



From A Bishop's Journal (773)

“To Learn Anew the Benefit of Individual Confession” (1)

On May 2, 2002, His Holiness Pope John Paul II wrote an apostolic letter, a “*motu proprio*” titled *Misericordia Dei*, on the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, in which he reaffirmed that individual confession is the only ordinary mode by which the faithful who are aware of grave sin is reconciled with God and with the Church. With this decision, the Pope rules out collective absolution as the ordinary mode of reconciliation. On January 30, 2008, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops published a Canadian decree on the application of the papal decision in Canada. With all the bishops in Canada and those throughout the world, I urge all the faithful to recognise the greatness of this sacrament. As first shepherd of the Diocese of Edmundston, I wish that every Catholic discover or rediscover the benefit of individual confession as a divine gesture.

To Re-Experience the Beauty of Individual Forgiveness

At a course on confession organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary, last March, Pope Benedict XVI said: “It is not sin that is at the heart of the sacramental celebration, but the mercy of God which is infinitely greater than any fault.” All those in charge of parishes have published the schedule for individual confessions. In the 32 parishes of the diocese: everyone who wishes to receive God’s forgiveness can approach the priest for confession and reception of the Lord’s forgiveness, at any time of the week. I am grateful to the priests for their availability. This is one of the most beautiful sacraments that a priest can celebrate with a penitent, making the mercy of God visible, in granting forgiveness.

Everything is Ready, but...

Like the parable of the banquet in the Gospel (Luke 14:15), the guests are few in number: I regret the small number who come for individual confession. What is the cause of this disaffection? Is it due to a lack of sins or of new sins? Is it the bad memory concerning past confessions? The coldness of certain confessors? Too relentless questioning, or too guilt-generating? Why not confess directly to God? Did the prodigal son or the Samaritan woman have to disclose all their sins before giving themselves over to the merciful Jesus? Doesn’t the practice of oral confession only go as far back as the 11th century? Haven’t the community celebrations brought a new acceptance of the sacrament? Whatever the reason for estrangement from the sacrament, we have

in Pope John Paul's instruction only one "ordinary" mode of celebration: individual confession. I believe it is important for us to pray for each other, that we may accept this teaching.

Acknowledgement of Exceptional Situations

Pope John Paul II left it to each diocesan bishop to judge the appropriateness of pastorally applying reasons "of very grave necessity" that can lead a bishop to sometimes have recourse to collective absolution. A particular instance of this would be of certain Christian communities living in distant parts of the country where there are no priests and that are visited only once or a few times by one priest, as well as the situation of Christian communities living away from major centres and who can only count on the occasional presence of a very limited number of priests who are usually of advanced age. In our Atlantic region with its eleven dioceses, situations can vary from one diocese to another. We have close to one million Catholics in 770 parishes, served by approximately 550 priests who often minister to four or five parishes, and the average age of these priests is above seventy. Even with the best intentions, it is difficult for one norm to apply to all the dioceses. In our diocese, there is no pastoral zone besides Edmundston, with more than three priests in active parish ministry. Besides, Pope Paul VI asked that the priest "take the time needed" to hear individual confessions, that is, confessions composed of welcoming the penitent, meditation on the word of God, confession of sins, and thanksgiving. It behooves every bishop, with the support of his principal collaborators, to reach the best decision. Only the bishop can judge of the gravity of certain situations. The Decree specifies that the priest is not to announce beforehand whether there is to be general absolution or not. Hence, with a congregation of five hundred attending and only one priest available, the most appropriate solution will have to be taken, to give each penitent the time necessary to celebrate forgiveness.

Community Celebration of Penance

Aware of all the effort that has been made in each of our parishes, these past thirty years, I ask the shepherds of the people to continue doing what has already been so well begun in each Christian community. I ask every pastor of a parish and every member of the pastoral units to continue preparing penitential celebrations, especially at the liturgical high points of Advent and Lent. Throughout the thirty years mentioned, Catholics have discovered to a greater degree, through these celebrations, the meaning of sin and of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and of the meaning of the celebration of forgiveness. This acquired experience should not be forgotten overnight: Holy Scripture witnesses to the fact that throughout its history, the entire people of God together proclaimed "the mercy of God." Religious education programmes talk of forgiveness and Eucharist: there are wonderful pages on the wonders of God in our world today that ought to be meditated.

Gratitude

I am deeply grateful to those who "make visible" the mercy of God by accepting to be the "servants" and "missionaries" of divine mercy. In the seventeenth century Saint John Eudes, who contributed so much to the renewal of Christian society as a whole, wrote these words: "He is merciful who carries in his heart the burdens of the most miserable." I thank my precious

collaborators for their continuous effort to teach one and all how to better understand this sacrament. And thank you to our pastoral agents, catechist and parents who give themselves wholeheartedly to preparing this sacrament.

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