

DOCUMENT ON GENERAL ABSOLUTION*

On 13 July in the Press Office of the Holy See, Rev. Prof. Vicencio Miano, S.D.B. Consultor of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, presented to the journalists the new document concerning the imparting of General Absolution. We print herewith a summary of the Conference.

In recent years the Holy See has received from different regions questions, enquiries, expressions of doubt and the reverberations of new opinions concerning the Sacrament of Penance and especially the matter of general or collective sacramental absolution.

Many Ordinaries, especially in mission countries, have been concerned about the lack of priests in the territories entrusted to them and the consequent difficulties of their people in approaching the Sacrament of Penance on an individual basis. They have likewise been anxious about the spread of some erroneous opinions and — in some places — about certain abuses in the administration of the important Sacrament. Thus they have turned to the Holy See with a request that the necessary conditions for the correct use of this Sacrament be re-affirmed and directives adapted to current circumstances be issued.

PURPOSE OF THE NORMS

The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, after a close study of the question in collaboration with other departments of the Holy See that are competent in this matter has prepared some pastoral Norms. These have been approved in a special way by the Holy Father in the audience granted to the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation on 16 June 1972.

The purpose of these Norms is to re-affirm Catholic doctrine concerning the Sacrament of Penance and, in accordance with it to determine the conditions in which a general sacramental absolution can be licitly given without previous individual confessions.

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

In fact, individual confession of serious sin to a priest in order to receive absolution is the only ordinary way to be reconciled with God and with the Church. It is however common teaching that there are cases of necessity in which a general or collective absolution can be given to penitents who do not have the possibility of going to confession. Besides the imminent danger of death, such necessity can exist also when, because of the number of penitents and the lack of sufficient priests to hear their confessions, the penitents would have to remain for a long time without the grace of the sacrament or without Holy Communion. This necessity was in the Norms issued by the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary on 25 March 1964.

However, in recent years there have arisen on the one hand questions concerning the application of these Norms — often little known — in areas where they might have served to meet real needs. On the other hand, abusive practices with regard to collective absolution were spreading in various places. These practices were inspired by erroneous theories concerning the Sacrament of Penance.

AURICULAR CONFESSION REMAINS

The present pastoral Norms of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith thus intend to give clear directives, so that auricular confession will be maintained, by reminding pastors of their serious obligation to assure its administration for the faithful. The Norms likewise intend to give clear directives in an area where, because of a shortage of priests the faithful cannot approach this sacrament of forgiveness on an individual basis, they may be able to avail themselves of a collective absolution. The Norms indicate the necessary conditions, which today can be verified not only in mission territories.

It is important that the purpose of the Norms be made very clear to the faithful in order to avoid creating the idea that general absolution now substitutes for individual confession. Collective absolution is an extraordinary means of administering Penance in cases of necessity. This is clear from the fact that the faithful who are absolved from serious sins in this manner must confess them in a later individual confession.