

"MISUSE" AND "OVERUSE" OF GENERAL SACRAMENTAL ABSOLUTION

By

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Consultation

The practice of imparting general sacramental absolution to the faithful has become quite frequent in some churches and places of prayer and recollection in this city. Unfortunately, this is done with little or no regard whatsoever for the requirements imposed by law, such as the number of penitents, dearth of confessors and the like. As a consequence of this practice the number of penitents going for individual confession has dwindled notably since many of the faithful apparently choose to forego the individual confession in favor of collective absolution.

We are aware of existing legislation regulating the practice of general sacramental absolution. However, we doubt if such legislation counts with sufficient built-in safeguards to stop or at least to minimize abuses in this matter of collective absolution.

Answer

The pertinent legislation you refer to is "The Pastoral Norms concerning the Administration of General Absolution" issued by the SCDF on June 16, 1972. (AAS., 64 -1972-, pp. 510-514; Boletín Eclesiástico, 46 -1972-, pp. 427-432).

And yes indeed, these Norms are provided, in our opinion, with sufficient safeguards which are built-into the very conditions set by the lawgiver for the licit administration of group-absolution, such conditions having to do with the number of penitents, the lack of confessors, and the time of absence from confession and holy communion. However, despite such safeguards this law — like any other law — is far from being foolproof.

In conformity with the principles laid down by the Council of Trent, the Pastoral Norms emphasize the need for integral, individual confession and absolution, except in approved emergency cases, when collective sacramental absolution could be resorted to under certain conditions, (Norms, I).

The emergency situations that could justify the administration of collective absolution will arise — aside from cases of danger of death — whenever on account of a dearth of confessors coupled with a large gathering of penitents it will be impossible "to hear properly the confession of each penitent within a reasonable time with the result that the penitents, through no fault of their own, would be forced to do without sacramental grace or holy communion", (Norms, III).

A high number of penitents by itself will not justify collective absolution whenever a sufficient number of confessors could be made available to hear the individual confessions within a reasonable period of time as it usually is the case during solemn festivities, pilgrimages and the like. It devolves on the local bishop, in consultation with his fellow-bishops, to decide whether the circumstances obtaining in a given case warrant the administration of general absolution.

Individual confession indeed is still regarded the ordinary — and ideal — way for the faithful to be reconciled to God and the Church. The practice of general absolution is merely an exception to the rule and may be resorted to only whenever the conditions mentioned above are present and the penitents are suitably disposed for confession, (Norms, VII).

Hence, the practice of general absolution is to be regarded a serious abuse — a "misuse" or "overuse" — whenever the above mentioned requirements are totally or partially ignored, (Norms, XIII).

The safeguards attached to the Norms have not always been effective due perhaps to the pastoral nature of the document which thereby demands a great deal of flexibility. An inherent danger of "misuse" and "overuse" of the practice of group-absolution had already been foreseen right after the Norms made its first public appearance. At the very outset there was the founded fear that the practice of general absolution would be readily abused to the detriment of individual confession. Truly the general consensus was that the Norms were opening the gates of penance a little wider.

However, there were some who took the opposite view: that the Norms were "repressive" and tended in the final analysis to negate the great potentials of collective absolution and communal penance. (Cf. GALEN, J., *General Sacramental Absolution: Pastoral Remarks on Pastoral Norms*. Theological Studies, 1973, pp. 114-121).

Though the Pastoral Norms have not been adequately used in all its practical applications, it would be farfetched to regard them either dangerous or repressive. For if they were applied faithfully and without legal rigorism, the good results envisaged by the law-giver will be fully achieved. On the other hand, the document offers ample ground for further experimentation in the pastoral level and for a meaningful development of communal penance. (Cf. CRICHTON, J. D., *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, London, 1975, p. 91).

Finally, it is to be stressed again that in normal cases there is no substitute for an individual reconciliation with God through a private confession to his minister. Certainly, in this our age of rank individualism a collective and impersonal absolution is but a makeshift or occasional expedient that can hardly give entire fulfillment and peace of mind to the christian.