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THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



EDWIN SULEWSKI
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How do I help the elderly at the time of a funeral?

Death of a loved one is painful. There is a tendency to believe that the elderly adjust more easily because they "should" anticipate the loss. Having more time to prepare does not guarantee that grieving will be easier. The elderly may have fewer resources such as long time friends, money or good health. Losing a partner or long time friend may mean living life alone at a time when a person may be least able to be independent. Support from family and friends at this time is most important. Being over protective or taking away a person's independence by making decisions for them is not desirable and may be harmful. Help the elderly begin their adjustment by attending the funeral and offering specific help.

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Columnists

Learn to listen to the words of life

By Father Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; (R1) Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; (R2) James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27.

Moses told the people: "Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live..."

How is our listening quotient? If you are like most people, you would rather talk than listen. You ask someone how he is, and you respond to his answers with "Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh." Then you rush to the next question. Finally when you have gotten all of that out of the way, you settle down to talking about yourself. You feel justified for having "listened" to your friend, when all you actually did was clear the decks so that you might get an uninterrupted ear.

Another ploy we use is to tune out what we do not like to hear and tune in on causes, ideas, heroes, books, movies and music we favor. "That's sharp," we say. "It's in. It's going to solve all our problems." People have been that way since the days of Moses. When it came to sound instruction, the people of Israel turned off their hearing aids. Repeatedly in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses pleaded, "Israel hear. Listen to what I am teaching that you may live."

The Holy Father says the same thing to all of us. Yet, when I mention how the Holy Father spoke of Our Lady's mediation, so many have responded "That's only his opinion!" Good heavens! What rot!

In the second reading, St. James builds on Moses' admonition. James said: "If all you do is listen to God's word, you are deceiving yourselves." From Moses down to the last apostles, God has given man the instructions he needs to win eternal life. To do so, James warns, we cannot just put away the instructions, like a bride putting away her silverware. You cannot get nourishment by staring at a recipe, or build a boat by looking at the instructions, or pass an examination by just reading the questions.

"No," says James, "act on the word." Put legs on your Christianity and get going. Worship can't take the place of service. But worship can degenerate into mere lip service. Some Christians go to Mass, listen to a homily, and then fold up their halos and go away happy and

A Word for Sunday

content that they have done their Christian bit — let the other fellow beware.

Yet, in the Gospel, the Jews did exactly that. How poorly they had listened to Moses! He had given them the greatest religion of antiquity, and they in turn reduced it to lip service and distorted it. So Christ pointed out, as James and as Moses had, that the greatest threat to revealed religion is formalism. To prevent this happening to the Mass, the Church has built in variety: different penitential rites, eucharistic prayers, etc.

Formalism cares about externals only; it does not care a whit about what goes on in the heart. Formalism is concerned about what people think, not about what God thinks. Formalism asks, "Does it look all right?" rather than, "Is it all right?" Formalism never gets to the heart of problems, because it never gets to the heart!

That is why Moses asked Israel to listen, why James added action to the listening, and why Christ zeroed in on the soul of action, which is the heart. Revolution deals with externals and structures, but changes nothing for the better. The Church calls to renewal, for renewal calls for a change of heart. "Wicked designs come from the deep recesses of the heart." Therefore, the heart alone is effective in changing society.

Speaking of listening, here is what the Mother of God revealed to Father Stefano Gobbi about our hearing the pope: "Love him, pray for him, listen to him! Obey him in all things... The first way of being separated from the pope is that of open rebellion. But there is also another way, more subtle and dangerous. It is that of proclaiming one's unity openly, but of dissenting from him interiorly, letting his teaching fall into a void and, in practice, doing the contrary of what he says" (pp. 231, 237).

Defining a sense of serious sin

By Father Richard P. McBrien

Several years ago, Communion in the hand was the great non-issue that divided the bishops of the United States. Today it's general absolution, the forgiveness of sins given to an assembled congregation outside of the confessional.

Each of these debates has created an impression that the way a sacrament is received is more important to the bishops than the fact that it is received at all.

At their Collegeville meeting in June, the bishops, by a 168-62 vote, tentatively approved "one month" as the criterion to decide when general absolution can be permitted. According to this vote, if the number of penitents is too large for the supply of available confessors, and if those assembled cannot avail themselves of private confession within a month's time, then priests may administer general absolution.

The bishops were simply trying to specify what the new Code of Canon Law left deliberately vague.

Canon 961 forbids general absolution without prior private confession unless "a serious necessity exists, that is, when in the light of the number of penitents a supply of confessors is not readily available rightly to hear the confessions of individuals within a suitable time so that the penitents are forced to be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time through no fault of their own."

The same canon left the matter of time to the discretion of the local bishop, "in the light of criteria agreed upon with other members of the conference of bishops."

Those bishops who opposed the one-month condition predicted that its enforcement would sound the death-knell of the sacrament of reconciliation. Unfortunately, they may be right.

The number of Catholics who "go to confession" has dropped precipitously in the last several years. That's a statistically demonstrated fact which no one can challenge.

The real choice, therefore, is not between general absolution and private confession, but between general absolution and practically nothing else.

On the other hand, those bishops who supported the one-month condition argued that setting such a limit will increase individual confessions and halt abuses. That's only a hope,

Essays in Theology

not statistically demonstrated fact.

One wonders if such bishops are in very close contact with their own parish priests. Many priests would probably agree with the Midwestern pastor who recently told his diocesan newspaper, "The sacrament of penance in the form of private confession is dead."

"Even if people are out there committing adultery and fornication," he complained, "they still come to Communion."

But there is an even deeper issue here and it has to do with the purpose of the sacrament itself. Is there any need at all for sacramental reconciliation?

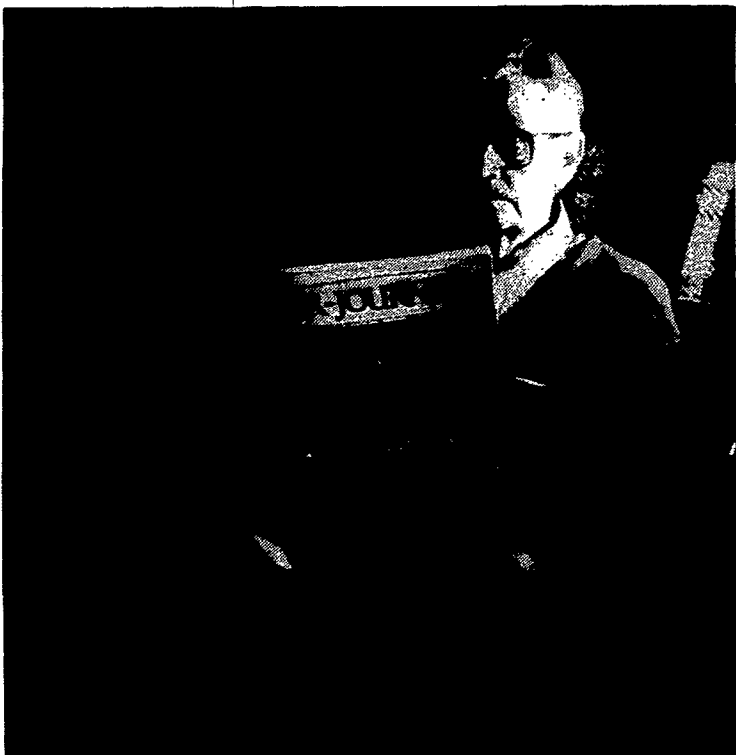
The standard answer is that the sacrament of reconciliation is necessary for the forgiveness of serious sins committed after baptism. The deeper issue in this debate is lodged precisely in our definition of serious sin, the sort of sin that makes confession necessary.

Why is it that those who defend private confession and deplore at the same time the erosion of a sense of serious sin so often think in terms of sins against the sixth and ninth commandments? Many Catholics, especially women, stopped going to confession precisely because of this inordinate emphasis on sexual sins — an emphasis complicated by the female-to-male character of the confessional encounter.

One might ask the partisans of private confession if they have ever heard, much less encouraged, the confession of the kinds of serious sins that the Lord himself condemned: self-righteousness, a refusal to forgive our enemies, a closing of our hearts (and bank accounts) to the poor, greed, vindictiveness, rash judgment, abuse of authority?

It would help a great deal if we could at least clear the air about what a "sense of serious sin" means. Then we might begin to justify the time and energy our bishops have invested in this argument over the relative merits of general absolution versus private confession.

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