



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE

15 September 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The journey to the Father, proposed for special reflection during this year of preparation for the Great Jubilee, also implies a rediscovery of the sacrament of Penance in its profound meaning as an encounter with the One who forgives us through Christ in the Spirit (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 50). There are various reasons why a serious reflection on this sacrament is urgently needed in the Church. It is called for especially by the message of the Father's love as the basis of Christian living and acting in the context of contemporary society, where the ethical vision of human life is often obscured. If many have lost their perspective on good and evil, it is because they have lost their sense of God, interpreting guilt only from a psychological or sociological viewpoint. Secondly, pastoral ministry must give a new impetus to a journey of faith growth that stresses the value of the spirit and practice of penance throughout the Christian life.

2. The biblical message presents this "penitential" dimension as an ongoing commitment to conversion. Doing works of penance presupposes a transformation of conscience that is the result of God's grace. In the New Testament especially, conversion is required as a fundamental choice of those to whom the kingdom of God is preached: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (*Mk* 1: 15; cf. *Mt* 4: 17). Jesus began his ministry with these words, announcing the fulfilment of time and the imminence of the kingdom. "Repent" (in Greek, *metanoëite*) is a call to change one's way of thinking and acting.

3. This invitation to conversion forms the vital conclusion of the Apostles' preaching after Pentecost. It fully explains the content of the message: it is no longer generically the "kingdom", but Jesus' very work as part of the divine plan foretold by the prophets. The proclamation of what occurred in Jesus Christ, who died, rose again and now lives in the Father's glory, is followed by the pressing invitation to "conversion", to which the forgiveness of sins is also connected. All of

this can be clearly seen in Peter's address in Solomon's portico: "What God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out" (*Acts* 3: 18-19).

In the Old Testament this forgiveness of sins is promised by God in the context of the "New Covenant" which he will make with his people (cf. *Jer* 31: 31-34). God will write his law in their hearts. From this standpoint, conversion is a requirement of the definitive Covenant with God as well as a permanent attitude of those who accept the content of the Gospel message and enter into the historical and eschatological dynamism of God's kingdom.

4. The sacrament of Reconciliation conveys and makes visible in a mysterious way these fundamental values proclaimed by the Word of God. It reinserts man into the saving context of the Covenant and opens him again to the Trinitarian life, which is a dialogue of grace, a circuit of love, the gift and acceptance of the Holy Spirit.

A careful rereading of the *Ordo Paenitentiae* will be a great help during the Jubilee for deepening our understanding of the essential elements of this sacrament. The maturity of ecclesial life depends in large part on its rediscovery. The sacrament of Reconciliation is not limited to the liturgical celebration, but leads to a penitential attitude of life as an ongoing dimension of the Christian experience. It is "a drawing near to the holiness of God, a rediscovery of one's true identity which has been upset and disturbed by sin, a liberation in the very depth of self and thus a regaining of lost joy, the joy of being saved, which the majority of people in our time are no longer capable of experiencing" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, n. 31, III).

5. For the doctrinal meaning of this sacrament I refer you to the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (cf. nn. 28-34) and to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (cf. nn. 1420-1484), as well as to the other statements of the Church's Magisterium. Here I would like to recall the importance of the necessary pastoral care for instilling a greater appreciation of this sacrament in the People of God, so that the message of reconciliation, the path of conversion and the very celebration of the sacrament can more deeply touch the hearts of the men and women of our day.

In particular, I wish to remind pastors that, to be good confessors, they themselves must be authentic penitents. Priests know that they have been entrusted with a power that comes from on high: the forgiveness imparted by them "is the effective sign of the intervention of the Father" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, n. 31, III) which brings resurrection from spiritual death. Therefore, when carrying out such an essential dimension of their ministry with Gospel humility and simplicity, confessors should not neglect their own growth and renewal, so that they will never lack those human and spiritual qualities which are so necessary for their relationship to consciences.

But along with pastors, the entire Christian community must be involved in the pastoral renewal of Reconciliation. This is required by the "ecclesial nature" of the sacrament itself. The Ecclesial

Community is the embrace which welcomes the repentant and forgiven sinner and, even before, creates a suitable climate for the journey back to the Father. In a reconciled and reconciling community, sinners can find the way they had lost and the help of their brethren. In the end, through the Christian community it is possible again to mark out a sound path of charity, which visibly expresses through good works the forgiveness refound, the evil redressed, the hope of being able once again to experience the Father's merciful embrace.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I extend a particular welcome to the Lutheran visitors from Latvia, as well as to the groups from England, Malta, Denmark, Japan, Canada and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the abundant blessings of almighty God.
