

THE VATICAN

Priests Told To Cut Back On Absolution For Groups

By MELINDA HENNEBERGER

VATICAN CITY, May 2 — The Vatican announced today that it was cracking down on priests who had become too free in granting group absolution to sinners or otherwise become lax confessors.

Pope John Paul II called for the changes in an apostolic letter, which also said, "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."

The pope was reaffirming the Roman Catholic teaching that penitents can be absolved only if they intend to change their ways — to try, as priests say at the end of the confessional rite, to "Go and sin no more."

At a news conference, Vatican officials were asked whether this meant that gay or divorced and remarried Catholics could never be forgiven. But the church teaches that forgiveness and redemption are always possible.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who heads the Vatican's doctrinal office, answered reporters by repeating what the pope had said. "When a person is in a chronic state of sin, with no intention of changing" there can be no absolution, he said. But "it's not right to say this is a punishment," or is intended for any specific groups of people.

It was mostly the timing of the letter demanding that priests cut back on blanket absolutions that was a surprise, given the perception of American Catholics coping with sexual abuse scandals involving priests that it is church leaders who should themselves be asking for forgiveness now.

Just last week, the pope and other top Vatican officials met with American cardinals who came here to discuss the scandals and how to deal with them. The result was a final communiqué that chiefly made clear that American church leaders were still divided on how to proceed. A national meeting of American bishops in Dallas this June will focus on the response.

When Cardinal Ratzinger was asked today whether, in light of the scandals, he thought American church leaders should make a public act of penitence, the pope's spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, interjected that sexual abuse involving priests was "not the theme today."

But Cardinal Ratzinger answered that and other questions related to the scandals anyway.

"The American bishops have already decided they will have a day of expiation, probably on the Feast of the Sacred Heart," on June 7, he said, "which is traditionally a day of expiation for our sins."

"This will be an act of purification. Such a public act forces us to focus on our sins and is an invitation to think about sin and mercy."

He described the meetings with American cardinals, which he was involved in, as "very opportune and very fraternal, also for understanding points of view that were very diverse."

In saying this, he acknowledged the chasm between the Vatican view, which had tended to underestimate the scandals, and the American view that the damage done could hardly be overestimated.

"Now we understand better the situation, the roots of the situation, and the responses to give," Cardinal Ratzinger said.

Asked whether canon law would be changed to allow American bishops to eject priests guilty of abusing minors more quickly, Msgr. Julian Herranz, head of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, said there was no need to change church law because it already contained provisions for removing abusive priests.

The pope's apostolic letter was supposed to address what Cardinal Ratzinger called a crisis: Fewer and fewer Catholics receive the sacrament of penance and increasingly, he said, blur the distinction between confession and psychotherapy.

"In psychotherapy, people take upon themselves the burden of deep and often dangerous revelations about their interior lives," Cardinal Ratzinger said. "In the sacrament of penance, one trusts God's merciful goodness in the simple confession of one's own guilt."

Cardinal Ratzinger and others complained about the trend in some countries toward group rather than individual confession.

Communal penance services are especially common in Australia, Germany and Switzerland, though there are some in the United States as well.

The pope's letter said general absolutions were for use only in "grave necessity," when an individual confession is not possible.

Cardinal Ratzinger said such services had contributed to the declining number of Catholics who go to confession.