to adjust as well to all that was happening in the Church in the years during and after Vatican Council II.

It is part of her grace that she is able to speak with gratitude even about the more difficult times and that she is still quite open to changing her own ways if she judges that to be for the good of others.

If in the next 20 years I can show some of the courage to move and grow with the Church that she and our other missionaries have shown in the last 20, I shall be a very happy man.

Peace.

Pope Cites Penance 'Crisis'

Washington (NC) -- The world today has lost its "sense of sin," and "the sacrament of penance is in crisis," Pope John Paul II said in a major new document released Dec. 11.

In the 143-page text, "Reconciliation and Penance," Pope John Paul also warned against ideas of "social sin" that would reduce personal freedom and responsibility.

The document was released simultaneously at the Vatican and in Washington by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The pope reaffirmed church teaching on the existence and nature of mortal sin and venial sin, and he said it was "an essential element of faith" that Christ instituted the sacrament of penance as the ordinary means of forgiveness of sins after baptism.

It would be "foolish" and "presumptuous," the pope said, "to claim to receive forgiveness while doing without the sacrament" of penance.

He reiterated church teaching on the need to confess mortal sins individually and rejected use of general absolution except in extraordinary circumstances, under the strict norms spelled out in the church's general and liturgical laws.

"Reconciliation and Penance" is based on the discussions on that topic by the 1983 world Synod of Bishops. It was dated Dec. 2, the first Sunday of Advent.

The document is identified as a "post-synodal apostolic exhortation," a new description for a papal statement.

In the document the pope began with an overview of divisions in the world today and said that sin is "the radical cause of all wounds

and divisions between people, and in the first place -- reconciliation of a number of penitents with general confession and absolution -- is exceptional in character. It is therefore not left to free choice but is regulated by a special discipline," the pope wrote.

He said that only the bishop can determine if the necessary conditions for general absolution exist in a particular case, and the bishop has "a grave obligation on his own conscience" to see that the norms are followed in such decisions.

The pope also stressed the obligation of those who receive general absolution to confess any serious sins in individual confession "as soon as possible."

No one who has received general absolution once is to receive it a second time "before a normal integral and individual confession," he said.

He particularly urged priests not only to devote time to the ministry of penance, but also to receive the sacrament frequently.

If a priest does not confess frequently and properly, he said, "the whole of his priestly existence suffers an inexorable decline."

While insisting that "sin, in the proper sense, is always a personal act," the pope also said that "from another point of view every sin is social, insofar as and because it also has social repercussions.... There is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it."

He spelled out several specific senses of "social sin" which he said correctly describe certain aspects of sin or certain types of sin.

He warned, however, that

there is one meaning sometimes given to social sin that is not legitimate or acceptable."

This usage, he said, "contrasts social sin and personal sin...in a way that leads more or less unconsciously to the watering down and almost the abolition of personal sin, with the recognition only of social guilt and responsibility."

Pope John Paul described St. Thomas Aquinas' distinctions between mortal and venial sin as "the doctrine which became constant in the church." He declared that certain acts "if carried out with sufficient awareness and freedom, are always gravely sinful."

He noted that some bishops at the synod suggested a "threefold distinction of sins, classifying them as venial, grave and mortal."

The distinction can help indicate "that there is a scale of seriousness among grave sins," the pope said.

"But it still remains true," he added, "that the essential and decisive distinction is between sin which destroys charity, and sin which does not kill the supernatural life: there is no middle way between life and death."

The pope also rejected the idea that the only mortal sin is "an act of 'fundamental option'" to reject God.

In reply the pope declared that "mortal sin exists also when a person knowingly and willingly, for whatever reason, chooses something gravely disordered."

Speaking of the church as a sacrament of reconciliation, Pope John Paul said that reconciliation is "a fundamental task of the church," within its own communion, with other Christian churches and other religious bodies, and with communities and nations.

He called "pastoral dialogue" a basic path of reconciliation, but he also stressed that "what is pastoral is not opposed to what is doctrinal," and authentic dialogue must be based on truth.

To counter confusion about basic Christian truths today, he called for renewed education of Catholics, particularly in such areas as a sense of sin, the meaning of temptation, fasting and other forms of asceticism as a part of penance and conversion, almsgiving, and the church's

social teachings.

Just before the end of the document, Pope John Paul addressed the "particularly delicate" pastoral issue of the divorced and remarried, people who are living together without being married, and priests living "in irregular situations."

In such situations the church expresses "compassion and mercy" but "does not agree to call good evil and evil good," the pope said.

Persons "who are not at the present moment in the objective conditions required" may not receive the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist, he said.

But the church "ever seeks

to offer...reconciliation" and asks those people to "maintain contact with the Lord" through prayer, attendance at Mass, and other acts of piety, he said.

In a departure from previous practice, after the 1983 synod Pope John Paul asked the Council of the Synod Secretariat, an elected body of 15 bishops including U.S. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, to help in drafting the new apostolic exhortation.

Describing the background of the new document in an introduction, the pope said that the document was his own, but it was also "something produced by the synod itself."

Highlights

Washington (NC) -- Highlights of Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation, "Reconciliation and Penance."

-- Overview: In a "shattered world" torn by conflict, division and sin, the church proclaims conversion and reconciliation.

-- Reconciliation: All people need reconciliation to heal breaks with God and with other people. The church preaches it but must also practice it.

-- Sin: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." All must acknowledge their sinfulness.

-- Personal, social sin: Sin, properly speaking, is a personal act, each sin "affects others" and is therefore social. "Social sin" indicates situations or actions that bring disorder in social relationships. The idea of "social sin" cannot be used, however, to water down or eliminate personal responsibility.

-- Mortal, venial sin: The mortal-venial distinction remains valid. Theories that reject the existence of mortal sin are wrong.

-- Conscience: "The loss of the sense of sin" or the "numbness or 'deadening' of conscience" is one of the most serious problems of today. Secularism and some theories of psychology, anthropology, sociology and ethical relativism have contributed to the loss of the sense of sin.

-- Piety: God's "fatherly loving kindness," which is "more powerful than sin," calls Christians to conversion and to piety, in its original sense -- obedient, filial love.

-- Dialogue: In its pastoral ministry, the church focuses on dialogue as one of the basic means of reconciliation.

-- Catechesis: Dialogue must be based on truth, and the church must educate its members. Catechesis is needed on conversion, repentance, asceticism, conscience and its formation, temptation, almsgiving, death and final judgment. It is especially needed on the church's social teachings, which are "in great part the hope for a peaceful solution to many social conflicts."

-- Sacraments: The sacraments are a "divinely instituted means" the church offers for penance and reconciliation.

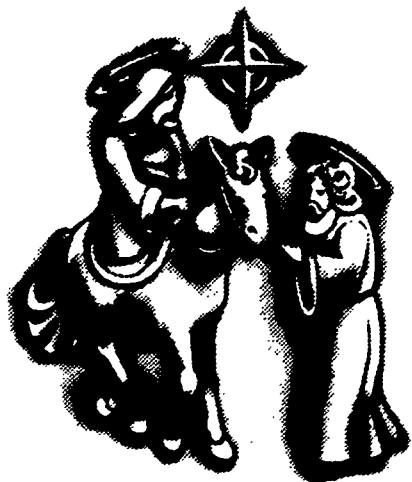
-- Penance: Of particular importance for reconciliation is the sacrament of penance itself, which "is in crisis." The sacrament is needed for the forgiveness of sins, and individual confession is the ordinary form. General absolution is strictly an exceptional case, not a normal form of the sacrament.

-- Special pastoral cases: For persons living together without marriage or living in irregular unions, the church offers compassion and mercy but also truth and consistency. They may not receive the sacraments while they remain in those situations, but they are urged to pray.

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