



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE CONFESSORS WHO SERVE
IN THE FOUR PAPAL BASILICAS OF ROME***

*Clementine Hall
Monday, 19 February 2007*

Dear Brothers,

I am happy to welcome you and I greet you with affection, beginning with Cardinal James Francis Stafford, Major Penitentiary, whom I thank for the kind words he addressed to me a few minutes ago. With him I greet the Regent, Mons. Gianfranco Girotti, and the members of the Apostolic Penitentiary.

This meeting offers me the opportunity to express my lively satisfaction above all to you, dear Father Confessors of the Papal Basilicas of the City, for the precious pastoral ministry that you carry out with diligent dedication.

At the same time I wish to extend a cordial thought to all the priests of the world who dedicate themselves with commitment to the ministry of the confessional.

The Sacrament of Penance, which has such importance in the Christian life, renders present the redemptive efficacy of Christ's Paschal Mystery. In imparting absolution, pronounced in the name and on behalf of the Church, the confessor becomes the conscious means of a wonderful event of grace.

With docile compliance to the Magisterium of the Church, he makes himself minister of the consoling mercy of God, he draws attention to the reality of sin, and at the same time he manifests the boundless renewing power of divine love, love that gives back life.

Therefore, confession becomes a spiritual rebirth that transforms the penitent into a new creature. Only God's grace can work this miracle, and it is accomplished through the words and gestures of the priest.

By experiencing the tenderness and pardon of the Lord, the penitent is more easily led to acknowledge the gravity of sin, is more resolved to avoid it in order to remain and grow in renewed friendship with him.

In this mysterious process of interior renewal the confessor is not a passive spectator, but *persona dramatis*, that is, an active instrument of divine mercy. Therefore, it is necessary that to a good spiritual and pastoral sensibility he unites a serious theological, moral and pedagogical preparation that enables him to understand the life of the person.

Furthermore, it is very useful for him to know the social, cultural and professional environment of those who approach the confessional in order to be able to offer appropriate advice and spiritual practices and orientations.

May the priest not forget that in this Sacrament he is called to take on the role of father, spiritual guide, teacher and educator. This demands constant updating: this is also the aim of the so-called "internal forum" promoted by the Apostolic Penitentiary.

Dear priests, your ministry bears above all a spiritual character. To human wisdom, to theological preparation, therefore, one must add a profound spiritual disposition, nourished by prayerful contact with Christ, Master and Redeemer.

In virtue of presbyteral ordination, in fact, the confessor carries out a particular service "*in persona Christi*", with a fullness of human gifts that are strengthened by grace.

His model is Jesus, the One sent by the Father: the source from which to draw abundantly is the vivifying breath of the Holy Spirit. Before such a lofty responsibility human strength is surely inadequate, but the humble and faithful adherence to the salvific design of Christ renders us, dear brothers, witnesses of the universal Redemption worked by him, putting into effect the admonition of St Paul who says: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself... and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (II Cor 5: 19).

To fulfil such a duty we must, above all, root this message of salvation in ourselves and let it transform us deeply. We cannot preach pardon and reconciliation to others if we are not personally penetrated by it. As it is true that in our ministry there are various ways and instruments to communicate the merciful love of God to our brethren, it is, however, in the celebration of this Sacrament that we can do it in the most complete and eminent way.

Christ has chosen us, dear priests, to be the only ones to be able to pardon sins in his Name: it concerns, then, a specific ecclesial service to which we must give priority.

How many people in difficulty seek the comfort and consolation of Christ! How many penitents find in confession the peace and joy that they sought for so long! How can one not recognize also in our age, marked by so many religious and social challenges, that this Sacrament also be rediscovered and proposed anew?

Dear brothers, let us follow the example of the saints, in particular those who, like you, were almost exclusively dedicated to the ministry of the confessional. Among them are St Jean-Marie Vianney, St Leopold Mandic, and closer to us, St Pio of Pietrelcina.

May they help you from heaven to be able to abundantly dispense the mercy and pardon of Christ. May Mary, Refuge of Sinners, obtain for you the strength, encouragement and hope to generously continue your indispensable mission.

I assure you of my heartfelt prayer, while with affection I bless you all.

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