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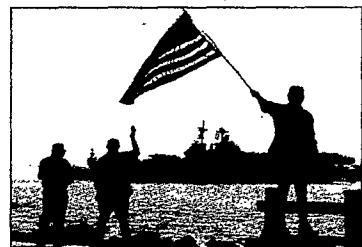
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Penance: Pope calls for revisions

More people seek the sacrament of penance during Lent and Advent than at any other time of the year. As a result of a papal directive released last May, however, the way many receive the sacrament is changing.

The shift stems from an apostolic letter titled *Misericordia Dei* (Mercy of God), in which Pope John Paul II clarified points in canon law regarding the sacrament of penance. The letter was issued *motu proprio* or "on one's own initiative," meaning that the pope decided on the document's contents personally, not relying on the counsel of cardinals or other advisers.

Church law permits administering the sacrament of penance through one of three possible rites: Rite 1 or individual confession; Rite 2, a communal penance service during which individual confession is offered, usually with more than one priest available; and Rite 3, commonly known as general absolution, a communal service in which a priest absolves the congregation's sins without benefit of individual confession. Anyone in a serious state of sin is to seek individual confession as soon as possible after general absolution.

Canon law stipulates that general absolution is only to be used in exceptional circumstances. Yet in his apostolic letter, the pope contends that this form of the sacrament has become too commonplace.

"In some places there has been the tendency to abandon individual confession," he wrote. "In this case general absolution is no longer seen as an extraordinary means to be used in wholly exceptional situations. On the basis of an arbitrary extension of the condi-



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The reconciliation window at St. Joseph Church in West Bend, Ind., is inscribed with the words "I absolve you." Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter on the administration of the sacrament of penance outlined limits on general absolution and the importance of individual confession.

tions required for grave necessity, in practice there is a lessening of fidelity to the divine configuration of the Sacrament, and specifically regarding the need for individual confession, with consequent serious harm to the spiritual life of the faithful and the holiness of the Church."

Pope John Paul's concern appears to focus on such events as Lenten and Advent penance services, to which a parish may attract large numbers of worshipers for a gathering of prayer and music culminating in the administration of general absolution. The pontiff's letter prompted Joan Workmaster, director of liturgy for the Diocese of Rochester, to issue a memo to all diocesan pastors and pastoral administrators in October 2002.

"As you plan and schedule Advent Reconciliation Services, please keep in mind that General Absolution and Rite 3 are meant to be used in only the most extreme circumstances, such as, imminent danger of death and/or the existence of a grave necessity," Workmaster wrote.

Father Joseph Hart, moderator of the Pastoral Center and a diocesan vicar general, said the reminder likewise applies to Lenten reconciliation services.

Canon law allows for a local bishop to determine when a suitable cause for general absolution exists. However, in his apostolic letter, Pope John Paul ordered bishops' conferences to develop norms "as soon as possible" agreeing on conditions that would allow for general absolution. According to Workmaster and Father Hart, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is still working on those norms.

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Story by Mike Latona



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