

SAINT JOSEPH CHURCH + YORKVILLE

April 28, 2024

Newsletter no. 215

Over the course of more than two months we have been discussing the sacrament of reconciliation, usually known as confession or penance, and for the past few weeks we have been viewing it from the perspective of the Code of Canon Law, the legal compendium of the Catholic Church. Canons 959-963 and part of 981 deal with the nature of reconciliation and with what constitutes a proper confession. The canons that immediately follow, nos. 964-986, touch principally upon the qualifications of the priests who may be designated to hear confessions. Most of them are of no great concern to us, but four of them seem to me to be important to be aware of, and the initial three will be discussed in this newsletter (the fourth will be reserved for next week's newsletter). These three, canons 978-980, describe how the priest should carry out the sacrament, and particularly how he should relate to the penitent. They are worth quoting in full, and a brief comment follows each canon.

Canon 978,1-2: "In hearing confessions, the priest is to remember that he is equally a judge and a physician and has been established by God as a minister of divine justice and mercy, so that he has regard for the divine honor and the salvation of souls. In administering the sacrament, the confessor as a minister of the Church is to adhere faithfully to the doctrine of the magisterium and the norms issued by competent authority."

This canon uses the imagery of a judge and a physician to describe the priest, since a judge is a symbol of justice, while a physician is a symbol of mercy, and the priest should exercise both virtues. But it is important to realize that, just as the two symbols (judge and physician) are not opposed to one another, neither are justice and mercy. Linked to justice and mercy are "the divine honor and the salvation of souls," which are also not opposed to one another. Indeed, God's honor, which is owed to him in justice, is upheld by the salvation of the souls that he created and redeemed and that in his mercy he wishes to be saved. But the judge cannot judge and the physician cannot be merciful if they are untethered from the official teaching of the Church, which is referred to here as "the magisterium."

Canon 979: "In posing questions, the priest is to proceed with prudence and discretion, attentive to the condition and age of the penitent, and is to refrain from asking the name of an accomplice."

These words not only instruct the priest as to how he is to ask pertinent questions but should also be reassuring to the penitent. The purpose of asking questions is certainly not to satisfy any curiosity that the priest may have but instead to gather information that might be helpful in exercising his role as judge and physician. And so, the priest should not ask questions that would intentionally embarrass the penitent, especially when it comes to sexuality. A priest who asks prurient and unnecessary questions is acting imprudently and indiscreetly and is himself committing a sin. But it might be necessary, for example, to ask a person who confessed to a sexual act whether he was married or not, just as it is usually necessary to ask a person who stole money how much he stole, and whether he stole it from an individual or from an entity like a store or a corporation. Similarly, age makes a difference in the gravity of a sin, since the moral awareness of a child—or a person with a child's level of intelligence—is different from that of an adolescent, just as an adolescent's moral awareness is different from that of an adult.

The canon also makes clear that, if the penitent committed a sin with someone else, that other person should remain anonymous. Although the canon does not mention it, this applies particularly to sexual sins. If for some reason the accomplice's name is mentioned by the penitent, the confessor is strictly obliged to keep it secret, in the same way that he must keep the entire confession secret (which will be the topic of next week's newsletter).

Canon 980: "If the confessor has no doubt about the disposition of the penitent, and the penitent seeks absolution, absolution is to be neither refused nor deferred."

"The disposition of the penitent" refers to the sincerity of his contrition. The very fact that the penitent is confessing his sins ordinarily implies a minimum amount of sincere sorrow, which includes some willingness to try not to sin again. Most priests, I'm sure, accept that minimum as sufficient for giving absolution. But if there seems to be no contrition whatsoever, the priest is justified in withholding absolution. Withholding absolution, though, is (and should be) very rare and should be a response of last resort on the part of the priest.

Next week's newsletter will deal with the so-called "seal of the confessional," the priest's obligation never to reveal what he has heard in the confessional.

Father Boniface

Mass intentions for the period from April 27th to May 5th

Saturday-Sunday, April 27th-28th

4:00 pm: Alice J. and Arturo Martinez (D)
8:00 am: Joseph and Anna Giaquinto (D)
10:00 am: Kevin and Willy Healy (L)
12:00 noon: Richard Serra (D)
2:00 pm (Hungarian): Valarie Kurcz (D)
6:00 pm: St. Joseph's Parishioners

Monday, April 29th

7:00 am: Peter Slapikas (D)
12:15 pm: Ann Moran (D)

Tuesday, April 30th

7:00 am: Matthew Driscoll (D)
12:15 pm: Addy Castagna-Pirinea (D)

Wednesday, May 1st (St. Joseph the Worker)

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Nancy Russo (D)

Thursday, May 2nd

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Juanita Thomas (D)

Friday, May 3rd (First Friday)

7:00 am: Priscila Halagao (D)
12:15 pm: Edina Dixon (D)

Saturday, May 4th

8:00 am: Mary Farrell (D)
12:15 pm: Bernice Mackey (D)
4:00 pm: Jimmy Quinn (D)

Sunday, May 5th

8:00 am: Megan, Matt, Sarah and Ryan (L)
10:00 am (German):
12:00 noon: Giuseppe Cristofalo (D)
2:00 pm (Hungarian): Peter Geosits (D)
6:00 pm: St. Joseph's Parishioners