

A meeting with the Regent of the Penitentiary at the conclusion of the course for confessors

The new forms of social sin
by Nicola Gori

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Genetic manipulation, environmental pollution, social inequality, unsustainable social injustice: these are the new forms of sin appearing on the horizon of humanity, like a corollary of the unstoppable process of globalization. They are also new challenges for the Apostolic Penitentiary, which labors to reaffirm its own role in an age in which the perception of sin counts less. Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, Regent of the Penitentiary, spoke of these in this interview released to *L'Osservatore Romano* the day after the conclusion of the course for confessors.

The Apostolic Penitentiary seems to be a mysterious object for public opinion as well as for a good part of the faithful.

Unfortunately, this affirmation corresponds with reality. Although it is the oldest office of the Roman Curia – after the suppression of *Dataria* in 1967 and the Chancery in 1973 – it is little known even among a large part of the clergy. The reason perhaps can be found in the fact that its activity doesn't have the same visibility as the other dicasteries. The Apostolic Penitentiary, among the dicasteries of the Roman Curia, addresses in an always direct manner, a properly spiritual activity, most in keeping with the fundamental mission of the Church, which consists in the *salus animarum* (the health of souls). It is the universal and exclusive organ of the Papacy concerning the internal forum. It is concerned with the internal forum not only for sins, censures, and irregularities, but in general for occult/hidden situations, such as dispensing with sanctions, confirming nullified acts derived from occult/unknown circumstances. It also examines and resolves cases of conscience that come from these. It resolves doubts in moral or juridical cases, as well as dealing with unknown circumstances or individual concrete facts.

What is the value of your responses?

These have an authoritative value – according to the cases, commanding or acquitting – only for the real and singular cases that come to be proposed and not for other cases, but to those others that can be extended as a prudential criterion. Which means the doctrinal orientations and disciplines included in the same solutions can be with prudence applied by the priest who is given to have recourse, by analogy, in a broader field, in no case, however is permitted to divulge those responses.

Does it still have a sense of an office such as the Penitentiary from the moment that seems to create problems at the ecumenical level?

I find it difficult to gather the reasons and objective motives of the presumed difficulty the Penitentiary creates at the ecumenical level. If it is intended to refer to historical errors regarding forgiveness that until the age of the Renaissance did not foster the correct ecumenical discussion, it would suffice to compare it with the recent and rich papers of highly-regarded scholars who have very honestly explained the function of this dicastery which retains the true “source of grace” without any interest.

Does the attention to sin come from a sensibility to the needs of modern society or from a reference point of a past time?

The reference is always the violation of the covenant with God and with brothers and the social consequences of sin. If yesterday sin had a rather individualistic dimension, today it has a value, a resonance beyond the individual, above all social, because of the great phenomenon of globalization. In effect, the attention to sin presents itself more urgently today than yesterday, because its consequences are wider and more destructive.

Is the Penitentiary still useful?

Without a doubt. In an age characterized by images and publicity where everything is public, a dicastery such as the Apostolic Penitentiary, attentive to the interior world in its more delicate and less visible side, I believe it is a precious instrument, especially in the complex framework of the Church.

Which questions are drawing your attention?

There are those offenses of which, for their gravity, the Holy See reserves absolution: the absolution of being complicit in sin against the Sixth Commandment (canon 1378); the sacrilegious profanation of the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist (canon 1367); the direct violation of the sacramental seal (canon 1388, 1); the dispensation of irregularity *ad recipiendos Ordines* contracted to procure an abortion (canon 1401,4); the dispensation of irregularity *ad exercendos Ordines* (canon 1044, 1).

How can one interpret the shock that public opinion has towards many situations of scandal and sin in the Church?

One cannot undervalue the objective gravity of a series of phenomenon that have been recently denounced and that bring with it the repercussions of human and institutional weakness of the Church; one cannot, however, ignore how it, worried with the grave damage, has redressed and continues to redress with rigorous interventions and initiatives to protect the image of the Church itself and for the good of the people of God. Nevertheless, it is necessary also to denounce the emphasis given to the media that on a daily basis casts discredit on the Church.

Sometimes people do not understand the Church's (issuing of) indulgences and Christian forgiveness? Why do you think it is that way?

Today it seems that repentance is taken to mean opening one's self to others when resolving issues found within his or her own special social sphere, within which one expresses his very own existence, and does so by offering his own contribution of clarification and support for those having such problems. Repentance, therefore, today takes on a (special) social dimension, due to the fact that relationships have grown weaker and more complicated because of globalization.

In your opinion, what are the "new sins"?

There are various areas today in which we adopt sinful behavior, as with individual and social rights. This is especially so in the field of bioethics where we cannot deny the existence of violations of fundamental rights of human nature – this occurs by way of experiments and genetic modifications, whose results we cannot easily predict or control. Another area, which indeed pertains to the social spectrum, is that of drug use, which weakens our minds and reduces our intelligence. As a result, many young people are left out of Church circles. Here's another one: social and economic inequality, in the sense that the rich always seem to get richer, and the poor, poorer. This [phenomenon] feeds off an unsustainable form of social injustice and is related to environmental issues –which currently have much relevant interest.

Do you think frequent indulgences inspire one to take on a "magic wand mentality" about (ridding oneself of) guilt and punishment?

In order not to fall prey to such a dangerous and false vision, I really believe it is absolutely necessary to be familiar with and understand the rightful doctrine and practice of indulgences, which is understood by the Church as a significant expression of God's mercy, as He reaches out to His children to help them overcome the punishment brought on by their sins.. God also does so in order "to push them toward, above all, a greater love of charity". The Church is more than anything inspired by its desire to teach, more so than (to require the mere) repetition of formulas and practices of prayer, repentance and exercising theological virtues. The reforms enacted by God's servant, Paul VI, with the Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina* on January 1, 1967 to some degree eliminated the so-called "magic wand mentality". Such doctrine clearly demonstrates the theological underpinnings of indulgences, as taken from the solidarity existing between men, as represented in Adam and Christ, the communion of saints, and the treasure of the Church consisting in expiation (of sins) and in the merits of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. Indeed, it must be emphasized that indulgences cannot be had without first undergoing a genuine conversion and without being in union with God. And added to this is the fulfillment of prescribed acts (of repentance).

Don't you think the conditions to receive indulgences are light?

If, together with the usual imposed conditions, no. That is, receiving the sacrament of confession no more than 15 or 20 days afterward, receiving the Eucharist and praying according to the Pope's intentions. To obtain such indulgences it is required that one also demonstrate outstanding purity and shows evidence of fervent charity. To arrive at this

state is very difficult, due to our human weakness. Hence, when thinking about it this way, receiving indulgences is something not to be taken lightly.

Are there sins you cannot absolve?

The Penitentiary is the Pope's *longa manus* when exercising his *potestas clavium*. Therefore, to carry out the functions assigned to him, within the degree of application, the Penitentiary possesses all necessary faculties [to absolve sin] –the only exception being those faculties which the Holy Father has expressly told the Cardinal Penitentiary to reserve for the Pope alone. He can, therefore, carry out, within his realm of authority, all acts of competence of all the other dicasteries within the Roman Curia.

Regarding the abortion issue, it seems that the Church does not take into account the difficult situations women have to deal with.

It seems that this is an excessive concern, especially since it is the Church that constantly seeks to protect and safeguard the rights and dignity of women. There are many courageous and intelligent initiatives led by Catholic organizations and Church movements. They endlessly and efficaciously support single mothers and fight today's social and cultural tendencies to the contrary. They even take responsibility to raise unwanted children and facilitate their adoption.

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