



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS AT THE COURSE ORGANIZED
BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 9 March 2018*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers, Good morning!

I greet you all cordially, beginning with Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, whom I thank for his words. I greet the entire family of the Apostolic Penitentiary and the participants in the Course on the Internal Forum which this year, looking towards the upcoming [Synod on young people](#), has addressed the relationship between sacramental Confession and vocational discernment. It is a theme more timely than ever, which merits some reflections that I would like to share with you.

You confessors, especially you future confessors, have the advantage — so to speak — of being young, and therefore of being able to experience the Sacrament of Reconciliation as “young people among young people”; and often, closeness in age favours even the sacramental dialogue, through a natural affinity of languages. This can create facilitation and a situation to be lived fittingly, in order to build authentic Christian character. However, it is a condition not lacking in limitations and even risks, because you are at the beginning of your ministry and therefore you still have to acquire all that knowledge and experience that a “consummate confessor” has, after decades of listening to penitents.

So, how does one live this situation? What consideration should one give in hearing sacramental confessions, especially of young people, also in relation to a possible vocational discernment?

First and foremost I would say that it is always necessary to rediscover, as Saint Thomas Aquinas states, the *instrumental dimension* of our ministry. The confessor priest is neither the source of

Mercy nor of Grace; he is certainly an indispensable instrument of them, but always only an instrument! And when the priest holds onto them, he prevents God from taking action within hearts. This awareness must favour careful vigilance over the risk of becoming “masters of consciences”, above all in the relationship with young people, whose character is still developing and therefore much more easily influenced. Remembering that you are, and must be, only instruments of Reconciliation is the first requirement for assuming an attitude of humble listening to the Holy Spirit, who guarantees a sincere effort of discernment. Being instruments is not diminishing the ministry but, on the contrary, is its complete fulfilment, since in the measure in which the priest disappears and Christ the supreme and eternal Priest appears, our vocation of being “unworthy servants” is fulfilled.

Secondly, it is important to be able to *listen to questions*, before offering answers. Giving answers, without being concerned with hearing young people’s questions and, where necessary, without trying to elicit authentic questions, would be the wrong approach. The confessor is called to be a man of listening: human listening to the penitent, and divine listening to the Holy Spirit. By truly listening to a brother or sister in the sacramental dialogue, we listen to Jesus himself, poor and humble; by listening to the Holy Spirit we place ourselves in attentive obedience; we become hearers of the Word and thus offer the greatest service to our young penitents: we put them in contact with Jesus himself.

When these two elements occur together, the sacramental dialogue can be truly open to that prudent and prayerful journey that is *vocational discernment*. Every young person should be able to hear God’s voice both in his or her conscience and by listening to the Word. And in this journey it is important that they be supported by the wise accompaniment of the confessor, who at times may also become — at the request of the young people themselves, and never at his own suggestion — spiritual father. Vocational discernment is first and foremost a reading of the signs, which God himself has placed in the young person’s life, through his or her personal qualities and inclinations, through encounters made, and through prayer: a continuing prayer, in which to repeat, simply, the words of Samuel: “Speak Lord, for thy servant hears” (1 Sam 3:9).

The dialogue of sacramental Confession thus becomes a privileged occasion of encounter, in order for both penitent and confessor to be open to listening to God’s will, discovering what his or her project may be, independently from the vocation. Indeed, the vocation does not correspond, nor can it ever correspond, to a form! This would lead to formalism! A vocation is the very relationship with Jesus: a vital and essential relationship.

The categories by which the confessor is defined — “physician and judge”, “pastor and father”, “teacher and educator”, — correspond to reality. But, especially for the youngest, the confessor is called above all to be a witness. Witness in the sense of “martyr”, called to have “com-passion” for the sins of his brothers and sisters, like the Lord Jesus; and then a witness to mercy, to the heart of the Gospel which is the Father’s embrace of the prodigal son who returns home. The confessor-

witness renders the experience of mercy more effective, opening up to the faithful a new and great horizon, which God alone can give to mankind.

Dear young priests, future priests and dear Penitentiaries, may you be witnesses to mercy; may you be humble listeners to the young and to God's will for them; may you always be respectful of the conscience and of the freedom of those who approach the confessional, because God himself loves their freedom. And may you entrust the penitents to she who is the Refuge of Sinners and Mother of Mercy.