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Statement of Clarification Regarding Pope Francis' Concession on the Absolution of the Sin of Abortion at the Confessional During the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy

On September 1, 2015, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, sent a letter to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, regarding the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, in which the Pope reaffirms his hope that the jubilee indulgence will lead every person to a “genuine experience of God's mercy” and explains that it can also be obtained by incarcerated persons. In addition, he grants to all priests, notwithstanding any provision to the contrary, the faculty to absolve from sin those who have resorted to abortion, repenting and asking forgiveness with a sincere heart, and establishes that those who during the Holy Year of Mercy approach the priests of the Fraternity of St Pius X to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation shall validly and licitly receive the absolution of their sins.

With particular reference to the Pope's statement regarding the sin of abortion, not a few questions and confusion have arisen such that there is a need to clarify the Pope's statement regarding the sin of abortion.

Before September 1, 2015, the absolution of the sin of abortion was reserved to diocesan bishops, who may concede to priests ministering in his diocese the faculty of absolving at the confessional the sins of abortion. Thus, priests do not have this faculty by virtue of ordination but by virtue of delegation by the diocesan bishop. A reserved sin is one in which permission to forgive the penitent must come from the diocesan bishop. It is up to the diocesan bishop to empower or grant the faculty to priests to grant sacramental absolution those sins whose sacramental absolution is reserved to the diocesan bishop. In virtually every diocese in the United States, the diocesan bishop has conceded this faculty of forgiving reserved sin. In the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the Archbishop has favorably and habitually delegated to priests ministering in the Archdiocese, the faculty of forgiving the sin of abortion at the confessional.

However, bishops in some countries have not granted this concession to priests. The approach of Pope Francis then is to grant this concession directly to priests everywhere until November 20, 2016. The purposes are to welcome home those who feel unforgiven by the church on account of procuring completed abortion, to make it easy for priests to forgive these people in confession without having refer the penitent to the bishop or his special delegate, and to bring a practical and pastoral approach to the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Furthermore, there are other sins, besides abortion, which remain reserved either to the diocesan bishop or to the Apostolic See, depending on the act itself. For example, some of the reserved sins are physical force against the pope or a bishop, the violation of the confessional seal, the false denunciation of a confessor, the attempted marriage by a cleric or a religious in perpetual vows, etc. The aforesaid Statement of Pope Francis is limited only to abortion; it does not affect other reserved sins.

In addition, a distinction is made between a sin and an ecclesiastical crime or delict. Not every sin is a delict, but all delicts are also sins. Some sins do not have any penalty attached to them; but all delicts have at least an indeterminate penalty attached to them. Furthermore, canon law distinguishes between the forgiveness of sins at the confessional and the imposition or the lifting of any ecclesiastical penalty which might be attached to the commission of the sin. Thus, while the sacramental forgiveness of sins restores the individual's relationship to God, the imposition or lifting of any ecclesiastical penalty attached to the sin is another matter which is still reserved either to the diocesan bishop or to the Apostolic See, depending on the nature of the sin and ecclesiastical crime involved.

In conclusion, Pope Francis has conceded directly to priests everywhere valid only until November 20, 2016, the faculty of absolving on the occasion of the Sacrament of Reconciliation a penitent who confesses the sin of abortion, provided the penitent has repented and asked for forgiveness with a sincere heart. This faculty is restricted only to the sin of abortion.

Below is an excerpt of the Pope Statement as released by the Vatican Information Service:

“One of the serious problems of our time is clearly the changed relationship with respect to life. A widespread and insensitive mentality has led to the loss of the proper personal and social sensitivity to welcome new life. The tragedy of abortion is experienced by some with a superficial awareness, as if not realising the extreme harm that such an act entails. Many others, on the other hand, although experiencing this moment as a defeat, believe they have no other option. I think in particular of all the women who have resorted to abortion. I am well aware of the pressure that has led them to this decision. I know that it is an existential and moral ordeal. I have met so many women who bear in their heart the scar of this agonising and painful decision. What has happened is profoundly unjust; yet only understanding the truth of it can enable one not to lose hope. The forgiveness of God cannot be denied to one who has repented, especially when that person approaches the Sacrament of Confession with a sincere heart in order to obtain reconciliation with the Father. For this reason too, I have decided, notwithstanding anything to the contrary, to concede to all priests for the Jubilee Year the discretion to absolve of the sin of abortion those who have procured it and who, with contrite heart, seek forgiveness for it. May priests fulfil this great task by expressing words of genuine welcome combined with a reflection that explains the gravity of the sin committed, besides indicating a path of authentic conversion by which to obtain the true and generous forgiveness of the Father who renews all with his presence.” [End of excerpted statement].

I use this opportunity to urge the faithful to use this opportunity to avail themselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. On Wednesday, September 9, 2015, all the Catholic Churches in the Archdiocese of New Orleans will have the Sacrament of Reconciliation beginning from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. or until the last confession is heard. Pope Francis has reminded us that God never tires of forgiving us, but perhaps we grow tired of asking for forgiveness. Our Holy Father reminds us instead that we must humbly ask for God's mercy knowing that he gives it in abundance.



Most Reverend Gregory M. Aymond
Archbishop of New Orleans
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