



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO CARDINAL WILLIAM W. BAUM, MAJOR PENITENTIARY  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE ANNUAL COURSE  
ON THE INTERNAL FORUM ORGANIZED BY  
THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

*To my Venerable Brother*

*Cardinal William W. Baum*

*Major Penitentiary*<sup>1</sup>. With notable care, Your Eminence, this year you have again been responsible for organizing the usual course on the internal forum for seminarians soon to be ordained and for recently ordained priests, while extending a cordial invitation to older priests with ministerial experience. I would like to express to you my satisfaction with this initiative, which is particularly significant in the Jubilee Year, for it is the year of great return and great pardon; as I noted in the Bull of Indiction *Incarnationis mysterium*, the sacrament of Penance has a primary role in this outpouring of divine mercy. The internal forum, moreover, is concerned with this sacrament and, in general, with matters of conscience that are ordinarily disclosed with trust to the Church in connection with the sacrament of Penance. I gladly take this occasion to express my appreciation also to the prelates and officials of the Apostolic Penitentiary, whose valuable work is institutionally concerned with matters relating to the internal forum. I next extend my grateful esteem to the confessors of Rome's Patriarchal Basilicas, who live their priesthood in a continual commitment to the ministry of Reconciliation through a mission that is emphasized and heightened in this Holy Year. Lastly, I extend a particularly affectionate greeting to the young priests and candidates for the priesthood who are taking advantage of the Apostolic Penitentiary's timely initiative and are preparing in these days for the fruitful accomplishment of their future mission.<sup>2</sup> It is my intention that the gratitude and exhortation expressed here should reach all the priests of the world, to encourage and support them in their work dedicated to the salvation of their brothers and sisters through the ministry of confession, one of the most significant expressions of their priesthood. Our Lord Jesus Christ redeemed us through the paschal mystery, whose heart, so to speak, is the moment of his bloody sacrifice. The priest, as the minister of forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance, acts *in persona Christi*: how could he not feel obliged to share Christ's sacrificial attitude with his whole life? This perspective, while firmly maintaining the value of the sacraments *ex opere operato* - regardless, that is, of the minister's holiness or worthiness - opens before him an immense ascetic wealth and offers him the loftiest reasons why he should be holy precisely in and through the exercise of his sacramental duties and find incentives and occasions for further sanctification in the very exercise of his ministry. The divine work of forgiving sins should thus be done with dispositions so elevated that one could say that this sublime ministry is carried out *digne Deo*, insofar as human limitations allow. This will certainly increase the trust of the faithful. The proclamation of the truth, especially in the moral-spiritual order, is all the

more credible when the one who proclaims it is not only an academic teacher but, above all, an existential witness.

Consideration of the essentially sacrificial nature of the sacrament cannot fail to give the penitents themselves a demanding incentive to respond to the Lord's mercy with a holiness of life that unites them ever more closely to the One who became a Victim for our salvation.<sup>3</sup> If the paschal mystery is the reality of death - the sacrificial aspect -, it was ordained by God only for the life of the Resurrection. The sacrament of Penitence - a conformation to the dead and risen Jesus - also entails the restoration of the supernatural life of grace, or its increase in the case of venial sins. Therefore, the mystery of this sacrament can be fully understood only in relation to the parable of the Prodigal Son: "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (*Lk* 15: 32).<sup>4</sup> The sacramental minister of Penance is the teacher, the witness and, with the Father, the father of divine life restored and offered in its fullness. His teaching authority is the Church's, because, when acting *in persona Christi*, he does not proclaim himself, but Jesus Christ: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (*2 Cor* 4: 5). His witness is entrusted to the humility of virtues practised but not paraded: "Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you.... When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret" (*Mt* 6: 2, 6). In giving the life of grace, he fulfils Jesus' command to the Apostles on their first mission: "You received without pay, give without pay" (*Mt* 10: 8).<sup>5</sup> In sacramental Reconciliation God's forgiveness is the source of spiritual rebirth and the effective principle of sanctification, to the very summit of Christian perfection. If the sacrament of Reconciliation is received by the repentant sinner under the proper conditions, it not only gives him God's forgiveness, but also, through the Father's merciful love, special graces that help him to overcome temptations, to avoid repeating the sins he has repented of and, to some extent, to have a personal experience of that forgiveness. In this sense, there is a close connection between the sacrament of Penance and that of the Eucharist, in which, by recalling Jesus' Passion, "*mens impletur gratia et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur*". Practically speaking, in fidelity to God's saving plan, as he in fact wished to fulfil it, "we must overcome the rather widespread tendency to reject any salvific mediation and to put the individual sinner in direct contact with God" (*Audience to the Portuguese Bishops on an "ad limina" visit*, 30 November 1999, n. 4; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 15 December 1999, p. 9). Thus, "may one of the fruits of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 be the general return of the Christian faithful to the sacramental practice of Confession" (*ibid.*).<sup>6</sup> The merciful love of God, who invites us to return and is ready to forgive, knows no limits of time or place. Through the ministry of the Church, not only for Jerusalem, as Zechariah prophesied, but for the whole world there is always "an open fountain to purify from sin and uncleanness" (13: 1), pouring out upon all "a spirit of grace and petition" (12: 10). The love of God, although not restricted in time and space, shines forth in a most special way during the Jubilee Year: to the essential gift of the restoration of grace, ordinarily given through the sacrament of Penance, and to the consequent remission of infernal punishment, the Lord, *dives in misericordia*, also adds, through the Church's ministry, the remission of temporal punishment by the gift of indulgences, obviously if gained with the proper dispositions of holiness or at least of striving for holiness. Indulgences, therefore, "far from being a sort of 'discount' on the duty of conversion, are instead an aid to its prompt, generous and radical fulfilment" (*General Audience*, 29 September 1999, n. 5; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 6 October 1999, p. 15). A plenary indulgence, in fact, requires complete detachment from sin and reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist in hierarchical communion with the Church, expressed through prayer for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff.

7. I strongly urge priests to teach the faithful, with appropriate and intensive catechesis, to take advantage of the great good of indulgences according to the mind and heart of the Church. In particular, priest confessors could very usefully

assign indulgenced practices to their penitents as sacramental penance, provided that the criteria of due proportion to the sins confessed are always observed. If for no other reason than the ministry of forgiveness entrusted to him by the Lord, the priest's mission deserves to be lived in its fullness: the salvation of his brothers and sisters cannot fail to be a source of profound spiritual joy for him. With this certainty, I raise my prayer to the merciful Lord for all the members of the Apostolic Penitentiary and for the young men preparing for their future priesthood, that he will grant them total generosity in offering themselves for the service of souls in the intimacy of the penitential dialogue, for it is especially then that the priest is "God's co-worker" in constructing "God's building" (cf. 1 *Cor* 3: 9). As a pledge of abundant heavenly favours, I send a special Apostolic Blessing to Your Eminence, to your collaborators, to the father confessors and to everyone attending the course on the internal forum. *From the Vatican, 1 April 2000.*

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