

Excommunication happens somewhat rarely in the Catholic church. It doesn't really throw you out of the church as some people think. It's a penalty that excludes you from some privileges like receiving the eucharist, helping out at mass, and holding church offices. Most of the ways you get excommunicated are pretty unusual: You kill the pope, or you physically assault him. You pretend you're a bishop and ordain someone. You steal the eucharist and desecrate it some way. A priest is excommunicated if he tells anyone what you tell him in confession. A lot of people think that if you're divorced, you're excommunicated. That's not true. Others think if you remarry without an annulment you're excommunicated. Not really. If you're in a second marriage without an annulment on the first, the church does ask you to refrain from receiving communion, but we don't call that particular state excommunication. The same is true of a Catholic in any marriage which was not celebrated in the Catholic Church nor obtained the proper dispensations. The partners in that relationship are not excommunicated in the canonical sense of the term, but they are asked to refrain from communion until the marriage can be convalidated by the Catholic Church. I suppose the most common cause of excommunication is procuring a direct abortion. People get freed from excommunication through the sacrament of reconciliation.

Pope John Paul II is very outspoken, as you know, about abortion. He believes guilt lies not only with those procuring the abortion but with those who conduct the procedure, and even with legislators who promote broader permissions for it. And yet, the pope has said something remarkably compassionate about the nature of excommunication. He says the state exists not just to call attention to the seriousness of the offense, but to invite people into repentance and reconciliation. He says in his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, "In the church the purpose of the penalty of excommunication is to make an individual fully aware of the gravity of a certain sin and then to foster genuine conversion and repentance." So the idea is not at all to throw people out, but to summon them to a conversion of heart.

I've used excommunication as an extreme example to make this general point about sin. What God most wants of sinners is not punishment, but conversion. This is very different from the American way of life. If somebody sins against us, we generally want them punished. We don't want to hear "Sorry." We want people to pay for their crimes. But the Christian approach really is different. It calls for immense patience with perpetrators. It calls for a heart that desires not the worst for them, but the best for them -- the best being their recognition of their offense and their contrition.

The second letter of Peter today deals with the question of how long it's taking Jesus to come back again. Some people thought Jesus was dallying on his promise to return. But the writer of the letter says, "The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard 'delay,' but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." In other words, Jesus hadn't come yet in order to give us time to repent. That way we would not be lost when he comes.

As the jubilee year draws ever closer, we will have ample

opportunity to express our sorrow and to win forgiveness. God is not slow.
God is patient.