

Pope: Make confession a time for God's merciful love

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — With fewer and fewer Catholics going to confession, Pope Benedict XVI urged priests and seminarians to make the sacrament of penance a time for sinners to feel God's merciful love.

"Sin does not lie at the heart of the sacramental celebration, but rather God's mercy, which is infinitely greater than each of our faults," he said March 7.

The pope spoke to about 700 priests and seminarians taking part in a weeklong course offered every year by the Vatican's Apostolic Penitentiary, which deals with matters of conscience.

The head of the penitentiary, U.S. Cardinal J. Francis Stafford, told the pope the annual study session was a way to promote the importance of "the penitential ministry, above all that of confession (which) depends greatly on priests, too, and their awareness of being the bearers of a precious and irreplaceable ministry."

The pope said that today, unfortunately, there is a growing lack of any sense of sin.

Those who are too self-confident and confide only in themselves are blinded by their ego "and their heart hardens in sin," he said.

A person who recognizes himself or herself "as weak and sinful entrusts himself to God and receives grace and pardon from him," he added.

The pope said this was the message priests had to convey to the faithful: that no matter what sin one commits, if the sinner humbly recognizes it and approaches a priest for confession with trust, "one always experiences the peacemaking joy of God's forgiveness."

He praised the fact that the course was helping confessors be doctrinally well prepared and better able to help penitents feel God's loving mercy.

He asked whether a lack of emphasis on God's mercy was a contributing factor to "a

certain disaffection toward this sacrament” of confession.

While helping the penitents understand the seriousness of their sins is important, he said insisting only on “the accusation of sin” risks putting the most important point on the back burner — that of “a personal meeting with God, the father of good will and mercy.”

“It’s necessary today to let the person who confesses feel that divine tenderness toward the penitent sinner,” which is seen in many moving accounts in the Gospel, he said, highlighting Luke’s account of Jesus’ encounter with a repentant woman in the house of Simon.

The pope reminded the priests how valuable their ministry of administering “divine mercy for the salvation of souls” was for the church and urged them to be examples of “authentic Christian life.”

One of the course’s organizers and a top official at the Apostolic Penitentiary, Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, told the Vatican newspaper the sacrament of penance in Italy was in a “period of crisis” and a “serious state of difficulty.”

In a March 4 article in L’Osservatore Romano, the bishop referred to a 1998 survey that found 30 percent of Catholics in Italy believed there was no need for a priest to be present in confessionals. Twenty percent said they had difficulty in talking to another person about their sins while 10 percent considered the priest to be an obstacle to direct conversation with God.

While the survey is dated, he said, “things have not improved” since then.

Bishop Girotti told the paper the course also addressed special penitents like the divorced, remarried and couples who were living together outside marriage.

He said the priest should use the moment of confession to slowly suggest solutions that would rectify the person’s situation so that he or she may eventually be able to receive the Eucharist.

While priests must follow doctrinal rules concerning divorced and remarried Catholics, their pastoral attitude must be inspired by the Gospel and “cannot and

must not bring someone despair," he said.

When hearing the confession of other priests or religious, the confessor must be a "just judge" and "good doctor of the spirit"; he must "never take on an apocalyptic tone" since taking too hard a line has often "been fatal for many," the bishop said.