



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO PARTICIPANTS IN A COURSE SPONSORED BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY

Sala Regia

Friday, 4 March 2016

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers, Good morning!

I am pleased to meet with you on the occasion of the annual course on the internal forum during this Lenten Season of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. I cordially greet Cardinal Piacenza, Major Penitentiary, and I thank him for his kind words. I greet the Regent — who has a very kind face, he must be a good confessor! — the prelates, officials and personnel of the Penitentiary, the Colleges of Ordinary and Extraordinary Confessors of the Papal Basilicas — whose presence has been extended for the Jubilee — and all of you participating in the course, which is intended to aid new priests and seminarians approaching ordination in their formation for administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The celebration of this Sacrament requires an adequate and updated preparation, so that those who partake in it may “touch the grandeur of God’s mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace” (Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 17).

This word, mercy, “might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him” (*ibid.*, n. 1). In this sense, mercy is, more than an attitude or a human virtue, God’s definitive choice in favour of every human being for his or her eternal salvation; a choice sealed with the blood of the Son of God.

Divine mercy can freely reach anyone who invokes it. Indeed, the possibility of forgiveness is truly open to all, it is as wide open as the greatest of “holy doors”, because it coincides with the very heart of the Father who loves and waits for all his children, especially for those who have erred the most and who are distant. The mercy of the Father can reach every person in many ways: through the opening of a sincere conscience; through the reading of the Word of God, which converts the heart; through an encounter with a merciful sister or brother; in the life experiences that speak to

us of wounds, of sin, of forgiveness and of mercy.

There is, however, a “sure path” of mercy, through which one passes from possibility to reality, from hope to certainty. This path is Jesus, who “has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Lk 5:24), and has handed this mission down to the Church (cf. Jn 20:21-23). The Sacrament of Reconciliation is therefore the privileged place to experience the mercy of God and to celebrate the feast of encounter with the Father. We all too easily forget this last aspect: I go, I ask forgiveness, I feel the embrace of forgiveness and I forget to celebrate. This is not theological doctrine, but I would say, with a little bit of a stretch, that celebration is part of the sacrament: it is as if the penitence were part of the feast which I must celebrate with the Father who has forgiven me.

When, as confessors, we enter the confessional to welcome our brothers and sisters, we must always remember that we are *instruments* of God’s mercy for them; thus, we are careful not to set up obstacles to this gift of salvation! The confessor is himself a sinner, a man ever in need of forgiveness; he is the first who cannot do without the mercy of God, who “chose” and “appointed” (cf. Jn 15:16) him for this great task. Therefore, you must always be ready with an attitude of humble and generous faith and the sole desire that every believer experience the love of the Father. In this we have no shortage of holy brother priests to look to: let us think of Leopold Mandić and Pio of Pietrelcina, whose mortal remains we venerated in the Vatican a month ago. And also — I will allow myself to add — one of my own family: Fr Cappello.

Every penitent faithful, after the priest’s absolution, has the certainty, through faith, that his sins are no more. They no longer exist! God is omnipotent. I like to think he has one weakness: a bad memory. Once He has forgiven you, He forgets. And this is great! The sins are no more; they have been wiped away by divine mercy. Every absolution is, in a certain way, a jubilee of the heart, which brings joy not only to the faithful and the Church but first of all to God himself. Jesus said so: “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15:7). It is important, therefore, that the confessor also be a “channel of joy” and that the faithful, after being pardoned, no longer feel the oppression of guilt, but that he or she can relish God’s work, who has freed them, to live in thanksgiving, ready to repair the evil committed and to go meet their brothers and sisters with a good and willing heart.

Dear brothers, in this time of ours marked by individualism, by so many wounds and by the temptation to become closed, it is a true and proper gift to see and to accompany people who draw near to divine mercy. This demands from us all, too, a still greater duty to evangelical coherence and fatherly benevolence; we are guardians, not masters, both of the sheep and of grace.

Let us put the focus back on the Sacrament of Reconciliation — and not just for this Jubilee Year; it is the true space of the Spirit in which we all, confessors and penitents, are able to experience

the unique, definitive and faithful love that God has for every one of his children, a love that never disappoints. St Leopold Mandić used to say that “the mercy of God exceeds our every expectation”. He also used to say to someone suffering: “We have in Heaven the heart of a mother. The Virgin, our Mother, who at the foot of the Cross endured the most a human being can suffer, she understands our troubles and she consoles us”. May Mary, Refuge of Sinners and Mother of Mercy, ever guide and sustain the fundamental mystery of Reconciliation.

And what do I do if I run into trouble and can't give absolution? What must be done? First of all, try to see if there is a way; there frequently is. Second, don't just bind yourselves by spoken language, but also to body language. There are people who can't speak but by their gestures they show their repentance, their sorrow. And third, if you can't give absolution, speak to them like a father: “Listen, because of this I cannot [absolve you], but I can assure you that God loves you, God is waiting for you! Let us pray together to Our Lady, that she protect you; and come, come back. I will wait for you just as God is waiting for you”. And give them a blessing. That way, this person leaves the confessional and thinks: “I found a father and he didn't hit me”. How many times have you heard someone say: “I never go to confession, because this one time I went and he yelled at me”? Even in the extreme case in which I cannot give absolution, let him or her feel the warmth of a father! Let them be blessed and be called back. And also may you pray a little for him or for her. This is always the point: there's a father there. And this too is a celebration, and God knows how to forgive things better than we do. But at least we can be an image of the Father.

I thank the Apostolic Penitentiary for its precious service, and with all my heart I bless you all and the ministry that you carry out as channels of mercy, especially in this time of Jubilee. Remember, please, also to pray for me.

And today I will go with you penitentiaries to confess in St Peter's.