



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE 28th COURSE ON THE INTERNAL FORUM
SPONSORED BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Friday, 17 March 2017*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers,

I am pleased to meet you in this first audience with you since the Jubilee of Mercy, on the occasion of the annual Course on the Internal Forum. I offer a cordial greeting to the Cardinal Major Penitentiary, and I thank him for his courteous expression. I greet the Regent, the Prelates, the Officials and Staff of the Penitentiary, the Colleagues of the Ordinary and Extraordinary Penitentiaries of the Papal Basilicas *in Urbe*, and all of you taking part in this course. In reality, I confess to you, the Tribunal of the Penitentiary is the type of Tribunal that I truly appreciate! Because it is a “tribunal of mercy”, to which one turns to obtain that indispensable medicine for our soul, which is Divine Mercy!

Your course on the internal forum, which contributes to the *formation of good confessors*, is more helpful than ever and I would even say necessary in our day. Certainly, one does not become a good confessor through a course, no: that of the confessional is a “lifelong school”. But who is the “good confessor”? How does one become a good confessor?

I would like to indicate three aspects in this regard.

1. The “good confessor” is, first and foremost, a true *friend of Jesus the Good Shepherd*. Without this friendship, it will be quite difficult for that paternity to mature, the paternity so necessary in the ministry of Reconciliation. Being friends of Jesus means first of all cultivating *prayer*: be it personal prayer with the Lord, asking ceaselessly for the gift of pastoral charity, or a specific prayer for the exercise of the task of confessors and for the faithful, the brothers and sisters who approach us in

search of God's mercy.

A minister of Reconciliation "wrapped in prayer" will be the credible reflection of God's mercy and will prevent the harshness and misunderstandings that, at times, can be generated even in the sacramental encounter. A confessor who prays clearly knows that he himself is the first to sin and the first to be forgiven. One cannot forgive in the Sacrament without the awareness of having been forgiven first. Therefore, prayer is the first guarantee to avoid any attitude of harshness, which pointlessly judges the sinner and not the sin.

In prayer it is necessary to implore the gift of a wounded heart, capable of understanding the wounds of another and of healing them with the oil of mercy, that which the Good Samaritan poured on the wounds of the unfortunate man, on whom no one had taken pity (cf. Lk 10:24).

In prayer we must ask for the precious gift of humility, so it may always clearly emerge that forgiveness is a free and supernatural gift of God, of which we are always simple, albeit necessary, administrators, through the very will of Jesus; and he will surely be pleased if we make broad use of his mercy.

In prayer, then, let us always invoke the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of discernment and compassion. The Spirit allows one to empathize with the suffering of the sisters and brothers who approach the confessional, and to accompany them with prudent and mature discernment and with true compassion for their suffering, caused by the poverty of sin.

2. The good confessor is, secondly, a *man of the Spirit*, a man of *discernment*. How much evil comes to the Church from a lack of discernment! How much evil comes to souls through an action that is not rooted in the humble listening of the Holy Spirit and of the will of God. The confessor does not do his own will and does not teach his own doctrine. He is called to do always and only the will of God, in full communion with the Church, of which he is minister, that is, servant.

Discernment allows one always to distinguish, so as not to confuse, and so as never to "paint everyone with the same brush". Discernment educates the gaze and the heart, allowing for that sensitivity of spirit so necessary before those who open the inner sanctum of their conscience to us so as to receive light, peace and mercy.

Discernment is also necessary because those who approach the confessional might come from the most diverse situations; they could also have spiritual disturbances, the nature of which must be subjected to attentive discernment, taking into account all the existential, ecclesial, natural and supernatural circumstances. Wherever the confessor should become aware of the presence of true and proper spiritual disturbances — which can also be in large part psychic, and which must be verified through a healthy collaboration with the human sciences — he must not hesitate to contact those who, in the diocese, are charged with this sensitive and necessary ministry, namely,

exorcists. But they must be chosen with great care and great prudence.

3. Lastly, the confessional is also a true and proper *place of evangelization*. In fact, there is no more authentic evangelization than the encounter with the God of mercy, with the God who is Mercy. Encountering mercy means encountering the true face of God, as the Lord Jesus revealed it to us.

The confessional is thus a place of evangelization and therefore of formation. Even in the brief dialogue he weaves with the penitent, the confessor is called to discern what may be most helpful and what may even be necessary to the spiritual journey of that brother or sister; at times it will be necessary to proclaim anew the most elementary truths of faith, the incandescent core, the *kerigma*, without which the very experience of God's love and his mercy would remain mute; at times it will be a matter of pointing out the basis of moral life, always in relation to the truth, the good and the will of the Lord. It is a work of ready and intelligent discernment, which can do much good for the faithful. The confessor, in fact, is called daily to the "peripheries of evil and of sin" — this is a terrible periphery! — and his work represents an authentic pastoral priority. Hearing confessions is a pastoral priority. Please, let there be no such signs as: "Confessions heard only on Mondays and Wednesdays from a certain time to a certain time". Hear confession every time you are asked. And if you are there [in the confessional] praying, keep the confessional open, as God's heart is open.

Dear brothers, I bless you and I hope you will be good confessors: immersed in the relationship with Christ, capable of discernment in the Holy Spirit, and ready to seize the opportunity to evangelize.

Always pray for the brothers and sisters who approach the Sacrament of forgiveness. And please, pray for me too.

I would not want to end without saying something that came to mind when the Cardinal Prefect was speaking. He spoke of the keys and of Our Lady, and I enjoyed it. I will say one thing ... two things. It did me a great deal of good when, as a youth, I read Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori's book on Our Lady: *The glories of Mary*. At the end of each chapter there was always a miracle of Our Lady, by which she entered into the midst of life and settled things. And the second thing. There is a legend about Our Lady, a tradition I was told exists in Southern Italy: Our Lady of the Mandarins. It is a land where there are lots of mandarins, is it not? And they say she is the Patroness of Thieves. [laughter] They say that thieves go there to pray. And the legend — as they tell it — is that when the thieves who pray to Our Lady of the Mandarins die, there is a queue in front of Peter who is holding the keys, and he opens [the gate] and lets one person pass, then opens it and lets another pass; and when Our Lady sees one of [the thieves], she signals for him to hide; and then, when all have passed, Peter closes [the gate] and night falls, and from the window Our Lady calls [the thief] and lets him in through the window. It is a popular tale, but it is so

beautiful: to forgive with our Mother beside us; to forgive with our Mother. Because this man, this woman who come to the confessional, have a Mother in Heaven who will open the gate for them and will help them at the moment of entering Heaven. Always Our Lady, because Our Lady helps us too in the exercise of mercy. I thank the Cardinal for these two signs: the keys and Our Lady. Thank you very much.

I invite you — it is time — to pray the *Angelus* together: “*Angelus Domini...*”.

[Blessing]

Do not say that thieves go to Heaven! Do not say this! [laughter]