

PENANCE

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RESTRICTIONS ON USAGE

Canon 961 in the Revised Code of Canon Law states that general absolution should only be permitted when a grave necessity arises such as the imminent danger of death, or the lack of priests to hear individual confession for a large number of penitents within a suitable time frame. *Misericordia Dei* gives as examples "mission territories or in isolated communities of the faithful, where the priest can visit only once or very few times a year, or when war or weather conditions or similar factors permit."

However, Canon 961 also points out, "It is not considered a sufficient necessity if confessors cannot be readily available only because of the great number of penitents as can occur on the occasion of some great feast or pilgrimage." And in his apostolic letter, Pope John Paul says a contrivance of grave necessity is unacceptable, "and still less because of penitents' preference for general absolution, as if this were a normal option equivalent to the two ordinary forms."

Father Hart noted that general absolution became more commonplace following the Second Vatican Council, when communal penance services involving this form of the sacrament grew in popularity. "Large groups of people find this periodic ritualization of the forgiveness of sin helpful," he said. "But there's another value which is lost in this process, and that is spiritual di-



rection."

Lack of spiritual direction was an issue prior to Vatican II as well, even within individual confession. Because Catholics placed a comparatively greater emphasis on frequent confession at that time, Father Hart explained, priests frequently had to cut short the amount of time spent with individual penitents in order to keep long lines moving. "Spiritual direction wasn't missed, because it seldom took place anyway," he said. "So, many found penance services with general absolution as fruitful as the individual confession to a priest."

On the other hand, Father Hart said that general absolution raises concerns not only about spiritual direction, but also about the fact that penitents are not required to confess to a priest at that time. Critics thus consider general absolution "a magical notion of penance," he said.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the

Doctrine of the Faith, touched upon this point during a May 2 press conference at which *Misericordia Dei* was released. According to Catholic News Service, Cardinal Ratzinger strongly supported the pope's emphasis on individual confession: "Certainly confession of one's sins can seem often burdensome to a person, because it humiliates his pride and confronts him with his poverty. But it is exactly this that we need."

A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE

But moving away from general absolution does not necessarily spell the end of communal penance services. In fact, diocesan officials are strongly endorsing the second rite of penance, which would allow for large gatherings provided that several priests are on hand to hear confessions.

"Both things work together," Workmaster said of the second rite's combination of communal prayer and individual confession.

Workmaster acknowledged that this can pose scheduling challenges, especially in view of the priest shortage. "If you have a church full of 600 people, which is possible in some of our parishes, and you have one or two priests, you can figure out how many hours you'd be there," she said.

One potential solution, she said, is to turn the penance service into a multi-parish event. "This does present opportunities to explore the use of Rite 2 within parish planning groups," Workmaster noted in her October 2002 memo. "If well planned, this could actually enlarge the possibilities for the people to participate in the Sacrament of Penance."

One event that has successfully used the second rite is the diocesan high-school retreat program. For several years, the weekend retreats have featured Saturday-night reconciliation gatherings. The services, which last approximately three hours, begin with music, readings, spiritual talks and instruction on how to make one's confession. Participants then enter makeshift confessionals at the retreat center, where priests await. The individual confessions are followed by small-group discussions on the subjects of faith, forgiveness, healing and peace.

Although teen retreatants are not required to go to confession, participation is always nearly 100 percent, said Michael Theisen, diocesan director of youth ministry. Six to eight priests are typically on hand to hear confession for groups of approximately 100 retreatants. Theisen said the priests are enthusiastic about the chance to take part in reconciliation services: "There are several who come every year. They make it a point."

Theisen acknowledged that it's more difficult to find priests for the retreats these days, but he has never considered revising the services in favor of general absolution. He said that "this beautiful sacrament" might be the only time all year a teen goes to confession, and that the youth can benefit greatly from a one-on-one meeting with a priest. "This is something that should not be rushed," Theisen said.

"We tell them to take as long as you need (making confession). And sometimes they do," added Sue Ver-sluis, diocesan youth-ministry program specialist.

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