



The Holy See

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

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Friday, 12 March 2021*

[Multimedia]

Dear brothers, good morning!

The Cardinal - I thank him for his words - insisted on Saint Joseph. For months [he has been saying to me]: "Write something on Saint Joseph, write something on Saint Joseph". And the Letter on Saint Joseph is his work, to a large extent. And so, thank you.

I apologise for remaining seated, but I thought: they are seated, so I will take a seat too... I shouldn't, but after the trip my legs are still aching. Please excuse me.

I am pleased to receive you on the occasion of the Course on the internal forum, organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary and which has reached its 31st edition this year. The Course is a regular appointment which, providentially, falls within the time of Lent, a penitential time and the time of the desert, of conversion, of penance and of being received in mercy - for us too. I greet Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, Major Penitentiary, and along with him I greet the Regent, the Prelates, the Officials and the staff of the Penitentiary, the Colleges of the ordinary and extraordinary penitentiaries of the Papal Basilicas in Rome and all the participants in the Course which, due to the pandemic, has had to be held online but with the notable participation of 870 clerics! A good number!

I would like to reflect with you on three expressions, which explain well the meaning of the Sacrament of Reconciliation; because going to confess is not like going to the dry cleaner's to have a stain removed. No, it is quite different. Let us think hard about what it is. The first

expression that explains this sacrament, this mystery, is “to abandon oneself to Love”; the second, “to let oneself be transformed by Love”, and the third, “to correspond to Love”. But always Love: if there is no Love in the sacrament, it is not as Jesus wishes it to be. If it is functional, it is not how Jesus wants it to be. Love. Love for the forgiven brother, a sinner - as the Cardinal said - towards the brother and the sister who are forgiven sinners. This is the fundamental relationship.

To abandon oneself to Love means to carry out a true act of faith. Faith can never be reduced to a list of concepts or a series of affirmations to believe in. Faith is expressed and understood within a relationship: the relationship between God and humanity, and between humanity and God, in accordance with the logic of the call and the response: God calls and the human person responds. The reverse is also true: we call to God when we are in need, and he always answers. Faith is the encounter with Mercy, with God himself who is Mercy - the name of God is Mercy - and it is abandoning oneself in the arms of this Love, mysterious and generous, of which we are greatly in need, but to which, at times, we are afraid of surrendering ourselves.

Experience teaches that those who do not surrender themselves to God end up, sooner or later, abandoning themselves to something else, ending up in the arms of the worldly mentality, which in the end leads to bitterness, sadness and solitude, and does not heal. So, the first step to a good Confession is indeed the act of faith, of surrendering oneself, with which the penitent approaches Mercy. And every confessor, therefore, must be capable always of being astonished by their brothers who, out of faith, ask for God's forgiveness and, again solely out of faith, surrender themselves to him, delivering themselves in Confession. Their suffering for their own sins is the sign of this trustful abandonment to Love.

To live Confession in this way means allowing oneself to be transformed by Love. It is the second dimension, the second expression on which I would like to reflect. We are well aware that it is not laws that save us - it suffices to read Chapter 23 of Matthew: the individual does not change as a result of a dry series of precepts, but rather for the appeal of Love perceived and gratuitously given. It is Love that was fully manifested in Jesus Christ and in his death on the cross for us. In this way Love, which is God himself, was made visible to men, in a way that was previously unthinkable, totally new and therefore capable of renewing all things. The penitent who encounters, in the sacramental exchange, a ray of this welcoming Love, allows him- or herself to be transformed by Love, by Grace, beginning to live that transformation of the heart of stone into a heart of flesh, which is a transformation that is given in every confession. It is thus also in the sentimental life: one changes as a result of the encounter with a great love. The good confessor is always called to see the miracle of change, to notice the work of Grace in the hearts of penitents, encouraging the transforming action as much as possible. The integrity of the accusation is the sign of this transformation that Love works: everything is given so that all may be forgiven.

The third and final expression is: to correspond to Love. Surrendering and letting oneself be transformed by Love have as a necessary consequence a correspondence of the love received.

The Christian always has in mind the words of Saint James: "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith" (2: 18). The real will to conversion becomes tangible in the response to the love of God that is received and accepted. It is a correspondence that manifests itself in the change of life and in the works of mercy that follow on from this. One who has been welcomed by Love cannot but welcome a brother. One who has surrendered himself or herself to Love cannot but console the afflicted. One who has been forgiven by God cannot but wholeheartedly forgive their brothers.

While it is true that we can never fully correspond to divine Love, because of the unbridgeable difference between the Creator and creatures, it is also true that God shows us a possible love, in which we can live out this impossible correspondence: love for our brothers and sisters. It is love for one's brother that is the place of real correspondence to God's love: by loving our brothers and sisters we show ourselves, the world and God that we truly love him and we correspond, always inadequately, to his mercy. The good confessor always points out, alongside the primacy of love of God, the indispensable love of neighbour, as a daily gymnasium in which to train our love for God. The present intention not to commit sin again is a sign of the will to correspond to Love. And many times people, even we ourselves, are ashamed of having promised, of committing the sin and coming back another time, another time... I am reminded of a poem by an Argentinean parish priest, a good one, a very good parish priest. He was a poet, he wrote many books. A poem to Our Lady, in which he asked Our Lady, in the poem, to look after him, because he would have liked to change but didn't know how. He made her a promise to change, to Our Lady, and ended like this: "Tonight, Lady, the promise is sincere. But just in case, leave the key on the outside of the door". ["Esta tarde, Señora, la promesa es sincera. Por las dudas, no olvide dejar la llave afuera"]. He knew that there will always be the key to open, because it was God, the tenderness of God, who left it outside. Thus, the frequent celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation becomes, both for the penitent and for the confessor, a way of sanctification, a school of faith, of abandonment, of change and of correspondence to the merciful Love of the Father.

Dear brothers, let us remember always that every one of us is a forgiven sinner - if one of us does not feel this, it is better he does not go to confess, better he does not become a confessor - a forgiven sinner, placed at the service of others, so that they too, through the sacramental encounter, may encounter that Love that has charmed and changed our life. With this knowledge, I encourage you to persevere faithfully in the valuable ministry you perform, or that will soon be entrusted to you: it is an important service for the sanctification of the holy people of God. Entrust this, your ministry of reconciliation, to the powerful protection of Saint Joseph, a just and faithful man.

And here I would like to pause to underline the religious attitude that is born of this awareness a confessor must have of being a forgiven sinner. Accept in peace, accept with fatherliness. Each one of you will know that the expression of fatherliness is: the smile, the peaceful eyes. Receive offering tranquillity, and let them speak. At times, the confessor will realise that there is a certain

difficulty in going ahead in describing a sin, but if he understands, he does not ask indiscreet questions. I learned something from Cardinal Piacenza: he said to me that when he sees that these people have difficulties and he understands what it is about, immediately he stops them and says, "I understand. Let's go on". Do not add more pain, more "torture" to this. And then, please, do not ask questions. At times I wonder: those confessors who go, "And what about this, and this, and this...". But tell me, what are you doing? Are you making a film in your mind? Please. Then, in the basilicas there is such a great opportunity to confess, but unfortunately the seminarians who are in the international colleges pass the word around, even among the young priests: "In that basilica you can go to all of them, bar this one and that one; don't go in that confessional, because there you will find the 'sheriff' who will torture you". Word gets around...

To be merciful does not mean to be broad-minded, no. It means to be brother, father, comforter. "Father, I can't do it, I don't know how I'll do it..." - "Pray, and come back whenever you need to, because here you will find a father, a brother, you will find this". That's the attitude. Please don't be a court, for an academic examination: "And how, when...". Don't be nosy about other people's souls. Be fathers, merciful brothers.

As I leave you with these thoughts for reflection, I wish you and your penitents a fruitful Lent of conversion. I bless you from my heart, and I ask you to please pray for me. Thank you!

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