



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

*Monday, 17 March 1997*

1. Once again the Lord grants us the grace and joy of a meeting which is both solemn and familiar. I affectionately greet Cardinal William Wakefield Baum, whom I thank for his warm words. With him, I greet the prelates and officials of the Apostolic Penitentiary, the ordinary organ of the ministry of charity entrusted, with the power of the keys, to the Successor of Peter, that he may generously dispense the gifts of divine mercy.

I warmly greet the confessors of the Patriarchal Basilicas of the city: I express to them my gratitude for the generosity, constancy and humility they dedicate to the service of the confessional, through which they bring to souls God's forgiveness and an abundance of his graces.

Lastly, I welcome the young priests and candidates soon to be ordained, who, making the most of the provident availability of the Apostolic Penitentiary, have wished to study more deeply the moral and canonical aspects regarding forms of human behaviour in greatest need of healing grace, and which must therefore be the special object of the Church's motherly concern. Thus they will be suitably prepared for their future ministry, for which I encourage them and urge them to trust constantly in the Lord's help.

2. Our meeting takes place, not without precise significance, right before Easter. This circumstance naturally reminds us of the sacrifice of Jesus, from whom alone comes our salvation and from whom therefore the sacraments draw their value. It is also worth remembering that this year, 1997, is one of the years of immediate preparation for the Jubilee of the new millennium, characterized as *the year of the incarnate Son of God*. Jesus, Son of God, came into the world "to bear witness to the truth" (Jn 18:37). He is the Lamb of God, "who takes away the sin of the world"

(Jn 1:29).

These statements from John's Gospel guide us to continue our reflection on the *truth that makes us free*, which was the subject of my message last year to the Cardinal Major Penitentiary, at the conclusion of a course on the internal forum. So the liberating truth is, in many respects, by virtue of grace, the premiss and fruit of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

In fact it is possible to free someone from evil only if he is aware of it as being evil. Unfortunately, on some fundamental themes of the moral order, socio-cultural conditions today do not favour clear awareness, because the customary boundaries and defences of the recent past have been torn down. As a result, many are undergoing a dulling of their personal sense of sin. People have even gone so far as to theorize the moral irrelevance and even the positive value of behaviour that objectively offends the essential order of things established by God.

3. This tendency is spreading throughout the vast field of man's free action. It is not possible here to make a deep analysis of this phenomenon and its causes. However I would like to take this occasion to recall that, especially for the fruitful reception of the sacrament of Penance, the Pontifical Council for the Family on 12 February published a "[Vademecum for Confessors](#)". This document is intended to clarify "some aspects of the morality of conjugal life".

It expresses in the proper language of a working guide the Church's unchanging doctrine on the objective moral order, as it has been constantly taught in previous documents on this subject. For the pastoral aim that distinguishes it, the Vademecum stresses the attitude of charitable understanding which should be shown to those who err through their lack of, or misguided perception of the moral norm, or, if aware of it, who fall because of human frailty and yet, touched by the Lord's mercy, want to lift themselves up again.

This text deserves to be welcomed with trust and interior docility. It helps confessors in their demanding task to illumine, correct if necessary, and encourage the married faithful, or those who are preparing for marriage. Thus in the sacrament of Penance a task is carried out which, far from being reduced to reprimanding conduct opposed to the will of the Lord, Author of life, is open to a positive teaching and ministry of fostering the authentic love from which life springs.

4. The situation of moral confusion which affects so much of society also touches many believers, but, through the Church's ministry, the saving power of the Son of God made man is available for all. However, the difficulty of the situation should not discourage, but rather, encourage all the inventiveness of our pastoral charity.

Indeed the ministry of confession must not be conceived as a moment apart from the rest of Christian life, but as a privileged moment of convergence of catechesis, the prayer of the Church, the sense of repentance and the trusting acceptance of the Magisterium and the power of the

keys.

Thus, forming the consciences of the faithful so that they may present themselves with the fullness of the proper dispositions for receiving God's pardon through the priest's absolution cannot be limited to warnings, explanations and admonitions which the priest should and must normally impart to the penitent in the act of confession. Apart from this strictly sacramental moment, constant guidance is necessary, expressed in the classical and irreplaceable forms of pastoral activity and Christian teaching: the catechism, adapted to the various age groups and cultural levels, preaching, prayer meetings, religious education classes in Catholic associations and schools, an incisive presence in the means of social communication.

5. Through this ongoing religious and moral formation, it will be easier for the faithful to grasp the deep reasons for the moral magisterium, realizing that wherever the Church in her teaching defends life by condemning murder, suicide, euthanasia and abortion, wherever she safeguards the holiness of conjugal relations and procreation, by directing them back to God's plan for marriage, she is not imposing a law of her own but reaffirming and explaining the divine law, both natural and revealed. Her firmness in denouncing deviations from the moral order stems precisely from this.

In order to assimilate this objective criterion, the faithful must be taught to accept the Magisterium of the Church even when it is not proposed in a solemn form: in this regard it would be well to remember what the First Vatican Council declared and the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed, namely, that when the ordinary and universal Magisterium of the Church proposes a divinely revealed doctrine it is a rule of divine and Catholic faith (cf. Denzinger-Schönmetzer, 3011; Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 25).

In the light of these criteria, we realize how unjustifiable it is to oppose the rights of conscience to the objective force of the law interpreted by the Church; in fact, if it is true that the act performed with an invincibly erroneous conscience is not culpable, it is also true that objectively it remains a disorder. It is therefore each person's duty to form his own conscience properly.

6. Our pastoral task demands that we proclaim the truth without compromises or shortcuts. Nonetheless St Paul warns us that we must live according to "the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). God is infinite love and does not want the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live (cf. Ez 18:23). We priests, his ministers, must counter the devastating force of sin with the consoling yet demanding announcement of forgiveness. Jesus died and rose for this reason. During this year dedicated to Christ the Redeemer, as we meditate on the unfathomable riches of Redemption, we will obtain the gift of experiencing within ourselves the saving divine mercy and so increasingly, after the example of Christ, we will be teachers who illumine and fathers who welcome in God's name and by his authority. In fact, we are called to say with St Paul: "We are ambassadors for Christ.... We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).

As I hope for abundant graces for the fruitful exercise of this ministry of reconciliation, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, priests and candidates for the priesthood present here, who represent for me, as universal Pastor, the whole world's priests and candidates for the priesthood.

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