NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Keep sex abuse sins confidential, confessors urged

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Mar. 18, 2010

VATICAN CITY -- A priest who confesses sexual abuse in the sacrament of penance should be absolved and should generally not be encouraged by the confessor to disclose his acts publicly or to his superiors, a Vatican official said.

Likewise, the confessor should not make the contents of such a confession public, said Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, regent of the Apostolic Penitentiary, a Vatican court that handles issues related to the sacrament of penance.

Bishop Girotti spoke in an interview published March 17 in L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper. His comments came as church leaders were responding to the disclosure of hundreds of allegations of past sexual abuse by priests in several European countries.

Bishop Girotti spoke strictly about the response of a confessor, and not about the wider responsibility to acknowledge and investigate priestly sexual abuse outside the confessional.

When a priest confesses such acts, "the confession can only have absolution as a consequence," he said.

"It is not up to the confessor to make them public or to ask the penitent to incriminate himself in front of superiors. This is true because, on one hand, the sacramental seal remains inviolable and, on the other hand, one cannot provoke mistrust in the penitent," he said.

"From the confessor, (the penitent) can only expect absolution, certainly not a sentence nor the order to confess his crime in public," he said.

Other Vatican officials, who spoke on background, said a distinction should be drawn between what a confessor requires of a penitent as a condition for absolution, and what the confessor may strongly encourage the penitent to do.

In the case of priestly sexual abuse, for example, a confessor may want to recommend that a priest discuss the situation with superiors in order to avoid the occasion of future sins, they said. Publicly admitting the sin might even be required of a penitent if it would clear the name of another person unjustly accused of the same act, they said.

In the interview, Bishop Girotti also explained why the church reserves to bishops the overall authority for absolution for the sin of abortion, but not for other grave sins like murder or the sexual abuse of minors by priests. Essentially, he said, the purpose is to highlight the gravity of the sin of abortion.

"It's not really correct to say that it's easier to confess a murder or sexual abuse than an abortion. It's simply a matter of two different configurations of sin," he said.

"By placing abortion in the category of sins reserved to a higher competence, the aim was to place the accent on the seriousness of the killing of an individual even before he or she is born. The hope is also to encourage more reflection by those thinking of abortion as a way to resolve a serious personal issue," he said.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/18/2014 - 13:43*): http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/keep-sex-abuse-sins-confidential-confessors-urged