



Embargoed for release:

Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015

U.S. Catholic priests seek expanded opportunities for sacramental confession and reconciliation —urge more access through full use of Vatican II rites

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, a traditional time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving for many Christians. Lent is also a time when the Catholic Church emphasizes the need for repentance, conversion and penance. A group of Catholic priests in the United States has chosen Lent as the time to seek expansion of the opportunities for confession and sacramental reconciliation.

Catholics of a certain age “went to Confession” on a regular basis, privately telling a priest the list of mortal and venial sins he or she had committed since the last confession. After making an Act of Contrition and a firm commitment to sin no more, the penitent received a penance – usually a set of prayers to be said – and finally, individual absolution.

Most Catholics today however have little or no such experience – and that is a reality that concerns the members of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests. Their concern first surfaced at the 2013 Assembly in Seattle, and now the AUSCP, with over a thousand members, hopes to convince the bishops of the United States to do what they can to expand possibilities for Catholics to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

What the priests are asking is defined in carefully chosen canonical terms, and requested within a well-reasoned theological framework. No special terminology is needed to describe the reality: 45 percent of U.S. Catholics *never* celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation; another 30 percent “go to Confession” *less than once a year*.

— *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, 2008.*

The priests have asked their bishops to seek full Catholic Church approval for the full restoration and implementation of the Rite of Penance that was approved following the Second Vatican Council.

- Rite 1 includes private confession and absolution.
- Rite 2 includes a common liturgical service followed by individual confession and absolution – a practice that is often truncated as large numbers of penitents meet a small number of priests with limited time available.



- Rite 3 envisions a communal celebration with communal absolution, with a requirement that a penitent follow up at a later time with a private confession if grave sins are involved.

The priests, who as a group have literally hundreds of thousands of hours of experience in the confessional, believe that Rite 1 private confession should be available every week. They believe that Rite 2 does not offer adequate pastoral care for penitents, but that Rite 3, with a communal liturgical service and communal absolution, would best allow the parish community to “commit anew to conversion, experience the merciful love of God, and work with the Lord in his ministry of reconciliation.”

— *AUSCP Background Document*

Technically, the AUSCP is asking the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to request an indult from the Holy See to allow celebration of the Rite 3 of Penance in parishes in the United States.

Celebrating the sacrament in this fashion, they believe, may actually bring more Catholics back to personal, private confessions – the practice that has been all but abandoned by 75 percent of Catholics in the United States. Rite 3 would “move hearts in the future toward the value of periodic personal confession with its availability of pastoral counseling and spiritual direction.”

A letter from the AUSCP, dated February 10, 2015, was sent to Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, president of the USCCB, to members of the conference’s Committee for Divine Worship, and to all bishop members of the conference.

The full text of the letter to Archbishop Kurtz, and to the U.S. bishops follows this release.

The AUSCP 14-page background document regarding full restoration and implementation of the Rite of Penance will be posted Wednesday, February 18, at <http://www.uscatholicpriests.org/our-work/>

Father Bernard “Bob” Bonnot, a priest of the Diocese of Youngstown, chairs the leadership team of the AUSCP and is available to speak for the association.

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Text of letter

Dear Archbishop Kurtz:

On November 12, 2012 your predecessor as President of the USCCB, Cardinal Dolan, observed to all our bishops “that despite the call of the Second Vatican Council for a renewal of the Sacrament of Penance, what we got instead was its near disappearance.” He referenced a pastoral plan to improve the situation and urged the bishops to set an example for the faithful.

Has the situation gotten better? Our experience is that it has not.



We write to recommend and request a change in the pastoral administration of the Sacrament of Penance, namely full implementation of the Rite of Penance devised decades ago in response to Pope St. John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council's call for "the effective transmission of the faith for the transformation of the world" (Cardinal Dolan's words).

The attached document provides background and rationale for the AUSCP's formal urging, herewith transmitted, **that the USCCB request an indulgence from the Holy See to allow full use of the Rite of Penance, including Rite 3, as part of the pastoral practice of the Church in the United States.** We make this request collectively as pastors with tens of thousands of years of pastoral experience. We ask it for the well-being of the faithful and with hope for the desired renewal of the sacrament expressed by Cardinal Dolan. The current restrictions on use of Rite 3 curtail the pastoral effectiveness of the sacrament, contribute to less frequent celebration, and limit the flow of God's merciful love through the sacraments of the church into the hearts and minds of our faith communities and society at large. That situation need not -- should not -- continue.

We make this request in response to a formal resolution passed with strong consensus at the 2013 national Assembly of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests in Seattle WA. We will appreciate this being put on the Agenda of the USCCB and so are sending it also to the Conference's Committee for Divine Worship.

On behalf of our Board and Members,

Rev. Bernard R. Bonnot, Board Chair

cc. All Bishops of the United States (Ordinary, Auxiliary, Emeritus)