



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE COURSE ON THE INTERNAL FORUM
PROMOTED BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

Paul VI Audience Hall

Thursday, 23 March 2023

[[Multimedia](#)]

Thank you for coming on the occasion of the annual course on the Internal Forum, organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary, which is now in its 33rd edition. I thank Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, Major Penitentiary. I thank him for his kind words and for what he does. I say the same to the Regent, Monsignor Nykiel, who works a lot; to the Prelates; to the Officials and to the Penitentiary Personnel — thanks to all of you — to the College of Penitentiaries of the Papal Basilicas and to all you participants in the course.

For more than three decades now, the Apostolic Penitentiary has offered this important and valid moment of formation, to contribute to the preparation of good confessors, fully aware of the importance of the ministry at the service of penitents. I renew my gratitude to the Penitentiary, as well as my encouragement to continue on this formative task, which does the Church so much good because it helps the lifeblood of mercy circulate in her veins. It is good to highlight this. The Cardinal repeated it many times: the lifeblood of mercy. If there is anyone who does not feel up to being a giver of the mercy received from Jesus, do not go to the confessional. In one of the papal Basilicas, for instance, I said to the Cardinal, “There is someone who listens and reprimands. He reprimands and then gives you a penance that cannot be done...”. Please, this is no good. No. Mercy. You are there to forgive and to offer words so that the person can move forward, renewed by forgiveness. You are there to forgive: put this in your heart.

The Apostolic Exhortation [*Evangelii Gaudium*](#) says that a Church that goes forth “has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy” ([n.](#)

24). An unbreakable link thus exists between the missionary vocation of the Church and the offer of mercy to all human beings. By living on mercy and offering it to everyone, the Church fulfils herself and carries out her own apostolic and missionary action. We could almost state that mercy is included among the distinguishing characteristics of the Church. In particular, it makes holiness and apostolicity shine.

With different styles in various eras, the Church has always expressed this “identity of mercy”, directed both at the body and the soul, desiring, with her Lord, the integral salvation of the person. And the work of divine mercy thus coincides with the very missionary action of the Church, with evangelization, because in it appears the face of God as Jesus showed it to us.

For this reason it is not possible, especially in this Lenten Season, to lessen the attention to the practice of pastoral charity, which is expressed, concretely and eminently, precisely in the full availability of priests to the ministry of reconciliation, without any reservations.

The availability of the confessor manifests itself in some evangelical attitudes. First of all, in welcoming everyone without prejudice, because only God knows what grace can work in hearts, at any moment. Then in listening to one’s brothers and sisters with the ear of the heart, wounded like the heart of Christ; in absolving the penitent, generously granting God’s forgiveness; in accompanying the penitential journey, without force, keeping up with the faithful’s pace, with patience and constant prayer.

Let us think of Jesus, who chooses to remain silent before the adulterous woman, in order to save her from the death sentence (cf. *Jn* 8:6). In the same way, may the priest in the confessional also love silence, be magnanimous of heart, knowing that each penitent calls him back to his same personal condition: being a sinner and a minister of mercy. This is your truth. If any of you does not feel like a sinner, please, do not go to the confessional. Sinner and minister of mercy go together. This awareness will keep confessionals from being abandoned and priests from lacking in availability. The evangelizing mission of the Church passes largely from the rediscovery of the gift of Confession, also in light of the next Jubilee of 2025.

I am thinking of the pastoral projects of the particular Churches, in which a just space for the service of sacramental Reconciliation should never be lacking. I am thinking in particular of the penitentiary in each cathedral, of penitentiaries in shrines; I am thinking above all of the constant presence of a confessor with an open schedule, in every pastoral zone, as in the churches served by religious communities: may there always be a penitentiary on duty. Always. Empty confessionals, never! “But,” you could say, “the people don’t come!”. Read something, pray; but wait, they will come.

If mercy is the Church’s mission — and it is the Church’s mission — then we must facilitate as much as possible the faithful’s access to this “encounter of love”, tending to it, starting with

children's first Confession and extending this attention to places of care and suffering. When not much can be done to heal the body, much can and should always be done for the health of the soul! In this sense, individual Confession represents the privileged path to travel, because it promotes a personal encounter with Divine Mercy, which every contrite heart awaits. Every contrite heart waits for mercy. In individual Confession, God wants to personally caress, with his mercy, every single sinner. The Pastor, only He, knows and loves each and every sheep, especially the weakest and most wounded. And may community celebrations be promoted in some occasions, without denying individual Confessions as an ordinary way of celebrating the sacrament.

Throughout the world, as we unfortunately see every day, there is no shortage of hotspots of hatred and vengeance. We confessors must thus increase the "hotspots of mercy". Let us not forget that we are in a supernatural fight, a fight which appears especially virulent in our time, even if we already know the final success of Christ's victory over the powers of evil. The fight, however, is ongoing, and victory is truly realized each time a penitent is absolved. Nothing distances from and defeats evil more than divine mercy. And I would like to tell you something about this: Jesus taught us that we should never dialogue with the devil. Never! He responded to the temptation in the desert with the Word of God, but he did not dialogue. Be wary in the confessional: never dialogue with the "evil", never. One offers what is right for forgiveness and one opens some doors to help [the penitent] move on, but never act as a psychiatrist or psychoanalyst. Please, do not go into these things! If any of you has this vocation, practice it elsewhere, but not in the tribunal of penance. This is a dialogue that is not convenient to have in the moment of mercy. There you must only think about forgiving and "how to manage" to make the person enter into forgiveness: "Are you sorry?" "No". "But doesn't this weigh on you?" "No". "But would you at least want to be contrite?" "Maybe". There is a door. Always look for the door to enter into forgiveness. And when you cannot enter through the door, enter through the window. But one must always seek to enter with forgiveness. With magnanimous forgiveness. "Let this be the last time; next time I won't forgive you". No, this is no good. Today it is my turn; the confessor is coming to me at 3! And another thing: think that God forgives abundantly. I said this last year, but I want to repeat it: there was a play some years ago about the prodigal son, set in modern culture, in which the young man recounts his adventures and how he distanced himself from home. And at the end, he speaks with a friend, and tells him he misses his father and wants to return home. And the friend advises him to write to his father, asking him if he would welcome him again and, if so, to place a white handkerchief on one of the house's windows as a sign that he would be welcomed. The play continues and, when the young man approaches the house, he sees it covered with white handkerchiefs. This is the message: abundance. God does not say, "Only this..."; he says, "Everything!". Is God naïve? I don't know if he is naïve, but he is abundant. He always forgives more, always! I have met good confessors, and a good confessor knows how to get there.

Dear brothers, I know that tomorrow, at the end of the course, you will have a penitential celebration. This is good and meaningful: to welcome and to celebrate first-hand the gift we are

called to bring to our brothers and sisters; to experience the tenderness of God's merciful love. He never tires of showing us his merciful heart. He never tires of forgiving. It is we who tire of asking for forgiveness, but he never gets tired.

I accompany you with prayer and I thank the Penitentiary for the work it tirelessly carries out for the good of the Sacrament of Forgiveness. And I invite you to rediscover, to theologically deepen and to pastorally spread — also in view of the Jubilee — that natural extension of mercy, which are indulgences, according to the celestial Father's desire to have us always and only with him, both in this life and in the eternal life.

Thank you for your daily commitment and for the rivers of mercy which, as humble channels, you pour out and will pour out in the world, to put out the fires of evil and kindle the fire of the Holy Spirit. I give you my heartfelt blessing. I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you!

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