

## PASTORAL NORMS CONCERNING THE ADMINISTRATION OF GENERAL SACRAMENTAL ABSOLUTION

---

### SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

Christ our Lord instituted the Sacrament of Penance in order that the faithful who have sinned might obtain pardon from the mercy of God for the offenses committed against him and at the same time be reconciled with the Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11). He instituted it when he gave the Apostles and their lawful successors the power to forgive and retain sins (cf. Jn 20:22-23).

The Council of Trent solemnly taught that for full and perfect forgiveness of sins three acts are required from the penitent as parts of the sacrament, these acts being contrition; confession and satisfaction. It also taught that absolution is given by the priests, who acts as judge, and that it is necessary by divine law to confess to a priest each and every mortal sin and the circumstances that alter the species of sins that are remembered after a careful examination of conscience (cf. Sess. XIV, *canones de Sacramento Paenitentiae*, 4, 6-9: DS 1704, 1706-1709).

A number of local Ordinaries have been disturbed at the difficulty for their faithful to go to confession individually because of the shortage of priests in some regions. They have also been troubled at certain erroneous theories about the doctrine of the Sacrament of Penance and the growing tendency to introduce the improper practice of granting general sacramental absolution to people who have made only a generic confession. They have therefore asked the Holy See to recall to the Christian people, in accordance with the true nature of the Sacrament of Penance, the conditions needed for the right use of this sacrament and to issue norms in the present circumstances.

This Sacred Congregation has carefully considered these questions and, taking account of the Instruction of the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary of 25 March 1944, makes the following declarations:

### I

The teaching of the Council of Trent must be firmly held and faithfully put into practice. This implies a reprobation of the recent custom which has sprung up in places by which there is a presumption to satisfy the precept of sacramentally confessing mortal sins for the purpose of obtaining absolution by confession made only generally or through what is called a community celebration of penance. This reprobation is demanded not only by divine precept as declared by the Council of Trent, but also by the very great good of souls deriving, according to centuries-long experience, from individual confession rightly administered. Individual and integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to be reconciled to God and the Church unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from such confession.

### II

It can indeed happen because of particular circumstances occasionally occurring that general absolution may or even should be given to a number of penitents without previous individual confessions.

This can happen first of all when there is imminent danger of death and even though a priest or priests are present, they have no time to hear the confession of each penitent. In this case any priest has the faculty to give general absolution to a number of people after first, if there is time, exhorting them very briefly to make an act of contrition.

### III

Apart from the cases of danger of death, it is lawful to give sacramental absolution collectively to a number of faithful who have confessed only generically but have been suitably exhorted to repent, provided that there is serious necessity: namely, when in view of the number of penitents there are not enough confessors at hand to hear properly the confessions of each within an appropriate time, with the result that the penitents through no fault of their own would be forced to do without

sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time. This can happen especially in mission lands but in places also and within groups where it is clear that this need exists.

This is not lawful however, when confessors are able to be at hand, merely because of a great concourse of penitents such as can for example occur on a great feast or pilgrimage (cf. Proposition 59, condemned by Innocent XI on 2 March 1679: DS 2159.)

#### IV

Local Ordinaries and, to the extent that they are concerned, priests are bound in conscience to see that the number of confessors should not become reduced because some priests neglect this noble ministry (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 5, 13; *Christus Dominus*, 30), while involving themselves in secular affairs or devoting themselves to less necessary ministries, especially if these ministries can be performed by deacons or suitable lay people.

#### V

The judgment as to whether the conditions mentioned above (art. III) are present and, consequently, the decision as to when it is lawful to grant general sacramental absolution are reserved to the local Ordinary after he has conferred with other members of the episcopal conference.

If a serious need arises of giving general sacramental absolution apart from the cases laid down by the local Ordinary, the priest is obliged, whenever it is possible, to have previous recourse to the local Ordinary in order to grant the absolution lawfully; if this is not possible, he is to inform the Ordinary as soon as possible of the need of the granting of the absolution.

#### VI

In order that the faithful may take advantage of general sacramental absolution it is absolutely required that they be suitably disposed: each should repent of the sins he has committed, have the purpose of keeping from sin, intend to repair any scandal or loss caused, and also have the purpose of confessing in due time each serious sin that he is at present unable to confess. Priests should carefully remind the faithful of these dispositions and conditions, which are required for the validity of the sacrament.

## VII

Those who have serious sins forgiven by general absolution should make an auricular confession before receiving absolution in this collective form another time unless a just cause prevents them. They are strictly obliged, unless prevented by moral impossibility, to go to confession within a year. They too are affected by the precept that obliges every Christian to confess privately to a priest once a year at least all his serious sins that he has not yet specifically confessed (cf. Fourth Lateran Council, c. 21 and also Council of Trent, *Doctrina de Sacramento Paenitentiae*, c. 21 and also Council of Trent, *Doctrina de Sacramento Paenitentiae*, c. 5 *De Confessione* and canons 7 and 8: DS, 1679-1683, 1707-1708; cf. also Proposition 11 condemned by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office in the Decree of 24 September 1665: DS 2031).

## VIII

Priests are to teach the faithful that those who are aware of being in mortal sin are forbidden to refuse deliberately or by neglect to satisfy the obligation of individual confession, when it is possible to have a confessor, while they wait for an occasion for collective absolution (cf. Instruction of the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary, 25 March 1944).

## IX

In order that the faithful may easily be able to satisfy the obligation of making an individual confession, let care be taken that confessors are available in the churches on days and at hours that are convenient for the faithful.

In places that are remote or difficult to reach, where the priest can come only at rare intervals during the year, let it be arranged that, as far as possible, the priest shall on each occasion hear the sacramental confessions of a group of penitents and give collective absolution to the other penitents provided that the conditions mentioned above (art. III) are present, so that in this way all the faithful, if possible, shall be able to make an individual confession at least once a year.

## X

The faithful are carefully to be taught that liturgical celebrations and community rites of penance are of great usefulness

for the preparation of a more fruitful confession of sins and amendment of life. Care must however be taken that such celebrations or rites are not confused with sacramental confession and absolution.

If in the course of such celebrations the penitents make an individual confession, each is to receive absolution singly from the confessor to whom he goes. In the case of general sacramental absolution, it is always to be given in accordance with the special rite laid down by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. However, until the publication of this new rite, the formula of sacramental absolution, now prescribed, is to be used, but changed to the plural. The celebration of this rite is to be kept quite distinct from the celebration of Mass.

## XI

If one who is in a situation causing actual scandal to the faithful is sincerely penitent and seriously proposes to remove the scandal, he can indeed receive general sacramental absolution along with others but he is not to go to Holy Communion until, in the judgment of a confessor whom he is first to approach personally, he has removed the scandal.

With regard to absolution from reserved censures, the norms of law in force are to be observed, calculating the time for recourse from the next individual confession.

## XII

Priests should be careful not to discourage the faithful from frequent or devotional confession. On the contrary, let them draw attention to its fruitfulness for Christian living (cf. *Mystici Corporis*, AAS 35 (1943) 235), and always display readiness to hear such a confession whenever a reasonable request is made by the faithful. It must be absolutely prevented that individual confession should be reserved for serious sins only, for this would deprive the faithful of the great benefit of confession and would injure the good name of those who approach the sacrament singly.

## XIII

The granting of general sacramental absolution without observing the norms given above is to be considered a serious abuse. Let all pastors carefully prevent such abuses out of

awareness of the moral duty enjoined upon them for the welfare of souls and for the protection of the dignity of the Sacrament of Penance.

In the audience granted on 16 June 1972 to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Paul VI specially approved these norms and ordered them to be promulgated.

From the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome, 16 June 1972.

(Sgd.) Francis Card. Seper, Prefect

(Sgd.) Paul Philippe, Secretary

The faithful want good confessors, who have a sound and mature grasp of doctrine, who will show to them clearly and accurately what is lawful and unlawful, who will impose no unnecessary burdens or obligations and who will come to their aid when justice or charity require it; they want prudent confessors in whom, as penitents, they can fully confide, without the risk of spiritual harm; confessors full of the spirit of God, who know how to lead them to the perfection which corresponds with their state. Show yourselves, beloved sons, worthy of such a noble ministry. (Pius XII, Discourse to the Parish Priests and Lenten Preachers of Rome, 17 feb. 1942)