LETTER TO PRIESTS
HOLY THURSDAY 2000*

My Dear Brother Priests!

1. Jesus, “having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). Here in Jerusalem, in the place where according to tradition Jesus and the Twelve were present for the Passover Meal and the institution of the Eucharist, I am deeply moved as I read once again the words with which the Evangelist John introduces the account of the Last Supper.

I give praise to the Lord for enabling me, in this Year of the Incarnation of His Son, to trace the earthly footsteps of Christ, following the paths which he took from his birth in Bethlehem to his death on Golgotha. Yesterday I spent time in Bethlehem, in the cave of the Nativity. In the days to come I will visit various places associated with the life and ministry of the Saviour, from the house of the Annunciation to the Mount of the Beatitudes and the Garden of Olives. Finally on Sunday I will be at Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre.

Today, this visit to the Upper Room gives me an opportunity to survey the entire mystery of the Redemption. It was here that Christ gave us the immense gift of the Eucharist. Here too our priesthood was born.

A LETTER FROM THE UPPER ROOM

2. From this Upper Room I would like to address this letter to you, as I have done for more than twenty years, on Holy Thursday, the day of the Eucharist and “our” day par excellence.

CIRCULAR LETTER CONCERNING THE INTEGRITY OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Through a mysterious sharing in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross, the Sacrament of Penance overcomes the division between man and God caused by sin. In this precious sacrament the repentant sinner receives, as a gracious gift of the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the ministry of the Church, that reconciliation, which is “concentrated in Christ himself, the Lamb without blemish offered for our sins (1 Pt 1: 19; Ro 5: 6; 12: 11),” whose “pain and abandonment is thus turned into an inexhaustible source of compassionate and reconciling love”.

For this reason, on the occasion of the ad limina visit to Rome in 1998 of the Bishops of Australia, the Holy Father himself and this Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacra-


3 Cf. Code of Canon Law, can. 959-991.
2. The divine constitution of the Sacrament of Penance requires each penitent to confess to a priest all mortal sins, as well as any specifying moral circumstances that he remembers after a diligent examination of conscience. For this reason the Code of Canon Law states clearly that "individual and integral confession and absolution is the sole ordinary means by which a member of the faithful who is conscious of mortal sin is reconciled with God and with the Church. Physical or moral impossibility alone excuses from such confession." In specifying this obligation, the Church has insistently reiterated that "all the faithful who have reached the age of discretion are bound faithfully to confess their mortal sins at least once a year." Energetic efforts are to be made to avoid any risk that this traditional practice of the Sacrament of Penance fall into disuse. Indeed, in this Jubilee Year Catholics are called in a particular way "to encounter anew the uniquely transforming experience that is individual, integral confession and absolution." In accord with the law and practice of the Church, the faithful must orally confess their sins (auricular confession), except in cases of true physical or moral impossibility (e.g., extreme illness or physical condition inhibiting speech, speech impediment, etc.). This disposition would exclude communal celebrations of the sacrament in which penitents are invited to present a written list of sins to the priest confessor. It should be noted that such innovations also risk compromising the inviolable seal of sacramental confession.

3. In giving consideration to the authentic discipline of the Church concerning "general absolution", the recent interdicasterial meeting of the Roman Curia with a representation of Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Australia noted that:

... communal celebrations have not infrequently occasioned an illegitimate use of general absolution. This illegitimate use, like other abuses in the administration of the Sacrament of Penance, is to be eliminated.

The teaching of the Church is reflected in precise terms in the requirements of the Code of Canon Law (cf. esp. canons 959-964). In particular it is clear that "A sufficient necessity is not... considered to exist when confessors cannot be available merely because of a great gathering of penitents, such as can occur on some major feastday or pilgrimage" (canon 961, § 1, 2.).

The Bishops will exercise renewed vigilance on these matters for the future, aware that departures from the authentic tradition do great wrong to the Church and to individual Catholics.

4. With respect to the administration of "general absolution", the exclusive authority enjoyed by Diocesan Bishops to determine whether a grave necessity is truly present in a given case in their diocese does not permit them "to change the required conditions, to substitute other conditions for those given, or to determine grave necessity according to their personal criteria however worthy."

Indeed, the Diocesan Bishop makes "this judgement graviter onerata

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4 Cf. Code of Canon Law, can. 988, §1; Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1453-1456.
5 Code of Canon Law, can. 960.
6 Code of Canon Law, can. 989. Cf. also Conc. Octob. Trid., sessio XIV, cap. IV: Denzinger-Schonmetzer 1683; sessio XIV, Canones de sacramento penitentiae, can. 8: Denz.-Schön. 1708; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1457.
10 Statement of Conclusions, no. 45.
5. Local Ordinaries and priests, to the degree that it applies to them, have an obligation in conscience to ensure that penitents have regular and frequent scheduled opportunities for individual and integral confession of sins in all parish churches and, insofar as possible, in other pastoral centres. In addition, priests are called upon to be generous in making themselves available outside of those scheduled times to celebrate individual and integral confession whenever the faithful would reasonably ask for it. Other works, for lack of time, may have to be postponed or even abandoned, but not the confessional.

6. The Holy Father has pointed to the personal nature of sin, conversion, forgiveness and reconciliation as the reason why the Rite of Reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution "demands the personal confession of sins and individual absolution". Since individual and integral confession of sins is not only an obligation "but also an inviolable and inalienable right" of the faithful, any innovation which would interfere with their fulfillment of this obligation, such as when penitents are invited or otherwise encouraged to name just one sin or to name a representative sin, is to be eliminated.

7. As an aid to a more fruitful reception of the Sacrament of Penance and in the hope of fostering the spirit and virtue of penance among the faithful, the Rite of Penance includes material for "Penitential celebrations", which are described as gatherings of the people of God to hear the proclamation of God’s word. Care should be taken that the faithful do not confuse these celebrations with the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, in particular, by making clear to them that such celebrations are preparatory in nature and do not include the sacramental forgiveness of sins. It is to be borne in mind that such penitential celebrations may not make use of the sacramental formula of absolution, nor should they employ the concluding formula from the Penitential Rite at Mass, nor any other formula which could be misconstrued to be an absolution from sin.

8. Neither the Rite of Reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution, nor the aforementioned Penitential celebrations may be integrated into the celebration of the Mass. In addition to the unauthorized innovation in the celebration of the respective rites and of the Mass that this practice would represent, it must be noted, in particular, that such abuses run the risk of creating confusion in the minds of the faithful as to whether a sacramental absolution may or may not have taken place.

9. It is to be recalled that the “Eucharist is not ordered to the forgiveness of mortal sins – that is proper to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.”

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16 Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1484.
19 Cf. Rite of Penance, no. 36; Appendix II.
21 Cf. Rite of Penance, no. 13.
22 Cf. Sacrosanctum Concilium, no. 22, § 3.
promotion of this teaching themselves and by reminding confessors to counsel the faithful that the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. In the pursuit of that authentic "rediscovery" of the Sacrament of Penance to which the Holy Father calls the Church, "a careful rereading of the Ordo Penance (Rite of Penance) will be a great help during the Jubilee for deepening our understanding of the essential elements of this sacrament". Especially in this Holy Year, "when Jesus' invitation to conversion makes itself more deeply felt may one of the fruits of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 be the general return of the Christian faithful to the sacramental practice of Confession".

Rome, from the offices of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. 20 March, the Solemnity of Saint Joseph in the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

Jorge A. Card. Medina Estévez
Prefect

κ Francesco Pio Tamburrino
Archbishop Secretary

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34 Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1395.
35 Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1367, 1394.
36 Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1395.
37 Pope John Paul II, General Audience, 15 September 1999, no. 5.
39 Pope John Paul II, General Audience, 22 September 1999, no. 5.