
THE CELEBRATION OF PENANCE AND FORGIVENESS IN OUR DIOCESE (4)



Rich in mercy, God the Father wants all His children to always live in Him, thanks to the forgiveness which was gained by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. God never ceases to tell us of His kindness and love. When we were baptised, He welcomed us as His beloved children. Never would He abandon us! He has given us priests, ordained persons to remind us of His infinite love and to make it present through the grace of the Holy Spirit. And through the wonderful gift of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation where Jesus himself is at work, God the Father gives us back our dignity as children of God. It is therefore in joy and faith that we can gather together to deeply experience this great mystery of God.

BRIEF REVIEW

In his May 2, 2002 Apostolic Letter, Pope John Paul II reminded us that “individual and integral confession and absolution are the sole ordinary means by which the faithful, conscious of grave sin, are reconciled with God and the Church; only physical and moral impossibility excuses from such confession, in which case reconciliation can be obtained in other ways.” He also reminded us that “the absolution of a number of penitents without previous confession cannot be imparted in a general manner unless: 1. the danger of death is imminent and there is not time for the priest to hear the confessions of the individual penitents; 2. a grave necessity exists, that is, when in the light of the number of penitents a supply of confessors is not readily available to hear the confessions of individuals in an appropriate way within an appropriate time, so that the penitents would be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time through no fault of their own (...).” I must point out that in our diocese the lack of priests is being more and more keenly felt: there are only two priests in Southern Victoria Deanery, two in the Restigouche Deanery, and three in the Upper Madawaska Deanery.

ROLE OF BISHOP AND BISHOPS

Judgement as to whether conditions are fulfilled to allow for general or collective absolution is reserved to the diocesan bishop. Taking into account the criteria established by the bishops' conference, the diocesan bishop may determine those cases in which pastoral necessity calls for general or collective absolution. Among the criteria established by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, in March of 1988, it is stated that some circumstances may oblige one to have recourse to general absolution. Hence, if the great number of faithful present at a penitential service exceeds by much the number of penitents that available confessors can minister to, either because of unforeseen circumstance, bad winter conditions, the distance which priests must travel, or the small number of priests in a region or a diocese does not allow an adequate response to the different periods of confession in the milieu's Christian community, within a normal period of time. Recourse to general or collective absolution, in cases of grave necessity, is not opposed to the mission of forming children in individual confession. At the bishops' 2002 annual meeting, we committed ourselves, as Canadian Catholic bishops, to spare no effort to bring about a greater appreciation of individual and community celebration of the sacrament of penance, and to interpret the CCCB 1998 criteria, with the orientations of the Ritual of Pope Paul VI and the Letter of Pope John Paul II in mind.

DIocese of Edmundston

After consultation with the priests' senate, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and the Bishop's Council, I hereby publish the official directives which are to take effect until further notice, regarding the sacrament of penance and reconciliation:

- a) Each priest moderator, united with the other members of the pastoral team, shall determine when it is possible to have individual celebrations of the sacrament: this schedule is to be published in the parish bulletin. Where it does not exist, a place for private confession shall be carefully prepared.
- b) Each priest moderator, in union with the other members of the pastoral team, carefully prepares a community celebration of penance and reconciliation, during the important periods of the liturgical year [Advent, Lent]. A community celebration clearly indicates the ecclesial nature of penance, since believers hear the Word of God together, a Word proclaiming the mercy of God, calling to conversion. In such a celebration believers also confront their lived experience with this Word, and help one another through prayer. After everyone has confessed and received absolution, all praise God together for the marvels He works among His people which His Son has acquired through his blood.
- c) Sacramental preparation teams are to continue their good work of religious education of our children, according to existing guidelines: individual absolution is to be given to children who present themselves for first reconciliation.
- d) Priest moderators who, depending on the needs of their communities and the scarcity of existing resources, believe that they must avail themselves of an authorisation for general or collective absolution must request it in writing from the bishop, giving the reasons for the request. The bishop cannot grant broad permission for general or collective absolution. It is forbidden to announce beforehand that general or collective absolution will be given. General or collective absolution cannot be given at the penance rite of a eucharistic celebration.

I count on all priests, pastoral agents, parish pastoral teams, religious educators, and parents to revitalise the sacrament of penance and forgiveness. In the Church, the first sign of forgiveness of sins is the sacrament of baptism. We say so in the Creed: "I believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." However, the Church's lived experience has led it to recognise that while one's entire life is committed to God in baptism, the battle is still not won. The baptised can still sin and need to be reconciled: this is the point where the sacrament of reconciliation intervenes. It does not repeat baptism, it only spreads its effect throughout our existence which is so marked by denials of love and withdrawal into oneself, but still challenged to new departures.

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