

SIGNIFICANCE OF PASTORAL NORMS ON PENANCE*

During the general audience at Castel Gandolfo on 19 July, the Holy Father explained to the faithful the importance of the recent document of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on general sacramental absolution. The text of Paul VI's address is as follows.

You will certainly know of the promulgation of some "Pastoral Norms on General Sacramental Absolution" issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 16 June 1972. If you have not yet heard of them, you had better inquire about them, for these norms concern the discipline of the sacrament of penance, and regard one of the fundamental points of Christian life. That is the reconciliation of the sinner both with God by means of the re-establishment (or restoration) of the state of grace, the supernatural life, in one who has lost (or weakened) it, and with the Church by means of readmission to her communion, if, unhappily, the sin committed should entail complete or partial exclusion from living participation in the mystical body of Christ, which the Church is. As you see, we are touching upon an essential and vital point of our personal relationship with the system of our salvation.

COLLECTIVE ABSOLUTION?

And what is it? It is the sacrament of Penance, which, by a rule deriving from Christ, from the Tradition of the Church, from the ecumenical Councils of Lateran IV (year 1215) and Trent (sess. XIV, c. 8), involves Confession. Confession requires a minister, the priest authorized to hear it, and then to give absolution. And where there are no priests? Where there are so few of them, or they come so rarely (as

* *L'Osservatore Romano* July 27, 1972.

in mission territory), that there is no way, or time, for the normal exercise of this ministry? Can it not be replaced by collective absolution, without individual confession? Moreover, has not a so-called community confession already been introduced in certain places, that is, a penitential rite of a gathering of faithful, to whom sacramental absolution is given collectively, without individual and auricular confession?

The answer given by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, after much study and consultation, after a thorough attempt to interpret the duty deriving from Christ's merciful will, and after considering with a sense of responsibility and pastoral insight the real advantage of the Church and of the individual faithful, as well as the duty and importance of the priestly ministry, is the following. First, the norm of the Council of Trent remains in force, in fact both priests and faithful (including the priests themselves) are called upon to observe it with exactitude: to have absolution of mortal sins, personal accusation is necessary, as hitherto. The law remains, second, as already established, in certain cases of imminent danger of death (for example, fire, shipwreck, war...), when there is no time to hear individual confessions, "any priest has the power to impart absolution to several persons together". Necessity and urgency prevail over the usual norm. Third, and this is the new feature: "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 results 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 . . . The celebration of this rite is to be kept quite distinct from the celebration of Holy Mass".

Other prescriptions, which it will be well to know and which will certainly be clearly expounded, complete this new discipline, which anyone with a sense of real Catholic pastoral life will greet with a twofold sentiment in his heart. Of ad-

miration and of joy at the charity of Mother Church, anxious to dispense the treasures of grace as widely as possible; and of appreciation and hope at the reminder of the prime importance of the unfortunate drama of sin in man's life, a drama which modern laxism tends to soft-pedal, and at the authoritative and stimulating confirmation given to the People of God about the ministry of penance exercised by means of Confession.

For our times, so much in need of the restoration of a clear and solid moral sensibility, so eager for liberation from what imprisons man most deeply and gravely, this reminder of the importance of the sacramental grace of penance today is certainly a providential fact. If sin is slavery, it is death, the recovery of the awareness of sin and recourse to the divine remedy of the remission of sin, is a thing that should be reconsidered and extolled with the interest and enthusiasm we reserve for the most important events of life and history. We say to you, confreres in the priesthood, called to be the doctors of souls, the confidants, the teachers, the "psychiatrists" of grace, in the extremely fruitful, though so delicate and responsible, exercise of the ministry of Confession. And we say so to all of you, faithful sons of the Church, whether you have the happy experience of it, or whether you are held back by deeply rooted pride or unjustified timidity. Let all of you have admiration, reverence, gratitude, desire for that "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5, 18), which is really paschal joy of resurrection.

With our Apostolic Blessing.