



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE COURSE ON THE INTERNAL FORUM ORGANIZED BY THE
APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

*Clementine Hall
Thursday, 11 March 2010*

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to meet you and to welcome each one of you on the occasion of the annual Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary. I cordially greet Archbishop Fortunato Baldelli, who has directed your study sessions for the first time as Major Penitentiary, and I thank him for his words to me.

Together with him I greet Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, Regent, the staff of the Penitentiary and all of you who, in taking part in this initiative express the great need to deepen your knowledge of a subject that is essential to the ministry and life of priests.

Your course is providentially taking place in the Year for Priests, which I established to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth in Heaven of St John Mary Vianney, who exercised the ministry of reconciliation both heroically and fruitfully.

As I said in the [Letter for the inauguration of the Year](#), "We priests should feel that the following words, which he [the Curé d'Ars] put on the lips of Christ, are meant for each of us personally: "I will charge my ministers to proclaim to sinners that I am ever ready to welcome them, that my mercy is infinite". From the Holy Curé d'Ars we can learn to put our unflinching trust in the sacrament of Penance, to set it once more at the centre of our pastoral concerns, and to take up the "dialogue of salvation' which it entails".

Where did the heroism and fruitfulness with which St John Mary Vianney lived his ministry as a

confessor stem from? First of all from an intense personal penitential dimension. His knowledge of his own limitations and his need to have recourse to Divine Mercy to ask forgiveness, to convert his heart and to be sustained on the journey to holiness are fundamental in the life of a priest. Only those who have first experienced its greatness can be convinced preachers and administrators of God's mercy.

Every priest becomes a minister of Penance through his ontological configuration to Christ, the Eternal High Priest, who reconciles humanity with the Father; so the priest is charged with the responsibility of faithfully administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We live in a cultural context marked by the hedonistic and relativistic mindset that tends to delete God from the horizon of life and does not encourage the acquisition of a clear set of values to refer to that would help one to discern good from evil and develop a proper sense of sin.

This situation makes even more urgent the service of stewards of Divine Mercy. We must not forget, in fact, that a sort of vicious circle exists between the clouding of the experience of God and the loss of the sense of sin. However, if we look at the cultural context in which St John Mary Vianney lived we see that in various aspects it was not so very unlike our own. In his time too, in fact, there was a mentality hostile to faith, expressed by forces that even sought to prevent the exercise of the ministry. In this circumstance, the Holy Curé d'Ars "chose the Church as his home", in order to lead people to God.

He lived radically the spirit of prayer, his personal and intimate relationship with Christ, the celebration of Holy Mass, Eucharistic Adoration and evangelical poverty, appearing to his contemporaries such a conspicuous sign of God's presence that he impelled a great many penitents to come to his confessional.

In the conditions of freedom in which it is now possible to exercise the priestly ministry, priests must live the response to their vocation "in a lofty manner", for only those who become every day a living and clear presence of the Lord can awaken in the faithful a sense of sin, impart courage and give rise to the desire for God's forgiveness.

Dear confrères, it is necessary to return to the confessional as a place in which to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but also as a place in which "to dwell" more often, so that the faithful may find compassion, advice and comfort, feel that they are loved and understood by God and experience the presence of Divine Mercy beside the Real Presence in the Eucharist.

The discussed "crisis" of the Sacrament of Penance, frequently calls into question priests first of all and their great responsibility to teach the People of God the radical requirements of the Gospel. In particular, it asks them to dedicate themselves generously to hearing sacramental confessions; to guide the flock courageously so that it does not conform to the mindset of this world (cf. Rom

12:2) but may even be able to make decisions that run counter to the tide, avoiding adjustments and compromises.

For this reason it is important that priests have a constant aspiration to ascetism, nourished by communion with God, and that they tirelessly dedicate themselves to keeping up to date in the study of moral theology and the human sciences.

St John Mary Vianney knew how to establish a true and proper "dialogue of salvation" with his penitents, showing them the beauty and greatness of the Lord's kindness and awakening that desire for God and for Heaven of which the Saints are the first heralds.

He said: "The Good Lord knows everything; even before you make your confession he already knows that you will sin again and yet he forgives you. How great is the Love of our God, who goes so far as to voluntarily forget the future, in order to forgive us" (Monnin A., *Il Curato d'Ars. Vita di Gian-Battista-Maria Vianney*, Vol. I, Turin 1870, p. 130).

It is the priest's task to encourage that experience of a "dialogue of salvation", which, born from the certainty of being loved by God, helps the human being to recognize his sin and gradually to enter that stable dynamic of conversion of heart which leads to radical renouncement of evil and to a life in accordance with God (cf. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1431](#)).

Dear priests, what an extraordinary ministry the Lord has entrusted to us! Just as in the celebration of the Eucharist he places himself in the hands of the priest to continue to be present among his People, similarly, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation he entrusts himself to the priest so that men and women may experience the embrace with which the father welcomed back the prodigal son, restoring his filial dignity and fully re-establishing him as his heir (cf. Lk 15:11-32).

May the Virgin Mary and the Holy Curé d'Ars help us to experience in our lives the length and breadth and height and depth of the Love of God (cf. Eph 3:18-19), in order to be faithful and generous stewards. I warmly thank you all and willingly impart my Blessing to you.

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