

Acta Sanctæ Sedis

Congregation for Divine Worship

On the Administration of the Sacrament of Penance

In fidelity to the mission entrusted to the Church by our Savior Jesus Christ, when he gave to his Apostles and to their successors the power to forgive or to retain sins, the Church “has never failed to call men from sin to conversion through the celebration of penance to show the victory of Christ over sin”.

In recent years, in spite of repeated clarifications given by the Holy See on the necessary conditions for the valid and licit administration of the Sacrament of Penance, there has been an increasing demand for the discriminate use of “general absolution.” It is perhaps important to recall that the recent Statement of Conclusions, signed by the Superiors of six Congregations of the Roman Curia as well as a representation of Australian Bishops, did not revoke anything permitted by the dispositions of law in force. In the hope of removing any remaining doubt or confusion regarding this matter this Congregation has considered it opportune to bring to the attention of the Catholic faithful in Australia, the essential conditions for the ordinary and extraordinary celebration of the sacrament in the Latin Church.

The norms in force are found in particular in the *Ordo Pœnitentiæ* of the *Rituale Romanarum* and in the *Codex Iuris Canonici* and are based on the constant doctrine of the Church, as well as the traditional practice of the Latin Church, and therefore, it is not possible to modify them or to derogate from them for any reason. Consequently, ‘Rite III’ must be understood to be of an “altogether exceptional character” and is in no way, an “ordinary” rite equatable with “Rite I” and “Rite II”. To present “Rite III” as an acceptable alternative to individual and integral confession is contrary to the clear and certain canonical dispositions laid down for the common good of the Church.

Specifically, it is the Church’s solemn teaching that for an integral and complete pardon of sins, three acts are required of the penitent as parts of the sacrament: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. By divine law, it is necessary that penitents confess to a priest all mortal sins as well as any specifying moral circumstances that they remember after a careful examination of conscience.

Having confessed his sins in this way, the penitent is then absolved from his sins in the judicial act of the priest’s sacramental absolution.

For this reason the *Codex Iuris Canonici* states clearly that “integral and individual confession and absolution is the sole, ordinary means by which a member of the faithful who is conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and with the Church. Physical or moral impossibility alone excuses from such confession...”.

Due to the “altogether exceptional character” of “general absolution”, it may not be administered except in two difficult situations of serious need on the part of the faithful: (1) imminent danger of death in which there is not time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the penitents individually; (2) certain well-defined situations where there exists a grave necessity that would deprive the faithful to sacramental grace or of Holy Communion for a lengthy period of time.

If in the opinion of the confessor there is a case of grave necessity that could permit “general absolution”, it is to be submit-

responsibility for deciding whether the necessary conditions are indeed present; without such a decision, “general absolution” may not be conferred. Moreover, as the canon itself points out, “sufficient necessity is not considered to exist when confessors cannot be available merely because of a great gathering of penitents, such as can occur on some major feastday or pilgrimages”.

The authorization given to Diocesan Bishops does not permit them “to change the required conditions, to substitute other conditions for those given, or to determine grave necessity according to their personal criteria however worthy”. The Diocesan Bishop “makes this judgement *graviter onerata conscientia*, and with full respect for the law and practice of the Church”. Furthermore, the fact that the canons acknowledge the right of the faithful to confess their sins on days and at times arranged for their convenience cannot be used as a justification for an alternative practice of “general absolution”.

In this context it is of great importance to remember that even when the sacrament is received by means of a collective absolution, it nevertheless requires, as a result of its divine and irrefutable foundation, that each penitent have the necessary dispositions for the reception of this sacrament, namely, individual and personal repentance for sins committed, the resolution to rectify scandal or injuries that may have been caused in relation to those sins, the intention of amending his life, and the intention to make an integral and individual confession as soon as possible of those grave sins from which he is impeded from confessing at the time. Each of these dispositions must be present in order that the sacramental absolution be received validly.

Nor should the importance of the act of satisfaction be passed over. This final act of the penitent “crowns the sacramental sign of Penance”. Hence, the confessor is to impose salutary and appropriate penance, in proportion to the kind and number of sins confessed, taking into account, however, the condition of the penitent. The penitent, for his part, is bound personally to carry out these penances.

All priests who exercise their ministry reconciling penitents are reminded that these obligations of the faithful are concomitant with a corresponding right for them to be given sacramental grace and the spiritual riches of the Church in individual confession. Therefore, priests are bound to adhere faithfully to the teaching of the Magisterium and to the norms established by the competent authority. To this end, local Ordinaries are asked to promote a thorough catechesis on the authentic nature and requisites of the Sacrament of Penance.

The grace of the sacrament is the communication of the indescribable mercy of God through the ministry of the Church which touches the Christian in the depths of his being, as well as in his relationship with God, with the Church, with others of the faithful, and with all his fellow men. As a consequence, all deviations from the authentic practice of the Church in the regard constitute a serious and wrongful deprivation, also punishable in accordance with the sacred canons.