



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE ANNUAL COURSE
ON THE INTERNAL FORUM ORGANIZED
BY THE TRIBUNAL OF THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

Dear Brothers,

1. With great joy I address a cordial greeting to all of you who are taking part in the Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary. I offer a special greeting to Cardinal James Francis Stafford, Major Penitentiary, and to his Collaborators, as well as to the confessors in the Basilicas of the City who carry out a service that is more precious and important than ever.

The Course on the Internal Forum inspires interest in the young priests who are studying at the Pontifical Universities and Athenaeums; it is a formative programme of considerable interest, which sheds light on the need for continuous theological, pastoral and spiritual updating on the part of priests, to whom the "*the ministry of reconciliation*" has been given (cf. II Cor 5: 18).

2. The Gospel passages to which the liturgy calls our attention in this Lenten Season help us to understand better the value of this unique priestly ministry. They show the Saviour converting the Samaritan woman and he is a source of joy to her; he heals the man born blind and becomes for him a source of light; he raises Lazarus and manifests himself as the life and resurrection which conquer death, the consequence of sin. His penetrating gaze, his words and his loving judgment fill with light the consciences of all those he meets, bringing about their conversion and deep renewal.

We live in a society that seems all too often to have lost the sense of God and of sin. Ever more urgent, therefore, is Christ's invitation to conversion that implies a conscious confession of one's sins and the related request for forgiveness and salvation. The priest knows that in the exercise of his ministry he is acting "in the person of Christ and under the action of the Holy Spirit". He must

therefore cultivate the same sentiments as Christ and increase within himself the love of Jesus, teacher and shepherd, doctor of souls and bodies, spiritual guide, and just and merciful judge.

3. In the tradition of the Church, sacramental Reconciliation has always been considered as closely connected with the sacrificial banquet of the Eucharist, the memorial of our redemption. In this year that is especially dedicated to the Eucharist, it seems to me particularly important to call your attention to the vital relationship that exists between these two sacraments.

The early Christian communities were already aware of the need to prepare themselves through a dignified way of life to celebrate the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, which is "communion" with the Body and Blood of the Lord and "communion" (*koinonia*) with believers who form one body because they all partake of the one bread, the Body of Christ (cf. I Cor 10: 16-17).

How useful it is to recall Paul's exhortations to the faithful of Corinth who did not take the celebration of the "Lord's Supper" seriously and were oblivious to the deep meaning of the memorial of the Lord's death and its requirements of fraternal communion (cf. I Cor 11: 17ff.!) His very severe words also warn us that we should receive the Eucharist with a genuine attitude of faith and love (cf. *ibid.*, 11: 27-29).

Many elements in the rite of Holy Mass emphasize this requirement of purification and conversion: from the initial penitential act to the prayers for forgiveness, from the sign of peace to the prayers the priests and faithful say before Communion. Only those who know in their hearts that they have not committed a mortal sin may receive the Body of Christ. The Council of Trent makes this quite clear when it states that "anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution" (*Session XIII*, chap. 7; *Denzinger* 1646-1647). And this continues to be what the Church also teaches today (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1385; Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, nn. 36-37).

4. Dear Brothers, take great care to celebrate the Eucharistic Mystery with a pure heart and sincere love. The Lord recommends that we not become branches which are cut off the vine. Preach clearly and simply the right doctrine about the need for the sacrament of Reconciliation before receiving Communion when a person is conscious that he or she is not in God's grace. At the same time, encourage the faithful to receive the Body and Blood of Christ to be purified from venial sins and imperfections, so that celebrations of the Eucharist may be pleasing to God and may unite us in offering the holy and immaculate Victim with a contrite and humble heart, trusting and reconciled.

May you be for everyone assiduous, available and competent ministers of the sacrament of Reconciliation, true images of the holy and merciful Christ.

May Mary, Mother of mercy, help you and all priests to be docile "instruments" of the mercy and holiness of God. May she make every priest aware of the lofty mission he is called to carry out with a pure heart and docility to the action of the Holy Spirit, to pour out upon the world with the creativity and ardour of love the gift that he himself receives upon the altar.

With these sentiments, I warmly bless you all.

From the Gemelli Polyclinic, 8 March 2005

JOHN PAUL II

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