

Vatican reveals secrets of worst sins

The Vatican's most secretive tribunal has revealed how the Catholic Church deals with the worst sins divulged in the confessional.

By Nick Squires in Rome

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The Apostolic Penitentiary, or "tribunal of conscience", has been shrouded in secrecy ever since it was established by Pope Alexander III in 1179 and until now has never provided details of the cases it scrutinises.

They are considered so heinous by the Catholic Church that only the Pope can grant absolution to those who perpetrate them.

But in an effort to present a more transparent image and to encourage more people to make confessions, the tribunal held a two-day conference in Rome in which it discussed its purpose and inner workings.

"Even though it's the oldest department of the Holy See, it's very little known - specifically because by its nature it deals with secret things," said Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, the tribunal's second most senior official.

While priests and bishops can deal with confessions of sins as grave as murder or even genocide, the tribunal is reserved for crimes which are viewed by the Church as even more serious.

They include attempting to assassinate the Pope, a priest abusing the confidentiality of the confessional by revealing the nature of the sin and the person who admitted to it, or a priest who has sex with someone and then offers forgiveness for the act.

A third type of case that comes before the tribunal involves a man who directly participates in an abortion - even by paying for it - who then seeks to become a priest or deacon.

"That is an irregularity and it means he should not receive the ordination without a dispensation from the Pope," said Cardinal James Francis Stafford, the American who heads the Apostolic Penitentiary.

Defiling the Eucharist, which Catholics believe is the body and blood of Christ, is also considered a sin of extreme gravity and one which is on the increase, the high-ranking members of the tribunal said.

Cardinal Stafford said there had been a rise in incidents in which people would receive Communion and then spit it out or otherwise desecrate it, sometimes in Satanic rituals.

In July last year an American academic, to make a point about freedom of thought and religion, drove a nail through a Communion wafer and then threw it in a rubbish bin.

Paul Myers, from the University of Minnesota, said later: "I pierced it with a rusty nail. Then I simply threw it in the trash. Question everything. God is not great, Jesus is not your Lord."

Such sins, which can only be dealt with by the Pope, acting through the tribunal, bring automatic excommunication from the Church. If the Pope decides to grant absolution, the excommunication is lifted.

A study by Italy's Sacred Heart University found that 47 per cent of Italians either never go to confession or last did so a long time ago.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/vaticancityandholyysee/4247756/Vatican-reveals-secrets-of-worst-sins.html>