

When is general absolution appropriate?



Question: I went to confession recently, and the elderly priest emerged from the confessional and told us in line that he was too ill to continue. He said he would offer us all general absolution and that we would not need to reconfess our sins at a later time. We all left puzzled and wondered if this was right.

– **Name withheld**, Washington state

Answer: This is clearly a very unusual situation. If a priest cannot complete confessions for an important reason such as ill health, granting general absolution is not the way to handle it. Sometimes the best and most accurate answer to offer Catholics is the humble answer that the Church does not always have a perfect answer for every situation. Sometimes a priest forgets to show up, or is delayed for confessions. At other times, he may fall ill and the parish is shorthanded. People who show up in good faith expecting confessions to be available at the usual time ought to be assured of God's mercy and, though not absolved, should plan to come at another time.

But for a priest to offer general absolution in the case of illness or fatigue is a misuse of the power, since confession is reasonably available to people soon, perhaps even later the same day. General absolution should be offered only in the rarest of circumstances, such as the danger of death for a large number of people in a short period – for example, in battle or when a plane is going down. Another example might be in certain mission lands when a visiting priest may face a huge number of penitents and cannot personally hear all their confessions.

Further, for the ill priest to announce that those who receive general absolution will not need to confess their sins at some point in the future is incorrect. Those who receive general absolution, in the rare circumstances when it must be offered, are expected to make a confession of their mortal sins in kind and number and be absolved in a usual way if and when the opportunity presents itself. This may be either because the danger has passed or the availability of a confessor becomes reasonably available.

John the Baptist

Question: I am puzzled at what Jesus says about St. John the Baptist: “among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt 11:11). He seems to diminish the holiness of John. Speaking only for myself, I can hardly say I’m holier than John. How is the least born in the kingdom greater than John?

– **Martin Johnson**, via email

Answer: The answer in a word is “grace.” Jesus permits John the Baptist to represent the best of which the natural order can supply. There were many who, before the coming of Christ, exemplified natural virtues such as courage, justice, prudence and fortitude. But with the coming of grace through Christ Jesus, supernatural virtues are available to us, and even our natural virtues can take on a more supernatural quality.

Chief among the supernatural virtues is sanctifying grace, wherein we are made pleasing to God. Prior to Christ’s sanctifying grace we were dead in our sins (cf. Eph 2:1) and destined for wrath (Rom 9:22). In other words, we could never hope to endure the brightness of God’s holiness or the fire of his love. But, with sanctifying grace, we are made holy and pleasing to God and can endure the day of his coming. Sanctifying grace works with many actual graces as well to

drive out sin and bring forth holiness in us. Actual graces are those particular graces offered to us at each moment and in diverse situations so that we can choose well and grow in holiness rather than sin. Even the least in the kingdom are offered these graces, and this puts us in a far greater status by and through God's gifts of grace through Christ.

Many hold that St John the Baptist was sanctified in the womb when he leapt for joy. But this does not mean that John was immaculately conceived. Rather, he was sanctified after his conception but before his birth. Hence, he is able to represent the best of the Old Covenant and the best of the New Covenant. So, Jesus is not dismissing John's sanctity but pointing to what is best about John's sanctity and what is also available to the least in the kingdom.

Msgr. Charles Pope is the pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian in Washington, D.C., and writes for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. at blog.adw.org. Send questions to msgrpope@osv.com.