

教宗若望保祿二世牧函



論天主仁慈自動諭——

談舉行懺悔聖事的某些層面

台灣地區主教團秘書處編印

論天主仁慈自動諭一  
談舉行懺悔聖事的某些層面

准印者：台北總主教 狄剛

編譯者：天主教中國主教團秘書處

發行人：王 愈 榮

出版者：天主教教務協進會出版社

地 址：台北市中山路復南路32巷34號

電話：(〇二)二五七八—三三五五

傳真：(〇二)二五七七—三八七四

定價：新台幣三十五元整

承印者：榮德彩色印刷有限公司

電話：(〇二)二三〇三一五三三一

郵政劃撥：〇〇一六七六一—六號

(中國主教團秘書處)

行政院新聞局 局版台業字第〇八六三號

中華民國九十一年六月初版 91.1000

不得翻印

版權所有

教宗若望保祿二世牧函

## ——論天主仁慈自動諭——

### 談舉行懺悔聖事的某些層面

由於天主的仁慈，父使我們與祂和好，聖言在至聖童貞瑪利亞無玷的懷中取了肉身，為「把自己的民族由他們的罪惡中拯救出來」（瑪一21），並且為他們打開「永遠得救的道路」①。聖若翰洗者藉認同耶穌是「除免世罪的天主羔羊」（若一29），確認他的使命。先驅若翰在他所做的和所講的一切中，熱切而

堅決地要求人們悔改和皈依，其標記是在約旦河中的施洗。耶穌自己也領受了這種悔改的禮節（參瑪三 13 — 17），不是因為祂犯過罪，而是因為「祂讓自己和罪人們並列，祂已是『除免世罪的天主羔羊』（若一 29），並提前了祂那殘酷死亡的『洗禮』」②。因此，救恩尤其是自與天主中斷友情的罪惡中得救，從人陷於惡魔的誘惑，且失去天主子女自由的奴役中（參羅八 21）解救出來。

基督把宣報天主的國和宣講悔改的福音的使命，託付給了宗徒們（參谷十六 15；瑪十八 18 — 20）。在祂復活的那天晚上，當宗徒的使命要開始時，耶穌藉聖神的德能，給予宗徒們權力，使痛悔的罪人與天主及教會和好：「你們領受聖神吧！你們赦免誰的罪，就給誰赦免；你們存留誰的，就給誰存留」（若廿 22 — 23）③。

歷史中在教會持久的習慣上，在聖洗和懺悔聖事中所執行的「和好職務」

（格後五18），一直被視為司鐸職中，主要而最受重視的為服從耶穌的命令而做的牧靈工作。歷代懺悔聖事的舉行，曾以不同方式而發展，但一直保持相同的基本架構：它不但需要聖職人的行動——只有主教或司鐸，以基督之名判斷、赦免、照護和治愈——，也需要懺悔者的行動：痛悔、告明和補贖。

我在《新千年的開始》牧函中寫道：「我也要求重新鼓起牧靈勇氣，在每天對基督徒團體的教導中，能具說服力且有效地推動和好聖事。各位當還記得，一九八四年我在世界主教會議後的《和好與懺悔》宗座勸諭中就談到這個主題，該勸諭綜合了世界主教會議中有關此主題的反省結果。我的請求就是盡一切努力來面對現代文化中很明顯的『罪惡感』的危機。但我更堅持要再度發現基督慈惠的奧秘（*mysterium pietatis*），天主在他內顯示給我們祂的同情心，以及讓

我們完全與祂和好。我們應透過懺悔聖事重新發現基督的面容，對信友來說，這是『在領洗之後，獲得寬恕及重罪之赦的正常管道』。世界主教會議談及這個問題時，大家都看到了和好聖事的危機，尤其是在世界上的某些地方。從那時起，在這麼短的時間內，引起危機的原因並沒有消失。但是在禧年，我們特別注意懺悔聖事，因此給了我們一個令人振奮的訊息，我們不應忽視，就是：如果許多信友，其中很多是年輕人，已從這個聖事獲得好處，那麼牧者或許應該有更大的信心、創意和恒心，來介紹這聖事，並引導人們重視這聖事。親愛的聖職弟兄，我們不應屈服於眼前發生的危機！天主所賜的恩賜，是來自洞悉人心的那一位，他也是歷史的主宰，而聖事就是他所賜與的最寶貴的恩寵。」④

我會想用以上這些話，現在也再次以這些話，鼓勵我的主教弟兄們，並且

誠摯地向他們——並經由他們向所有的司鐸們——呼籲，負責努力復興和好聖事。這需要道地的愛心和真正的牧靈正義<sup>⑤</sup>，而且我們應該記得，當信友們內心有適當的意願時，他們本人有權利領受聖事的恩寵。

爲使此聖事的施行人能知道悔罪者的意願，爲了給予或暫不給予赦免並加以適當的補贖，信友必須意識到他們所犯的罪，爲這些罪痛悔，並且決心不再犯罪<sup>⑥</sup>，而且應該表明他們的罪。對於此點，特利騰公會會議宣稱「由於神律，必須表明每一個死罪」<sup>⑦</sup>。教會一直把聖事中司鐸所要做的判斷，和悔罪者需要數說他們的罪之間的關係，視爲是主要的<sup>⑧</sup>，除非是不可能。因爲由於神律，完整表明重罪是此聖事的組成部分，不可由牧人隨意處理（如寬免、詮釋、地方風俗等）。在有關的紀律條文中，教會主管當局只指出一些標準，用來分辨某

些情況，是否真的無法告明個人的罪，或是其不可能僅是假象，或是可以克服的。

目前爲了照顧人靈，並回答許多主教弟兄們的要求，我以爲有必要重申某些現行的教會關於舉行懺悔聖事的一些法規，並澄清這些法規的某些層面，爲了能更妥善地施行此聖事。整個主教團對此有責任，並以共融的精神來做<sup>⑨</sup>。目的是要使主耶穌在復活後所交給教會的恩典（參若二十19—23），舉行得更正確而更有成果。尤其有必要的是，在某些地方開始有放棄個別告明、並錯誤地訴諸於「概括的」或「集體的」赦罪的趨向。在這種情形下，概括赦罪不再視爲是例外情況下用作非常的辦法。由於隨意擴展「嚴重需要」<sup>⑩</sup>所要求的條件，這種做法，減少了對此聖事的神律結構的忠實，特別是對個別告明的需要，

結果嚴重傷害到信友的靈修生活及教會的神聖。

爲此，我與信理部、聖禮暨聖事部，以及宗座法典條文解釋委員會商議，並聆聽負責教廷部會的樞機弟兄們的看法，同時重申「天主教教理」<sup>⑩</sup>一書中有關懺悔及和好聖事的天主教教義後，意識到牧人的責任及深覺有必要對此聖事和它的持久效果，我頒布以下的法令：

1. 教會教長應提醒懺悔聖事的聖職人，普世教會法，依天主教教義，對此聖事所制定的法規：

(a) 「明知自己有重罪的信徒，要與天主及教會和好，唯一正常的方法，是個別的和完整的告明以及赦罪；只有身體的或心理的不可能，才免除這項告明，在此情形下，可以其他辦法獲得和好」<sup>⑪</sup>。

(b) 因此，「凡按職務負有照顧人靈的所有聖職人員，有責任聽所屬信徒合理要求的告解，並在信徒方便的日子及時刻，使他們有機會去告解」<sup>⑬</sup>。

此外，所有有權施行懺悔聖事的司鐸，只要信徒合理地要求，時常表示誠心準備聆聽他們的告解<sup>⑭</sup>。願意歡迎受傷的羊，甚至出去找他們回歸羊棧，假如由於晉鐸而該反映善牧圖像的人，缺乏這種牧人的感覺，是可悲的。

2. 教區教長及堂區主任司鐸，聖堂及朝聖地的主任司鐸，應該定期調查是否確實提供信徒告罪的最大可能性。特別敦勸在敬禮的地方，在預告的時刻，可以看到聽告解司鐸在場，而這些時刻要適合懺悔者的真實情況，特別在彌撒之前可以告解。爲了信徒的需要，假如有別的司鐸在場，也可在彌撒中聽告解<sup>⑮</sup>。
3. 既然「信徒有責任在仔細的省察後，應該表明在領洗後所犯的，未在個別

告解中告明過的，也未經教會權力直接赦免過的一切重罪」①⑥，任何把告解侷限於概括告罪，或是只告一個或兩個以爲較重要的罪的做法，是該受譴責的。由於所有信徒都被召成聖，敦勸他們也要告小罪①⑦。

4. 根據以上規則，並在這些規則的框架內，教會法第九六一條所指，沒有先告明而赦免一群懺悔者，必須正確了解和施行。這種赦罪實在是「例外」①⑧，並且「不得普遍給予」，除非：

(1) 「死亡的危險迫在眉睫」，而且司鐸或司鐸們沒有時間聆聽單獨懺悔者的告解；

(2) 「有嚴重的需要時」，就是，懺悔者人數眾多，而無足夠多的聽告解司鐸，在適當的時間內照常規聽每個人的告解，致使懺悔者非因自己的過失，而被迫

長時期得不到聖事的恩寵，或不能領聖體時；然而，僅僅由於懺悔者眾多，不能找到許多聽告解司鐸，一如大慶日或朝聖時可能發生的情形，則不得視為有足夠的需要」①。

關於「嚴重需要」的個案，作以下的說明：

(a) 是指客觀例外的情況，如在傳教區或是在孤立的教友團體中可能發生的，那裏司鐸一年只能去一次或幾次而已，或是戰爭或氣候或是其他因素，阻礙他們。

(b) 法典所指決定嚴重需要的兩個條件是不可分開的。因此，絕對不只是由於聽告解司鐸人數不足，個人是否能「依常規」及「在適當的時間內」告解的問題，而應該結合懺悔者不然要被追長時間得不到聖事的恩寵的事實，而且不是

由於他自己的過失。因此，應該考慮懺悔者的一般情況，及教區對方便信徒告解的牧靈措施及可能性。

(c) 第一個條件，即無法「依常規」「在適當時間」聽告解，僅僅指爲了有效而適當舉行聖事的合理時間。這裏不是說較長時間的牧靈交談，這可留給更適合的環境做去。合理而適當聽告解的時間，要視聽告解司鐸或司鐸們，以及懺悔者本人的實際可能性。

(d) 第二個條件要求有智慧的判斷，使懺悔者將長時期被迫缺少聖事恩寵，真正成爲法典九六〇條所述的真正的不可能，推定沒有死亡的立即危險。假如扭曲身體的或心理的不可能的意思，則判斷是不明智的，例如以爲不到一個月的時間，是失去聖事恩寵的「長時期」。

(e) 我們無法接受那設計或製造「嚴重需要」假象的情形，由於無法履行上述的規則⑳不依常規施行聖事，或是因為懺悔者較喜歡概括赦罪，視之為一般的選擇，並與禮儀經本中所有的兩種正常方式相等同。

(f) 由於大慶節或朝聖，或因為觀光或是因為今日人們的移動性大而集合的懺悔者人數眾多，本身並不構成足夠的需要。

5. 斷定是否有法典九六一條一項二款所要求的條件，不是聽告解司鐸的事，而是「教區主教斷定，他依與主教團其他成員所同意的標準，斷定那些個案符合需要」㉑。這些牧靈的標準，應該在他們自己的地區，具體表現出完全忠於教會普通法中所有的基本標準，而這些標準是根據天主建立的懺悔聖事本身所引申的要求。

6. 世界主教團之間，對教會生活如此主要的事的和協是非常重要的，因此，各個主教團，依照教會法典四五條二項的規定，應愈早愈好把根據本「自動諭」應用法典九六一條所發布的規則，寄送聖禮暨聖事部。這有助於教會主教們之間更大的共融，當他們勉勵各地信徒，豐富地汲取從和好聖事不斷流出的天主慈悲的泉源。

爲了普世的共融，希望教區主教將他們教區內，是否有過「嚴重需要」的個案，通知主教團。主教團要將有關在他們的地區的實在情況，以及後來所做的改變，報告給聖禮部。

7. 有關懺悔者本人的準備，重申以下幾點：

(a) 「一個信徒想有效地與其他許多人一起領受聖事性的赦免，不但要先作適

當的準備，還要定志在能單獨告解時，把目前沒有機會告的重罪都表明」②②。

(b) 盡可能，包括在立即有死亡危險時，應先勸信徒「每人要發痛悔」②③。

(c) 顯然的，那經常生活在重罪狀態下的懺悔者，同時他不想改變他的情況，無法有效地接受赦免。

8. 「至少一年一次表明自己的重罪」②④的義務還是存在，因此「凡以集體赦罪獲得赦免重罪的人，一有機會，在領受另一次集體赦罪前，應盡快去單獨告解，除非有正當的理由」②⑤。

9. 有關舉行此聖事的地點及告解亭，必須注意：

(a) 「行告解的正常地點，是教堂或經堂」②⑥，雖然眾所週知，由於牧靈理由，可以在其他地點舉行此聖事②⑦。

(b) 告解亭是依各主教團的規定辦理，他們要確定告解亭是安置在「開放的」地方」並有「固定的格子窗」，如此讓聽告解司鐸和信徒可以自由應用<sup>②8</sup>。

我決定在此「自動論」的牧函中所規定的一切，有完全及恒久的效力，並即日起生效，任何相反的事均無法成立。在此牧函所制定的一切，依其本質，為可敬的東方天主教會，附合他們法典的有關條文，同樣有效。

#### 教宗若望保祿二世

主曆二〇〇二年，在教宗職第二十四年，四月七日復活第二主日  
天主慈悲慶日發自羅馬聖伯鐸大殿

HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
APOSTOLIC LETTER  
IN THE FORM OF *MOTU PROPRIO*  
*MISERICORDIA DEI*  
ON CERTAIN ASPECTS  
OF THE CELEBRATION  
OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

**B**Y THE MERCY OF GOD, the Father who reconciles us to himself, the Word took flesh in the spotless womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary to save “his people from their sins” (*Mt* 1:21) and to open for them “the way of eternal salvation”.<sup>1</sup> By identifying Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (*Jn* 1:29), Saint John the Baptist confirms this mission. In all his deeds and preaching, the Precursor issues a fervent and energetic summons to repentance and conversion, the sign of which is the baptism administered in the waters of the Jordan. Jesus himself underwent this penitential rite (cf. *Mt* 3:13-17), not because he had sinned, but because “he allows himself to be numbered among sinners; he is already ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (*Jn* 1:29); already he is anticipating the ‘baptism’ of his bloody death”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Roman Missal*, Advent Preface I.

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 536.

Salvation is therefore and above all redemption from sin, which hinders friendship with God, a liberation from the state of slavery in which man finds himself ever since he succumbed to the temptation of the Evil One and lost the freedom of the children of God (cf. *Rom* 8:21).

Christ entrusts to the Apostles the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God and preaching the Gospel of conversion (cf. *Mk* 16:15; *Mt* 28:18-20). On the evening of the day of his Resurrection, as the apostolic mission is about to begin, Jesus grants the Apostles, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the authority to reconcile repentant sinners with God and the Church: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (*Jn* 20:22-23).<sup>3</sup>

Down through history in the constant practice of the Church, the "ministry of reconciliation" (*2 Cor* 5:18), conferred through the Sacraments of Baptism and Penance, has always been seen as an essential and highly esteemed pastoral duty of the priestly ministry, performed in obedience to the command of Jesus. Through the centuries, the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance has developed in different forms, but it has always kept the same basic structure: it necessarily entails not only the action of the minister—only a Bishop or priest, who judges and

<sup>3</sup> Cf. ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF TRENT, Session XIV, *De Sacramento Paenitentiae*, Can. 3: DS 1703.

absolves, tends and heals in the name of Christ— but also the actions of the penitent: contrition, confession and satisfaction.

I wrote in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: “I am asking for renewed pastoral courage in ensuring that the day-to-day teaching of Christian communities persuasively and effectively presents the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As you will recall, in 1984 I dealt with this subject in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, which synthesized the results of a General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops devoted to this question. My invitation then was to make every effort to face the crisis of ‘the sense of sin’ apparent in today’s culture. But I was even more insistent in calling for a rediscovery of Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself. It is this face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance, which for the faithful is ‘the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism’. When the Synod addressed the problem, the crisis of the Sacrament was there for all to see, especially in some parts of the world. The causes of the crisis have not disappeared in the brief span of time since then. But the Jubilee Year, which has been particularly marked by a return to the Sacrament of Penance, has given us an encouraging message, which should not be ignored: if many people, and

among them also many young people, have benefited from approaching this Sacrament, it is probably necessary that Pastors should arm themselves with more confidence, creativity and perseverance in presenting it and leading people to appreciate it”.<sup>4</sup>

With these words, I intended, as I do now, to encourage my Brother Bishops and earnestly appeal to them—and, through them, to all priests—to undertake a vigorous revitalization of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is a requirement of genuine charity and true pastoral justice,<sup>5</sup> and we should remember that the faithful, when they have the proper interior dispositions, have the right to receive personally the sacramental gift.

In order that the minister of the Sacrament may know the dispositions of penitents with a view to granting or withholding absolution and imposing a suitable penance, it is necessary that the faithful, as well as being aware of the sins they have committed, of being sorry for them and resolved not to fall into them again,<sup>6</sup> should also confess their sins. In this sense, the Council of Trent declared that it is necessary “by divine decree to confess each and every mortal sin”.<sup>7</sup> The Church has always seen an essential link

<sup>4</sup> No. 37: *AAS* 93 (2001) 292.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, Cans. 213 and 843 § 1.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF TRENT, Session XIV, *Doctrina de Sacramento Paenitentiae*, Chap. 4: *DS* 1676.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Can. 7: *DS* 1707.

between the judgement entrusted to the priest in the Sacrament and the need for penitents to name their own sins,<sup>8</sup> except where this is not possible. Since, therefore, the integral confession of serious sins is by divine decree a constitutive part of the Sacrament, it is in no way subject to the discretion of pastors (dispensation, interpretation, local customs, etc.). In the relevant disciplinary norms, the competent ecclesiastical authority merely indicates the criteria for distinguishing a real impossibility of confessing one's sins from other situations in which the impossibility is only apparent or can be surmounted.

In the present circumstances of the care of souls and responding to the concerned requests of many Brothers in the Episcopate, I consider it useful to recall some of the canonical laws in force regarding the celebration of this Sacrament and clarify certain aspects of them—in a spirit of communion with the responsibility proper to the entire Episcopate<sup>9</sup> with a view to a better administration of the Sacrament. It is a question of ensuring an ever more faithful, and thus more fruitful, celebration of the gift entrusted to the

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Chap. 5: *DS* 1679; ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF FLORENCE, *Decree for the Armenians* (22 November 1439): *DS* 1323.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Can. 392; SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, Nos. 23, 27; Decree on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops *Christus Dominus*, No. 16.

Church by the Lord Jesus after his Resurrection (cf. *Jn* 20:19-23). This seems especially necessary, given that in some places there has been a tendency to abandon individual confession and wrongly to resort to “general” or “communal” absolution. In this case general absolution is no longer seen as an extraordinary means to be used in wholly exceptional situations. On the basis of an arbitrary extension of the conditions required for *grave necessity*,<sup>10</sup> in practice there is a lessening of fidelity to the divine configuration of the Sacrament, and specifically regarding the need for individual confession, with consequent serious harm to the spiritual life of the faithful and to the holiness of the Church.

Thus, after consultation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, and the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, and after hearing the views of venerable Brother Cardinals in charge of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia, and reaffirming Catholic doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as summarized in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,<sup>11</sup> conscious of my pastoral responsibility and fully aware of the need for this Sacrament and of its enduring efficacy, I decree the following:

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Can. 961, § 1, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Nos. 980-987; 1114-1134; 1420-1498.

1. Ordinaries are to remind all the ministers of the Sacrament of Penance that the universal law of the Church, applying Catholic doctrine in this area, has established that:

a) "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 or moral impossibility excuses from such confession, in which case reconciliation can be obtained in other ways".<sup>12</sup>

b) Therefore, "all those of whom it is required by virtue of their ministry in the care of souls are obliged to ensure that the confessions of the faithful entrusted to them are heard when they reasonably ask, and that they are given the opportunity to approach individual confession, on days and at times set down for their convenience".<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, all priests with faculties to administer the Sacrament of Penance are always to show themselves wholeheartedly disposed to administer it whenever the faithful make a reasonable request.<sup>14</sup> An unwillingness to welcome the wounded sheep, and even to go out to them in order to bring them back into the fold, would

<sup>12</sup> Can. 960.

<sup>13</sup> Can. 986, § 1.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 13; *Ordo Paenitentiae, editio typica*, 1974, *Praenotanda*, No. 10, b.

be a sad sign of a lack of pastoral sensibility in those who, by priestly Ordination, must reflect the image of the Good Shepherd.

2. Local Ordinaries, and parish priests and rectors of churches and shrines, should periodically verify that the greatest possible provision is in fact being made for the faithful to confess their sins. It is particularly recommended that in places of worship confessors be visibly present at the advertized times, that these times be adapted to the real circumstances of penitents, and that confessions be especially available before Masses, and even during Mass if there are other priests available, in order to meet the needs of the faithful.<sup>15</sup>

3. Since “the faithful are obliged to confess, according to kind and number, all grave sins committed after Baptism of which they are conscious after careful examination and which have not yet been directly remitted by the Church’s power of the keys, nor acknowledged in individual confession”,<sup>16</sup> any practice which restricts confession to a generic accusation of sin or of only one or two sins judged to be more important is to be reprovved. Indeed, in view of the fact

<sup>15</sup> Cf. CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, *Responsa ad dubia proposita: Notitiae*, 37 (2001) 259-260

<sup>16</sup> Can. 988, § 1.

that all the faithful are called to holiness, it is recommended that they confess venial sins also.<sup>17</sup>

4. In the light of and within the framework of the above norms, the absolution of a number of penitents at once without previous confession, as envisaged by Can. 961 of the Code of Canon Law, is to be correctly understood and administered. Such absolution is in fact “exceptional in character”<sup>18</sup> and “cannot be imparted in a general manner unless:

1. *the danger of death is imminent* and there is not time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents;

2. a *grave necessity* exists, that is, when in 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; it is not considered sufficient necessity if confessors cannot be readily available only because of the great number of penitents, as can occur on the occasion of some great feast or pilgrimage”.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Can. 988, § 2: JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (2 December 1984), 32: *AAS* 77 (1985) 267; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1458.

<sup>18</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (2 December 1984), 32: *AAS* 77 (1985) 267.

<sup>19</sup> Can. 961, § 1.

With reference to the case of *grave necessity*, the following clarification is made:

a) It refers to situations which are objectively exceptional, such as can occur in mission territories or in isolated communities of the faithful, where the priest can visit only once or very few times a year, or when war or weather conditions or similar factors permit.

b) The two conditions set down in the Canon to determine grave necessity are inseparable. Therefore, it is never just a question of whether individuals can have their confession heard “in an appropriate way” and “within an appropriate time” because of the shortage of priests; this must be combined with the fact that penitents would otherwise be forced to remain deprived of sacramental grace “for a long time”, through no fault of their own. Therefore, account must be taken of the overall circumstances of the penitents and of the Diocese, in what refers to its pastoral organization and the possibility of the faithful having access to the Sacrament of Penance.

c) The first condition, the impossibility of hearing confessions “in an appropriate way” “within an appropriate time”, refers only to the time reasonably required for the elements of a valid and worthy celebration of the Sacrament. It is not a question here of a more extended pastoral conversation, which can be left to more

favourable circumstances. The reasonable and appropriate time within which confessions can be heard will depend upon the real possibilities of the confessor or confessors, and of the penitents themselves.

d) The second condition calls for a prudential judgement in order to assess how long penitents can be deprived of sacramental grace for there to be a true impossibility as described in Can. 960, presuming that there is no imminent danger of death. Such a judgement is not prudential if it distorts the sense of physical or moral impossibility, as would be the case, for example, if it was thought that a period of less than a month means remaining “for a long time” in such a state of privation.

e) It is not acceptable to contrive or to allow the contrivance of situations of apparent *grave necessity*, resulting from not administering the Sacrament in the ordinary way through a failure to implement the above mentioned norms,<sup>20</sup> and still less because of penitents’ preference for general absolution, as if this were a normal option equivalent to the two ordinary forms set out in the Ritual.

f) The large number of penitents gathered on the occasion of a great feast or pilgrimage, or for reasons of tourism or because of today’s

<sup>20</sup> Cf. above Nos. 1 and 2.

increased mobility of people, does not in itself constitute sufficient necessity.

5. Judgement as to whether there exist the conditions required by Can. 961 §1, 2 is not a matter for the confessor but for “the diocesan Bishop who can determine cases of such necessity in the light of criteria agreed upon with other members of the Episcopal Conference”.<sup>21</sup> These pastoral criteria must embody the pursuit of total fidelity, in the circumstances of their respective territories, to the fundamental criteria found in the universal discipline of the Church, which are themselves based upon the requirements deriving from the Sacrament of Penance itself as a divine institution.

6. Given the fundamental importance of full harmony among the Bishops’ Conferences of the world in a matter so essential to the life of the Church, the various Conferences, observing Can. 455 § 2 of the Code of Canon Law, shall send as soon as possible to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments the text of the norms which they intend to issue or update in the light of this *Motu Proprio* on the application of Can. 961. This will help to foster an ever greater communion among the Bishops of the Church as they encourage the faithful everywhere to draw abundantly from the foun-

<sup>21</sup> Can. 961, § 2.

tains of divine mercy which flow unceasingly in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In this perspective of communion it will also be appropriate for Diocesan Bishops to inform their respective Bishops' Conferences whether or not cases of *grave necessity* have occurred in their jurisdictions. It will then be the task of each Conference to inform the above-mentioned Congregation about the real situation in their regions and about any changes subsequently taking place.

7. As regards the personal disposition of penitents, it should be reiterated that:

a) "For the faithful to avail themselves validly of sacramental absolution given to many at one time, it is required that they not only be suitably disposed but also at the same time intend to confess individually the serious sins which at present cannot be so confessed".<sup>22</sup>

b) As far as possible, including cases of imminent danger of death, there should be a preliminary exhortation to the faithful "that each person take care to make an act of contrition".<sup>23</sup>

c) It is clear that penitents living in a habitual state of serious sin and who do not intend to change their situation cannot validly receive absolution.

<sup>22</sup> Can. 962, § 1.

<sup>23</sup> Can. 962, § 2.

8. The obligation “to confess serious sins at least once a year”<sup>24</sup> remains, and therefore “a person who has had serious sins remitted by general absolution is to approach individual confession as soon as there is an opportunity to do so before receiving another general absolution, unless a just cause intervenes”.<sup>25</sup>

9. Concerning the *place* and *confessional* for the celebration of the Sacrament, it should be remembered that:

a) “the proper place to hear sacramental confessions is a church or an oratory”,<sup>26</sup> though it remains clear that pastoral reasons can justify celebrating the Sacrament in other places.<sup>27</sup>

b) confessionals are regulated by the norms issued by the respective Episcopal Conferences, who shall ensure that confessionals are located “in an open area” and have “a fixed grille”, so as to permit the faithful and confessors themselves who may wish to make use of them to do so freely.<sup>28</sup>

I decree that everything I have set down in this Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio* shall

<sup>24</sup> Can. 989.

<sup>25</sup> Can. 963.

<sup>26</sup> Can 964, § 1.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Can. 964 § 3.

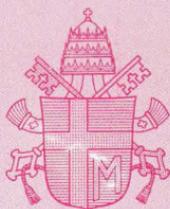
<sup>28</sup> PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF LEGISLATIVE TEXTS, *Responsa ad propositum dubium: de loco excipiendi sacramentales confessiones* (7 July 1998): *AAS* 90 (1998) 711.

have full and lasting force and be observed from this day forth, notwithstanding any provisions to the contrary. All that I have decreed in this Letter is, by its nature, valid for the venerable Oriental Catholic Churches in conformity with the respective Canons of their own Code.

Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 7 April, the Second Sunday of Easter, the Feast of Divine Mercy, in the year of our Lord 2002, the twenty-fourth of my Pontificate.

*Joannes Paulus II*

LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA  
VATICAN CITY



HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
APOSTOLIC LETTER  
IN THE FORM OF *MOTU PROPRIO*  
*MISERICORDIA DEI*  
ON CERTAIN ASPECTS  
OF THE CELEBRATION  
OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE