Fewer confessions and new sins

By David Willey
BBC News, Rome

The Vatican has brought up to date the traditional seven deadly sins by adding seven modern mortal sins it claims are becoming prevalent in what it calls an era of "unstoppable globalisation".

Those newly risking eternal punishment include drug pushers, the obscenely wealthy, and scientists who manipulate human genes. So "thou shalt not carry out morally dubious scientific experiments" or "thou shalt not pollute the earth" might one day be added to the Ten Commandments.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into Hell".

The new mortal sins were listed by Archbishop Gianfranco Girotti at the end of a week-long training seminar in Rome for priests, aimed at encouraging a revival of the practice of confession - or the Sacrament of Penance in Church jargon.

According to a survey carried out here 10 years ago by the Catholic University, 60% of Italians have stopped going to confession altogether. The situation has certainly not improved during the past decade.

Catholics are supposed to confess their sins to a priest at least once a year. The priest absolves them in God's name.

Talking to course members at the end of the seminar organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary, the Vatican department in charge of fixing the punishments and indulgences handed down to sinners, Pope Benedict added his own personal voice of disquiet.

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"We are losing the notion of sin," he said. "If people do not confess regularly, they risk slowing their spiritual rhythm," he added. The Pope confesses his sins regularly once a week.

Greatest sins of our times

In an interview with the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano, Archbishop Girotti said he thought the most dangerous areas for committing new types of sins lay in the fields of bio-ethics and ecology.

He also named abortion and paedophilia as two of the greatest sins of our
times. The archbishop brushed off cases of sexual violence against minors committed by priests as "exaggerations by the mass media aimed at discrediting the Church".

Father Gerald O'Collins, former professor of moral theology at the Papal University in Rome, and teacher of many of the Catholic Church's current top Cardinals and Bishops, welcomed the new catalogue of modern sins.

"I think the major point is that priests who are hearing confessions are not sufficiently attuned to some of the real evils in our world," he told the BBC News website. "They need to be more aware today of the social face of sin - the inequalities at the social level. They think of sin too much on an individual level.

"I think priests who hear confession should have a deeper sense of the violence and injustice of such problems - and the fact that people collaborate simply by doing nothing. One of the original deadly sins is sloth - disengagement and not getting involved," Father O'Collins said. The Jesuit professor now teaches at St Mary's University in Twickenham.

"It was interesting that these remarks came from the head of the Apostolic Penitentiary," he said. "I can't remember a time when it was so concerned about issues such as environmental pollution and social injustice. It's a new way of thinking."