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Pope changes remarriage law

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Pope Paul VI has ruled that U.S. Roman Catholics who remarry after divorce are no longer excommunicated from the church, Archbishop Jean Jadot, the apostolic delegate, said Thursday.

The pope's action came in response to a petition by the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops approved in Chicago last spring.

The excommunication penalty, in force only in the United States, was adopted by the Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884.

Removal of the ban will allow divorced and remarried Catholics to participate in church services but will still forbid them full communion with the church.

In order to take communion, a divorced and remarried Catholic must go before a marriage tribunal to see whether the church will validate the second marriage.

Excommunication, the most severe of church penalties, means the person is

separated from the community of the church, forbidden to receive the sacraments and to hold church offices and is excluded from public prayers.

While largely symbolic, the papal action announced Thursday is considered important as a gesture of reconciliation to the growing number of divorced and remarried Catholics. There are an estimated 5 million divorced Catholics in the United States.

Bishop Thomas C. Kelly, general secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, stressed the lifting of the excommunication penalty in no way changed the church's traditional teaching that sacramental marriages cannot be dissolved. Remarriage after divorce is still generally prohibited.

The question of whether divorced and remarried Catholics can participate in the church's sacramental life has been ir-

creasingly debated since Bishop Carroll T. Dozier of Memphis held a controversial mass rite of general absolution which included a large number of divorced and remarried Catholics.

The Vatican criticized the Memphis rites.

"The intention of the lifting of the penalty is pastoral — to extend a reconciling gesture to the divorced and remarried Catholics and encourage them to seek regularization of their status," Kelly said.

"It is important that it not be seen as either more or less than that," he said.

When the bishops voted to ask Pope Paul to lift the sanction, Bishop Cletus F. O'Donnell, Madison, Wis., said the action "welcomes back to the community of believers in Christ all who may have been separated by excommunication."