

For 830 years, Apostolic Penitentiary has focused on forgiveness

VATICAN CITY – The crimes the Catholic Church considers to be most serious are investigated and punished by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but the Vatican also has a specific office for helping the guilty find forgiveness and reconcile with God and the church.

In matters related to the conscience of individual Catholics, the work of the Apostolic Penitentiary, headed by U.S. Cardinal J. Francis Stafford, is probably the most secret of any Vatican office.

Even the tribunals dealing with delicate situations involving requests for the annulment of marriages publish annual reports giving the number of cases opened and resolved during the year.

But the Apostolic Penitentiary does not release that kind of information because its work is covered under the sacramental seal of confession.

The low profile of the office combined with the seriousness of the sins brought to its attention probably explains why members of the media flocked to a Jan. 13-14 symposium on the history of the Apostolic Penitentiary and of the sacrament of penance.

Cardinal Stafford told reporters Jan. 13 that the penitentiary deals with five specific cases: a man who directly participated in an abortion and later wants to enter the priesthood; priests who have broken the seal of confession; priests who have offered sacramental absolution to their own sexual partner; desecrating the Eucharist; and making an attempt on the life of the pope.

The “very serious sin” of clerical sexual abuse is not one of the sins over which the penitentiary has competence, the cardinal said; those cases are handled by the doctrinal congregation.

Forgiveness of the five sins listed by Cardinal Stafford is what the church describes as “reserved” to the Holy See, so in order to receive absolution for them, it is not enough to go to one’s local priest for confession, said Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, regent of the Apostolic Penitentiary.

A detailed account of the case is sent to the penitentiary, which studies it to ensure the true repentance of the sinner and which recommends “an appropriate, proportionate penance,” Bishop Girotti said.

The penitentiary also has other responsibilities, including choosing, training and coordinating the work of the priests who hear confessions in the major basilicas of Rome; promoting appreciation of the sacrament of penance; coordinating the offering of indulgences; and offering an annual course for priests and seminarians on administering the sacrament of penance.

Cardinal Stafford told reporters Jan. 13 that he organized the symposium to increase public awareness of the penitentiary’s work over the past 830 years.

“Today we talk a lot about God’s forgiveness, which is a motive for joy and happiness. But I am a bit worried about the lack of awareness of the connection between this joy and the forgiveness of sins,” he said.

“We all know the burden of sin in our personal lives, which is why the sacrament of penance really is the sacrament of reconciliation given by Christ to his church. It is a sacrament full of the mercy, charity and love of God,” he said.