



The Holy See

PENITENTIAL LITURGY FOR CLERGY OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

***ADDRESS PREPARED BY POPE FRANCIS,
READ BY H.E. CARDINAL ANGELO DE DONATIS,
HIS HOLINESS' VICAR GENERAL FOR THE DIOCESE OF ROME***

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I do not intend to reflect so much on the difficulties that stem from the presbyteral mission: they are very well known and widely identified things. On this occasion, I wish to speak to you about a subtle enemy that finds many ways to disguise itself and hide, and like a parasite, it slowly robs us of the joy of the vocation to which we were one day called. I want to speak to you of the bitterness that is centred around the relationship with the faith, with the Bishop and with your confreres. We know that other roots and situations may exist. However, these summarize many encounters that I have had with some of you.

I would like to immediately point out two things: the first is that these words are the outcome of listening to some seminarians and priests from different Italian dioceses, and they should not and cannot be attributed to any specific situation. The second [thing] is that the majority of priests I know are content with their life and they consider this bitterness to be a part of normal life, without any drama. I have preferred to tell you what I heard rather than express my opinion on the issue.

To face our bitterness and confront ourselves with it allows us to take our humanity into account, our blessed humanity. And thus to remind ourselves that, as priests, we are not called to be omnipotent but rather men who are sinners and are forgiven and sent forth. As Saint Irenaeus of Lyons used to say: "what is not assumed is not healed". Let us also allow this "bitterness" to show us the way to a greater adoration of the Father and help us to experience anew the power of his merciful unction (cf. Lk 15:11-32). To use the words of the Psalmist: "Thou hast turned for me my

mourning into dancing; thou has loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness, that my soul may praise thee and not be silent" (Ps 30[29]:11-12).

First cause of bitterness: Problems with the faith

"We believed he was the one", the disciples confided to one another at Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:21). A failed hope was at the root of their disappointment. However, we have to reflect: is it the Lord who has disappointed us or have we confused hope with our own expectations? Indeed, Christian reality does not disappoint and does not fail. To hope is not to be convinced that things will improve, but rather, that everything that happens has meaning in light of Easter. But in order to hope in a Christian way, — as Saint Augustine explained to Proba — we have to live a life of nourishing prayer. That is where one learns to distinguish between expectations and hope.

Now, the relationship with God — more than pastoral disappointment — can be a cause of profound bitterness. At times it seems almost as if he does not respect the expectations of a fulfilled and abundant life which we had on the day of our ordination. Sometimes an unending adolescence does not help to transit from dreams to *spes*. Perhaps as priests we are too "proper" in our relationship with God and we do not dare protest in our prayers, as instead the psalmist very often does — not only for ourselves but also for our people; because the pastor also carries the bitterness of his people — but the psalms too were "censored" and rarely do we make our own the spirituality of protest. In this way we fall into cynicism: discontent and somewhat frustrated. True protest — the adult kind — is not against God but before him because it stems precisely from confidence in him: the worshipper reminds the Father who he is and what is worthy of his name. We have to sanctify his name, but sometimes the disciples have to waken the Lord and say to him: "do you not care if we perish" (Mk 4:35-41). Thus, the Lord wants to involve us directly in his Kingdom, not as spectators, but by actively participating.

What is the difference between expectation and hope? Expectation arises from spending our lives saving our lives: we struggle, seeking security, reward, advancement.... When we receive what we want, we almost feel as though we will never die, that it will always be like this! Because we are the reference point. Hope, on the other hand, is something that is born in the heart when one decides not to defend oneself anymore. Once I recognize my limitations and that not everything begins and ends with me, I recognize the importance of having trust. In *The Spiritual Combat*, the Theatine Lorenzo Scupoli taught that the key to everything is in a dual and simultaneous movement: to mistrust oneself and to confide in God. I have hope, not when nothing further can be done, but when I stop doing things only for myself. Hope rests on a covenant: God has spoken to me and promised me on the day of my ordination that my life will be fulfilling, with the fullness and flavour of the Beatitudes: certainly with tribulation — like all mankind — but beautiful. My life is filled with flavour if I do my Pasch, not if things go the way I say.

And here, one understands another thing: it is not enough to simply listen to history in order to

understand these processes. One must see history and our life in the perspective of the Word of God. The disciples at Emmaus overcame their disappointment when the Risen One opened their minds to the intelligence of the Scriptures. Thus, things will go better, not only because we will change superior, mission or strategy, but because we will be comforted by the Word. Jeremiah the prophet professed: “thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart” (15:16).

Bitterness — which is not a fault — should be welcomed. It can be a great opportunity. Perhaps it is even healthy because it makes the inner alarm bell ring: be careful, you confused security with covenant, you are becoming “foolish and slow of heart” (cf. Lk 24:25). There is a sadness that can lead us to God. Let us welcome it and not be angry with ourselves. It may be the right time. Saint Francis of Assisi experienced this too. He reminds us of this in his Testament (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, 110). Bitterness will turn into the greatest sweetness and easy, worldly sweetness will turn into into bitterness.

Second cause of bitterness: Problems with the Bishop

I do not want to be rhetorical or look for a scapegoat and not even to defend myself or defend those in my circle. The cliché that places all blame on the superiors, no longer holds. We all lack something big or small. In today’s world, we seem to be breathing a general atmosphere (not only among ourselves) of widespread mediocrity that does not allow us to clutch at easy judgments. However the fact remains that much of the bitterness in the life of priests arises from the omissions of Pastors.

We all experience our limitations and inadequacy. We face situations in which we realize that we are inadequately prepared.... But as we move up to the services and ministries with greatest visibility, our inadequacy becomes more evident and strident. And it is also a logical consequence that this relationship, has much at risk for better or for worse. Which omissions? We are not referring here to the disagreements that are often unavoidable concerning management problems or pastoral styles. This is acceptable and it is part of life on this earth. As long as Christ shall not be everything in everyone, everyone will try to impose him/herself on everyone! It is the fallen Adam within us who plays these tricks on us.

The real problem that causes bitterness is not divergent opinions (and maybe not even mistakes; a Bishop too has the right to make mistakes like all creatures) but rather two reasons that are very serious and destabilizing to priests.

Firstly, a certain *soft* authoritarian deviation: we do not accept among us those who think differently from us. A word is enough to be labelled one of those who run counter; over a “distinction” one is enrolled among the discontented. *Parrhesia* is buried under the frenzy of laying down projects. The worship of initiatives is substituting the essential: only one faith, only one Baptism, only one God, Father of All. Adherence to the initiatives runs the risk of becoming the

measure of communion. But it does not always coincide with the unanimity of opinions. Nor can one expect communion to be exclusively unidirectional: priests must be in communion with the bishop... and the bishops must be in communion with the priests. It is not a problem of democracy but of fatherhood.

In his *Rule*, Saint Benedict — in the well-known Chapter III — advises the Abbot that when he has to deal with an important issue, he should consult the entire community, including the youngest. He then continues pointing out that the final decision rests with the Abbot, who has to organize [things] with *prudence* and *fairness*. For Benedict, authority is not in question. Quite the contrary, it is the Abbot who has to answer to God for the management of the monastery. However, he says that when deciding, he should be “prudent and fair”. We know the first precept well: prudence and discernment are part of our shared vocabulary.

“Fairness” is less common: fairness means keeping in mind everyone’s opinion and safeguarding the representation of the flock, without preferences. The great temptation of the pastor is to surround himself with “his” people, the “close” ones, and thus, unfortunately, real competence becomes replaced by a certain presumed loyalty, with no distinction made between those who gratify us and those who offer advice in a disinterested manner. This causes great suffering to the flock, who often accepts things, without saying anything. The Code of Canon Law recalls that the faithful “have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church” (Can. n. 212 §3). Certainly in these days of widespread precariousness and frailty, the solution seems to be authoritarian, (this is evident in the political sphere). But the real cure — as Saint Benedict advises — is fairness, not uniformity.^[1]

Third cause of bitterness: Problems among us

In recent years, the presbytery has suffered the blows of financial and sexual scandals. Suspicion has drastically made relations colder and more formal: there is no longer the enjoyment of the gifts of others. Indeed, it seems that destroying, minimizing and raising suspicion have become a mission. Before these scandals, the evil one tempts us and pushes us towards a “Donatist” vision of the Church: inside are the impeccable ones and outside are those who make mistakes! We have a false conception of a militant Church, of a sort of ecclesiological puritanism. The Bride of Christ is and remains the field on which the good seed and the weeds grow, until the *parousia*. Whoever has not made this Gospel vision of reality their own, exposes himself to untold and useless bitterness.

However, the public and publicized sins of the clergy have made everyone more cautious and less willing to make significant bonds, especially in sharing the faith. Ordinary commitments are increasing — permanent formation and other things — but one takes part with a less willing heart. There is the “community”, but less communion! The question we ask ourselves when we meet a new confrere arises silently: “who do I really have in front of me? Can I trust him?”.

It is not a matter of solitude: it is not a problem but an aspect of the mystery of communion. Christian solitude — of those who enter a room and pray to the Father in hiddenness — is a blessing, the true wellspring of loving outreach to others. The real problem is not finding more time to be alone. Without solitude, there is no freely given love and the others become a surrogate for emptiness. In this sense, as priests we always must relearn how to remain alone “evangelically”, like Jesus at night with the father.[2]

This is the tragedy of isolation which is different from solitude. Isolation that is not only and not so much exterior — we are always in the midst of people — as much as, regarding the priest’s soul. I shall begin from the deepest isolation and then will touch upon its more visible form.

Isolated with respect to grace: touched by secularism we do not believe nor feel that we are any longer surrounded by heavenly friends — “a great number of witnesses” (cf. Heb 12:1) — we seem to experience that our life and affliction do not touch anyone. The world of grace slowly becomes extraneous to us and the saints seem only to be the “imaginary friends” of children. The Spirit that abides in the heart — in substance and not figuratively — is something that perhaps we have never experienced due to dissipation or inattention. We know but we do not “touch”. Distance from the power of grace creates nationalism or sentimentalism, never redeemed flesh.

Isolating oneself from history: everything seems to occur in the *here* and *now* without any hope of the goods promised and future rewards. Everything opens and closes with ourselves. My death is not the passing of a witness, but an unjust interruption. The more one thinks one is special, powerful, and filled with gifts, the more the heart closes to the ongoing sense of history of the People of God to whom one belongs. Our individualized conscience leads us to believe that there was nothing before us and nothing after us. This is why we struggle to care for and protect the good started by our predecessor. Often on arrival in a parish, we feel we have a duty to make *tabula rasa* in an effort to stand out and mark our difference. We are unable to *continue*, to keep alive what we did not create! We begin from nothing because we do not feel the enthusiasm of belonging to a community path of salvation.

Isolated with respect to others: Isolation with respect to grace and history is one of the causes of our inability to establish significant relations of trust and evangelical sharing, amongst ourselves. If I am isolated, my problems seem unique and insurmountable: no one can understand me. This is one of the favourite thoughts of the father of lies. Let us remember the words of Bernanos: “Only after much time one recognizes him, and the sadness that announces him, precedes him, how sweet it is! It’s the most substantial of the elixirs of the devil, his ambrosia!”.[3]

A thought that slowly takes shape and closes us within ourselves, distances us from others and puts us in a position of superiority. Because no one would be worthy of the demands. A thought which, from repetition, ends up nesting within us. “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy” (Pr 28:13).

As the devil does not want you to speak, to tell a story, to share, seek a good spiritual father, an “astute” elderly person who can accompany you. Never isolate yourself, never! A profound feeling of communion can only be experienced when one becomes personally conscious of “we”, who one is, was and will be. Otherwise, the other problems will cascade like a waterfall: as a result of isolation, of a community without communion, competition arises and certainly not cooperation; the desire for recognition emerges, not the joy of shared holiness. One enters into relationships either to compare oneself or for support.

Let us recall when the People of Israel arrived in Marah after walking in the desert for three days, and were unable to drink the water because it was bitter. Faced with the people’s complaints, Moses invoked the Lord and the water became sweet (cf. Ex 15:22-25). The holy People faithful to God know us better than anyone else. They are very respectful and they know how to accompany and care for their pastors. They know our bitterness and they also pray to the Lord for us. Let us join our prayers to theirs and ask the Lord to turn our bitterness into sweet water for his people. Let us ask the Lord to grant us the ability to recognize what is making us bitter and thus allow us to be transformed and to be reconciled people who reconcile, people at peace who make peace, filled with the hope that instills hope. The People of God are waiting for us to be teachers of the spirit, capable of indicating the wells of sweet water in the midst of the desert.

[1] A second cause of bitterness arises from the “loss” in the ministry of pastors: suffocated by management problems and personnel emergencies, we run the risk of neglecting the *munus docendi*. The Bishop is the teacher of the faith, of orthodoxy and of “orthopathy”, of the right belief and of the right [way of] listening to the Holy Spirit. In episcopal ordination, the epiclesis is prayed with the Evangeliary held open over the head of the candidate, and the imposition of the mitre outwardly emphasizes the *munus* of transmitting, not his personal beliefs, but evangelical wisdom. Who is the catechist of that permanent disciple who is the priest? Naturally, the bishop! But who remembers this? One could object that priests do not usually want to be instructed by bishops. And it is true. But this — even if it were — is not a good reason to give up on the *munus*. The holy People of God have the right to have priests who teach them to believe; and deacons and the presbytery have the right to have a bishop who in his turn teaches them to believe and hope in the Only Teacher, the Path, Truth and Life who kindles their faith. As a priest I do not want the Bishop to please me, but rather to help me believe. I would want to be able to base my theological hope in him. At times, we limit ourselves to following only the confreres who are in a crisis (and it is a good thing), but even “healthy donkeys” need more focused and serene listening, far from emergencies. Here then is a second omission that can cause bitterness: giving up on the *munus docendi* towards priests (and not only). Authoritarian pastors who have lost the authority to teach?

[2] It is a case of a halfway solitude — let us say it honestly — because it is the solitude of the pastor that is filled with names, faces, situations, of the pastor who arrives tired in the evening to speak to the Lord about all these people. The solitude of the pastor is a solitude inhabited by the

laughter and the tears of the people and of the community. It is a solitude that has faces to offer the Lord.

[3] cf. *"The Diary of a Country Priest"*, Milan 2017, p. 103.