

NORMS FOR THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

*At its General Meeting in Maynooth from 12 to 14 June 2000, the Irish Episcopal Conference decided that the following Diocesan Norms for the Sacrament of Reconciliation be published in **Intercom***

1. Since the criteria for the simultaneous administration of sacramental absolution to a number of penitents do not presently exist in this Diocese, 'general absolution' must not be administered when communal rites of Penance are celebrated, or indeed in any context, unless there should arise an altogether exceptional situation, such as those described below (cf. Complementary Legislation to the *Codex Iuris Canonici* of the Irish Episcopal Conference, *Intercom*, 18 [1987-1988] p.9).
2. Whether celebrated according to the first or second chapters of the *Order of Penance*, individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the sole ordinary means by which a member of the faithful who is conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and with the Church. Physical or moral impossibility alone excuses from such a confession (cf. can. 960).
3. By divine law, it is necessary that a penitent confess to a priest all mortal sins, as well as any specifying moral circumstances that he remembers after careful examination of conscience. Having confessed his sins in this way, the penitent is then absolved from his sins in the judicial act of the priest's sacramental absolution. Any practice which would interfere with the faithful's fulfilment of the obligation of integral confession of all mortal sins, such as when a penitent is invited to name just one sin or to name a representative sin, etc., is never permissible.
4. In this context it is of great importance to remember that regardless of its manner of administration, the sacrament requires, as a result of its divine and irreformable foundation, that each penitent have the following necessary interior dispositions for the valid reception of the sacrament: personal repentance for sins committed, the firm intention of avoiding those and all sins in the future and the resolution to make reparation for any scandal or injury that may have been caused by those sins.
5. In observance of canon 986, all priests who have the care of souls are to ensure that regular and frequent scheduled opportunities for confession are available to the faithful in all parish churches and insofar as possible at other pastoral centres within the Diocese. Such schedules are to be announced at all Masses at least once every month.
6. Communal penance services for the individual and integral confession of sins and receiving of sacramental absolution have proved to be one of the significant gains of the renewed sacramental practice that has flowed from the Second Vatican Council. Such celebrations bring out the essentially liturgical nature of the sacrament by the common listening together, as a Christian community, to the Word of God as proclaimed in the words of Holy Scripture by the Church and by responding through the help of the grace of Christ Jesus our Lord and the action of the Holy Spirit to the divine call to repentance. They have brought out the social dimension of our personal sins and have also given many courage they needed to return to the sacraments and put to rights the situations into which human frailty had led them.
7. Accordingly, I would urge all the priests of the Diocese to collaborate with me in devising appropriate ways of planning such communal celebrations in the seasons of Lent and Advent and at other key moments of the Church's year, which would incorporate an examination of conscience, intercessions and the opportunity for individual confession and absolution. It is my wish that, to foster a sense of community in our parishes, arrangements be made also before the main feast days of each parish for such celebrations to take place, with the cooperation of priests from other areas of the

Diocese. Such cooperation will also satisfy the pastoral need to ensure that the faithful in our parishes have reasonable access to a choice of confessors.

8. If in the opinion of the confessor there is a case of grave necessity that could permit 'general absolution', I reaffirm the necessity, according to the requisites of the *Code of Canon Law*, that prior recourse be had by the priest concerned, and on a case by case basis, to myself as Bishop for my explicit permission. In the absence of such permission, 'general absolution' may not be conferred.
9. As regards the stipulation of canon 961 §1, 2° that 'grave necessity' must be present, until such time as the Holy See shall decide otherwise, in the Diocese of N. such a necessity shall be understood as referring the certain rare and extreme cases, clearly determined to be in accord with liturgical and canonical norms, which is to say, those of true physical impossibility, including typically, for example, in wartime conditions or in a similar situation, such as a major disaster, or in situations brought about by some similar exceptional circumstance where penitents would be deprived, without fault of their own, of sacramental grace or of Holy Communion for lengthy period of time. Sufficient necessity is not considered to exist when confessors cannot be available merely because of a great gathering of penitents, such as can occur during the seasons of Advent and Lent, on occasion of a wedding or a funeral, or on the occasion of some major feast day or pilgrimage.
10. As seen above, canon 961 §1, 2° requires that for 'general absolution' to be justified, one of the conditions to be met is that otherwise the penitent would be deprived of sacramental grace or of Holy Communion for a lengthy period of time (*diu* in Latin). Until such time as the Holy See shall decide otherwise, in the Diocese of N. that period of time is to be considered to be one that exceeds one month. At present, such a circumstance is never present in this Diocese.
11. The other case foreseen by the law concerns occasions where 'danger of death threatens and there is not time for the priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents.'
12. Should, however, such circumstances as found in nos. 9-11 occur, what is laid down by the *Code of Canon Law* in canons 962-963 would also apply, namely, that in order for the sacramental absolution given to a number of people simultaneously to be received *validly*, it is required that each individual penitent should be properly disposed, which is to say, to be truly contrite (see no. 4 above), and, at the same time, personally resolved to confess in due time each of the grave sins which cannot at the time be thus confessed. Penitents whose grave sins are forgiven by such an absolution are further required to make an individual confession 'as soon as possible, when the opportunity occurs ... before receiving another general absolution, unless a just reason intervenes.' Insofar as possible, penitents are to be clearly instructed about these requirements even in situations of danger of death.
13. In promulgating these norms it is my confident hope that they will be accepted and implemented unreservedly in that same spirit of faith in which we receive all of the Lord's teachings, whose words are spirit and life. The Sacrament of Penance was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ as the principal means by which our sins are forgiven and as an abiding source of strengthening grace to enable us to preserve in our call to holiness. Since the Lord, who knows us better than we know ourselves, has constituted the sacrament in this way with the elements of contrition, confession of sin, priestly absolution and satisfaction, we are to see in this teaching not an imposition, but truly a most precious gift of salvation. It is the role of the Church, then by her teaching and legalisation, to build up and protect the Sacrament of Penance from any risk of invalidity or sacrilege and from all other misuses which could conceal the authentic nature of the

sacrament. For this reason, the Church who 'has never failed to call men from sin to conversion' has established the requisites for the administration of the sacrament which are binding in conscience upon bishops, priests and all lay Catholics and cannot arbitrarily be ignored. As a result, this occasion should spur all of us on to renew our relationship in the Sacrament of Penance with Christ. All improvised and unauthorised practices must be resolutely set aside.

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