



The Holy See

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

*Hall of Blessings
Friday, 28 March 2014*

Dear Brothers,

I welcome you on the occasion of the annual Course on the Internal Forum. I thank Cardinal Mauro Piacenza for the words with which he introduced our meeting.

For a quarter of a century the Apostolic Penitentiary has offered, especially to newly ordained priests and deacons, the opportunity to attend this course in order to contribute to the formation of good confessors who are mindful of the importance of this ministry. I thank you for this most valuable service and I encourage you to continue it with renewed commitment, thanks to the experience acquired, and with wise creativity, in order to assist the Church and confessors ever more effectively in fulfilling the ministry of mercy, which is so very important!

In this regard, I wish to offer you several reflections.

First, *the protagonist of the ministry of Reconciliation is the Holy Spirit*. The forgiveness which the Sacrament confers is the new life transmitted by the Risen Lord by means of his Spirit: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:22-23). Therefore, you are called always to be “men of the Holy Spirit”, joyous and strong witnesses and proclaimers of the Lord’s Resurrection. This witness is seen on the face, is heard in the voice of the priest who administers the Sacrament of Reconciliation with faith and “anointing”. He receives penitents not with the attitude of a judge, nor with that of a simple friend, but with the charity of God, with the love of a father who sees his son returning and goes out to meet him, of the shepherd who has found his lost sheep. The heart of a priest is a heart capable of

being moved by compassion, not through sentimentalism or mere emotion, but through the “bowels of mercy” of the Lord! If it is true that Tradition points us to the dual role of physician and judge for confessors, let us never forget how the physician is called to heal and how the judge is called to absolve.

Second aspect: if Reconciliation transmits the new life of the Risen One and renews baptismal grace, then your task is *to bestow it generously upon the brethren*. To bestow this grace. A priest who does not foster this aspect of his ministry, both in terms of the amount of time he dedicates to it and in terms of its spiritual quality, is like a shepherd who does not take care of lost sheep; he is like a father who forgets his lost son and neglects to wait for him. But mercy is the heart of the Gospel! Do not forget this: mercy is the heart of the Gospel! It is the good news that God loves us, that he always loves the sinner, and with this love he attracts him to himself and invites him to conversion. Let us not forget that the faithful often find it difficult to approach this Sacrament, both for practical reasons and for the natural reticence in confessing their sins to another man. For this reason it is essential to prepare ourselves, our humanity, in order never to be an obstacle, but rather always to foster their drawing near to mercy and forgiveness. However, it happens so many times that a person comes and says: “I have not confessed for many years, I had this problem, I stopped going to Confession because I encountered a priest and he told me this”, and one perceives the imprudence, the lack of pastoral love in what the person recounts. And they turn away because of a bad experience in Confession. Were there this attitude of a father, which comes from the goodness of God, this problem would never occur.

And one needs to see oneself from two opposite extremes: rigorism and laxism. Neither of the two are beneficial, because in reality they do not take care of the penitent. Mercy instead truly listens with the heart of God and wants to accompany the soul along the path of reconciliation. Confession is not a tribunal of condemnation, but an experience of forgiveness and mercy!

Lastly, we all know *the difficulties Confession has often met*. There are many reasons for this, both historical and spiritual. Yet we know that the Lord has willed to make this immense gift to the Church, offering the baptized the assurance of the Father’s forgiveness. This is what it is: it is the assurance of the Father’s forgiveness. Therefore it is very important that, in all dioceses and in parish communities, particular care be paid to the celebration of this Sacrament of forgiveness and salvation. *It is good that in each parish the faithful know when they can find priests available*: when there is faithfulness, we see the fruits. This is true in a special way for the churches entrusted to religious Communities that can ensure the constant availability of confessors.

To the Virgin, the Mother of Mercy, let us entrust the ministry of priests and of every Christian community, that they may understand ever more deeply the value of the Sacrament of Penance. I entrust all of you to Our Mother and I bless you from the heart.

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