



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN A COURSE
ON THE INTERNAL FORUM ORGANIZED
BY THE TRIBUNAL OF THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

Hall of Blessings

Friday, 7 March 2008

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Confessors in the Roman Basilicas,*

I am pleased to meet you at the end of the Course on the Internal Forum, which for some years now the Apostolic Penitentiary has organized during Lent. With its carefully planned programme, this annual meeting renders a precious service to the Church and helps to keep alive the sense of holiness of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I therefore address my cordial thanks to the organizers, especially the Major Penitentiary, Cardinal James Francis Stafford, whom I greet and thank for his courteous words. Together with him, I greet and thank the Regent and staff of the Penitentiary as well as the praiseworthy Religious of various Orders who administer the Sacrament of Penance in the Papal Basilicas of the City. I also greet all those who are taking part in the Course.

Lent is an especially favourable season to meditate on the reality of sin in the light of God's infinite mercy, which the Sacrament of Penance expresses in its loftiest form. I therefore willingly take this opportunity to bring to your attention certain thoughts on the administration of this Sacrament in our time, in which the loss of the sense of sin is unfortunately becoming increasingly more widespread. It is necessary today to assist those who confess to experience that divine tenderness to repentant sinners which many Gospel episodes portray with tones of deep feeling. Let us take, for example, the passage in Luke's Gospel that presents the woman who was a sinner and was forgiven (cf. Lk 7: 36-50). Simon, a Pharisee and a rich dignitary of the town, was holding a banquet at his home in honour of Jesus. In accordance with a custom of that time, the meal was

eaten with the doors left open, for in this way the fame and prestige of the homeowner was increased. All at once, an uninvited and unexpected guest entered from the back of the room: a well-known prostitute. One can understand the embarrassment of those present, which did not seem, however, to bother the woman. She came forward and somewhat furtively stopped at Jesus' feet. She had heard his words of pardon and hope for all, even prostitutes; she was moved and stayed where she was in silence. She bathed Jesus' feet with tears, wiped them dry with her hair, kissed them and anointed them with fragrant ointment. By so doing, the sinner woman wanted to express her love for and gratitude to the Lord with gestures that were familiar to her, although they were censured by society.

Amid the general embarrassment, it was Jesus himself who saved the situation: "Simon, I have something to say to you". "What is it, Teacher?", the master of the house asked him. We all know Jesus' answer with a parable which we can sum up in the following words which the Lord addressed basically to Simon: "You see? This woman knows she is a sinner; yet prompted by love, she is asking for understanding and forgiveness. You, on the other hand, presume yourself to be righteous and are perhaps convinced that you have nothing serious for which to be forgiven".

The message that shines out from this Gospel passage is eloquent: God forgives all to those who love much. Those who trust in themselves and in their own merits are, as it were, blinded by their ego and their heart is hardened in sin. Those, on the other hand, who recognize that they are weak and sinful entrust themselves to God and obtain from him grace and forgiveness. It is precisely this message that must be transmitted: what counts most is to make people understand that in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, whatever the sin committed, if it is humbly recognized and the person involved turns with trust to the priest-confessor, he or she never fails to experience the soothing joy of God's forgiveness. In this perspective your Course acquires considerable importance. It aims to prepare well-trained confessors from the doctrinal viewpoint who are able to make their penitents experience the Heavenly Father's merciful love. Might it not be true that today we are witnessing a certain alienation from this Sacrament? When one insists solely on the accusation of sins - which must nevertheless exist and it is necessary to help the faithful understand its importance - one risks relegating to the background what is central, that is, the personal encounter with God, the Father of goodness and mercy. It is not sin which is at the heart of the sacramental celebration but rather God's mercy, which is infinitely greater than any guilt of ours.

It must be a commitment of pastors and especially of confessors to highlight the close connection that exists between the Sacrament of Reconciliation and a life oriented decisively to conversion. It is necessary that between the practice of the Sacrament of Confession and a life in which a person strives to follow Christ sincerely, a sort of continuous "virtuous circle" be established in which the grace of the Sacrament may sustain and nourish the commitment to be a faithful disciple of the Lord. The Lenten Season, in which we now find ourselves, reminds us that in our Christian life we must always aspire to conversion and that when we receive the Sacrament of

Reconciliation frequently the desire for Gospel perfection is kept alive in believers. If this constant desire is absent, the celebration of the Sacrament unfortunately risks becoming something formal that has no effect on the fabric of daily life. If, moreover, even when one is motivated by the desire to follow Jesus one does not go regularly to confession, one risks gradually slowing his or her spiritual pace to the point of increasingly weakening and ultimately perhaps even exhausting it.

Dear brothers, it is not difficult to understand the value in the Church of your ministry as stewards of divine mercy for the salvation of souls. Persevere in imitating the example of so many holy confessors who, with their spiritual insight, helped penitents to understand that the regular celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and a Christian life that aspires to holiness are inseparable elements of the same spiritual process for every baptized person. And do not forget that you yourselves are examples of authentic Christian life. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy and of Hope, help you who are present here and all confessors to carry out zealously and joyfully this great service on which the Church's life so intensely depends. I assure you of my remembrance in prayer and bless you with affection.