



# The Holy See

---

## **ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

*Saturday, 31 March 2001*

*Your Eminence,  
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,  
Dear Seminarians,*

1. This traditional annual meeting is always a cause of special joy to me. Indeed the audience granted to the Apostolic Penitentiary, to the confessors of the city's Patriarchal Basilicas and to the young candidates for the priesthood, participants in the course on the internal forum organized by the Penitentiary, gives me the occasion to discuss various aspects of the sacrament of reconciliation which is so important to the life of the Church.

I first greet the Cardinal, the Major Penitentiary, and thank him for the kind words he has just addressed to me on everyone's behalf. I then greet the members of the Penitentiary, the institution of the Apostolic See whose task is to offer the means of reconciliation in the most serious, tragic cases of sin, together with authoritative advice for problems of conscience, and the indulgence which is the crowning of grace, preserved or recovered through the Lord's mercy. I also greet the confessors who live their priesthood with generous dedication to the ministry of sacramental reconciliation, and the young men present who, with a good understanding of the excellence and indispensability of this ministry, wanted to perfect their training by taking part in the course that is now ending. Lastly, I extend my grateful appreciation to all the priests throughout the world who, especially during the recent Jubilee, dedicated themselves with patience and hard work to the valuable service of the confessional.

2. Through Baptism, the human being becomes like Christ, with an indelible ontological configuration to him. However, his will remains exposed to the fascination of sin, which is rebellion against God's holy will that results in the loss of the divine life of grace, and, in extreme cases, the breaking of the juridical and visible bond with the Church; it is the tragic fallout of sin.

But God, "*dives in misericordia*" (who is rich in mercy, cf. Eph 2: 4), does not abandon the sinner to his destiny. Through the power granted to the Apostles and their successors, he makes active within him, if he is repentant, the redemption acquired by Christ in the paschal mystery. This is the wonderful effectiveness of the sacrament of reconciliation, which heals the contradictions produced by sin and restores the true state of the Christian as a living member of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. The sacrament is thus organically connected with the Eucharist, which, as the memorial of the sacrifice of Calvary, is the source and summit of the life of the one and holy Church.

Jesus is the one, necessary mediator of eternal salvation. St Paul is explicit: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tm 2: 5). Hence the need, with regard to eternal salvation, for those means of grace instituted by Jesus which are the sacraments. The claim to settle one's own accounts with God, doing without the Church and the sacramental economy, is therefore deceptive and disastrous. It is significant that on Easter Sunday evening, the risen Christ conferred the power to forgive sins upon the Apostles and declared its necessity (cf. Jn 20: 23). At the Council of Trent, the Church solemnly taught this necessity with regard to mortal sins (cf. ses. XIV, chap. 5 and can. 6; DS 1679, 1706).

It forms the basis of the priest's duty to the faithful and their right to expect the priest to administer the sacrament of Penance correctly. I have addressed twelve Messages to the Apostolic Penitentiary on the subject from various viewpoints in the period between 1981 and last year, 2000.

3. The large flow of the faithful to sacramental confession during the Jubilee Year has shown how this subject - and with it that of Indulgences, a happy incentive for sacramental reconciliation - is always timely. Christians feel an inner need for reconciliation and are grateful when priests receive them willingly in the confessional. Therefore in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* I wrote: "The Jubilee Year, which has been particularly marked by a return to the sacrament of Penance, has given us an encouraging message, which should not be ignored. If many, and among them, many young people, have benefited from approaching this sacrament, it is ... necessary that Pastors ... present and lead people to appreciate it" (n. 37).

Encouraged by this experience, which is a promise for the future, in today's Message I would like to recall several aspects of special importance, at the level of principles and of pastoral orientation. The Church, in her ordained ministers, is the active subject of the work of reconciliation. St Matthew records Jesus' words to his disciples: "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (18: 18). Likewise, St James, speaking of the Anointing of the Sick, which is also a sacrament of reconciliation, urges: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (5: 14).

The celebration of the sacrament of Penance is always an act of the Church which in it proclaims her faith and gives thanks to God, who in Jesus Christ has set us free from sin. From this it follows that for the validity and liceity of the sacrament, the priest and the penitent must faithfully follow what the Church teaches and prescribes. For sacramental absolution, in particular, the formulas to be used are those prescribed in the *Ordo Paenitentiae* (Order for the Administration of the Sacrament of Penance), and in similar ritual texts in force for the Eastern Churches. The use of other formulas is absolutely forbidden.

It is also necessary to bear in mind what is prescribed by canon 720 of the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* and by canon 960 of the *Code of Canon Law*, which states that individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary way by which the faithful who are aware of serious sin are reconciled with God and with the Church; therefore general absolution, without the previous individual confession of sins, must be kept rigorously within the specific canonical norms (cf. CCEO, cann. 720-721; CIC, cann. 961, 962, 963).

4. The priest, as a minister of the sacrament, acts *in persona Christi*, at the summit of the supernatural economy. In sacramental confession the penitent accomplishes a "theological" act, that is, dictated by faith, with sorrow that stems from the supernatural causes of love and fear of God, with regard to the recovery of his friendship with him and so ordered to eternal salvation.

At the same time, as is suggested by the formula of sacramental confession, with the words: "May God grant you pardon and peace", the penitent aspires to interior peace, and also legitimately desires psychological peace. However, the sacrament of Reconciliation should not be confused with a psychotherapeutic technique. Psychological practices cannot substitute for the sacrament of Penance, nor, even less, be imposed in its place.

The confessor, minister of God's mercy, will feel bound to be generous in offering to the faithful his time and patient understanding. Canon 980 of the *Code of Canon Law* prescribes that "if the confessor has no doubt about the disposition of a penitent who asks for absolution, absolution is not to be refused or delayed"; canon 986 makes it a necessary obligation of priests responsible for the care of souls to hear the confessions of their faithful "*qui rationabiliter audiri petant*" (who reasonably ask to be heard) (CCEO, can. 735, 1). This obligation is the application of a general juridical and pastoral principle, which says that "the sacred ministers cannot refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, are properly disposed and are not prohibited by law from receiving them" (CIC, can. 843, 1). And since "*caritas Christi urget nos*" (the charity of Christ presses us), even priests who are not in charge of souls will show generosity and availability in this regard. In every case, the canonical norms about the necessary and appropriate place to hear sacramental confessions should be respected (cf. CCEO, can. 736; CIC, can. 964).

In addition to being an act of faith of the Church, the sacrament is also a personal act of the penitent's faith, hope and, at least in an initial stage, love. The priest's task will therefore be to help

him to confess his sins, not simply as a recalling of the past, but as an act of religious humility and trust in God's mercy.

5. The transcendent dignity that enables the priest to act *in persona Christi* in the administration of the sacraments, creates in him - excepting that for the penitent the sacrament is always effective even if the minister should be unworthy - the duty to conform himself to Christ so as to be his living image for the faithful. To achieve this it is necessary that he, in turn, receive faithfully and often the sacrament of Reconciliation as a penitent.

His condition of minister acting *in persona Christi* imposes on the priest the absolute obligation to respect the sacramental seal on the contents confessed in the sacrament, even at the cost, if necessary, of his life. Indeed, the faithful do not entrust the mysterious world of their conscience to the priest as a private person, but as the instrument, through the mandate of the Church, of the power and mercy which are God's alone.

The confessor is judge, physician and teacher on the Church's behalf. As such, he cannot propose "his own" personal morality or asceticism, that is, his private opinions or choices, but must express the truth of which the Church is the guardian and guarantee in the authentic Magisterium (cf. *CIC*, can. 978).

During the Jubilee, for whose spiritual fruits we thank God, the Church commemorated the 2,000th anniversary of the birth among men of the Son of God, made man in Mary's womb and made to share in every aspect of the human condition except sin. Its celebration revived in Christian consciences the awareness of Christ's living and active presence in the Church: "*Christus heri et hodie, Ipse et in saecula*" (Christ yesterday, today and forever). The sacramental economy is placed precisely at the service of the dynamism of Christ's grace. In it Penance, closely connected with Baptism and with the Eucharist, acts so that Christ may be reborn and dwell mystically within believers.

From this comes the importance of the sacrament, which Christ wanted to give to his Church on the very day of his Resurrection (cf. Jn 20: 19-23). I urge priests from every part of the world to become its generous ministers, so that the wave of divine mercy can wash over every soul in need of purification and comfort. May Mary Most Holy, who brought forth Jesus physically in Bethlehem, obtain for every priest that he bring forth Christ in souls, and be an instrument of the Jubilee that never ends.

Upon my heartfelt appeal, with you and for you, I humbly beg the Lord's blessing; may the Apostolic Blessing which I impart to you be its pledge.

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana