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Audience with participants in the Course on the 34th Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 34th Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary, taking place from 4 to 8 March 2024.

The following is the address prepared by the Pope for the occasion, and handed to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I am pleased to meet you on the occasion of the annual *Course on the Internal Forum*, organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary. I address a cordial greeting to Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, major penitentiary, to the regent Msgr. Nykiel, to the prelates, the officials and staff of the Penitentiary, to the College of ordinary and extraordinary Penitentiaries of the Papal Basilicas in Rome, and to all of you participating in the course.

In the context of Lent and, in particular, in the Year of Prayer in preparation for the Jubilee, I would like to propose to you to reflect together on a simple and rich prayer, which belongs to the heritage of the holy faithful People of God, and which we will recite during the rite of Reconciliation: the *Act of Contrition*.

Despite the somewhat old-fashioned language, which may even be misunderstood in some of its expressions, this prayer preserves all its relevance, both pastoral and theological. Besides, its author is the great Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, master of moral theology, a pastor close to the people and a man of great equilibrium, distant from both rigorism and laxism.

I will dwell on three attitudes expressed in the *Act of Contrition*, which I think can help us reflect on our

relationship with God's mercy: *repentance* before God, *trust* in Him and the *resolve* not to relapse.

First: *repentance*. It is neither the fruit of self-analysis, nor of a psychic sense of guilt, but arises entirely from an awareness of our wretchedness in the face of God's infinite love, His boundless mercy. Indeed, it is this experience that moves our soul to ask Him for forgiveness, confident in His fatherliness, as the prayer recites: "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee", and later adds, "because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good". In reality, in the person, the sense of sin is proportional precisely to the perception of God's infinite love: the more we feel His tenderness, the more we desire to be in full communion with Him and the more the ugliness of evil in our life becomes apparent to us. And it is precisely this awareness, described as "repentance" or "contrition", that prompts us to reflect on ourselves and our deeds, and to convert. Let us remember that God never tires of forgiving us, and on our part, let us never tire of asking for forgiveness!

Second attitude: *trust*. In the *Act of Contrition*, God is described as "all good and deserving of all my love". It is beautiful to hear, on the lips of a penitent, the acknowledgment of both God's infinite goodness and His primacy, in one's own life, of love for Him. To love "above all else" indeed means to place God at the centre of everything, as the light on the path and the foundation for every order of values, entrusting everything to Him. And this is a primacy that inspires every other love: for humanity and for creation, because he who loves God, loves his brother (cf. *1 Jn* 4: 19-21), and seeks his wellbeing, always, in justice and in peace.

Third aspect: *resolve*. It expresses the will of the penitent not to relapse into the sin committed (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1451), and enables the important passage from *attrition* to *contrition*, from imperfect to perfect suffering (cf. *ivi.*, 1452-1453). We manifest this attitude by saying, "I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more". These words express an intention, not a promise. Indeed, none of us can promise to God to sin no more, and what is required to receive forgiveness is not a guarantee of impeccability, but a current resolve, made with a righteous intention at the moment of confession. Moreover, it is a commitment we always make with humility, as the words "with the help of Thy grace" emphasize. Saint John Mary Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, used to repeat that "God forgives us even though He knows we will sin again". And besides, without His grace, no conversion would be possible, against any temptation of Pelagianism, old or new.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the prayer's beautiful conclusion: "My God, have mercy". "God" and "mercy" are like synonyms, and this is decisive! God is mercy (cf. *1 Jn* 4:8), mercy is His name, His face. It is good for us to remember this, always: in every act of mercy, in every act of love, the face of God appears.

Dear friends, the task entrusted to you in the confessional is beautiful and crucial, because it enables you to help so many brothers and sisters to experience the sweetness of God's love. I encourage you, therefore, to live every confession as a unique and unrepeatable moment of grace, and to give the forgiveness of the Lord generously, with affability, fatherliness and, I dare say, even with maternal tenderness.

I invite you to pray and to strive to ensure that this year of preparation for the Jubilee may see the Father's mercy flourish in many hearts and in many places, and so that God may be ever more loved, recognized and praised.

I thank you for the apostolate you carry out – or which to some of you will soon be entrusted. May Our Lady, Mother of mercy, accompany you. I too keep you in my prayer, and I bless you from my heart. Please, do not forget to pray for me.
