

Your Eminence, Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the priesthood,

I welcome you today and address my cordial greeting to each one of you, participants in the Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary.

In the first place I greet Cardinal James Francis Stafford, Major Penitentiary, who I thank for the kind words he addressed to me, Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, Regent of the Penitentiary, and all those present.

Today's meeting also offers me the opportunity to reflect together with you on the importance in our day of the Sacrament of Penance and to repeat the necessity for priests to prepare themselves to administer it with devotion and fidelity to the praise of God and for the sanctification of the Christian people, as they promise to their Bishop on the day of their priestly ordination.

In fact, it is one of the qualifying duties of the special ministry that they are called to exercise "*in persona Christi*". With the gestures and sacramental words the priest above all makes God's love visible, which was revealed fully in Christ.

In the administration of the Sacrament of Pardon and of Reconciliation, the priest — as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recalls — acts as "the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner" (n. 1465). What takes place in this Sacrament, therefore, is especially a mystery of love, a work of the merciful love of the Lord.

"God is love" (I Jn 4:16): in this simple affirmation the Evangelist John has enclosed the revelation of the entire mystery of the Triune God. And in meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus, foretelling his passion and death on the Cross, affirms: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

We all need to draw from the inexhaustible fountain of divine love, which is totally manifested to us in the mystery of the Cross, in order to find authentic peace with God, with ourselves and with our neighbour. Only from this spiritual source is it possible to draw the indispensable interior energy to overcome the evil and sin in the ceaseless battle that marks our earthly pilgrimage toward the heavenly homeland.

The contemporary world continues to present contradictions so clearly outlined by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 4-10): we see a humanity that would like to be self-sufficient, where more than a few consider it almost possible to do without God in order to live well; and yet how many seem sadly condemned to face the dramatic situations of an empty existence, how much violence there still is on the earth, how much solitude weighs on the soul of the humanity of the communications era!

In a word, it seems that today there is even loss of the "sense of sin", but in compensation the "guilt complex" has increased.

Who can free the heart of humankind from this yoke of death if not the One who by dying overcame for ever the power of evil with the omnipotence of divine love?

As St. Paul reminded the Christians of Ephesus: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph 2:4).

The priest in the Sacrament of Confession is the instrument of this merciful love of God, whom he invokes in the formula of the absolution of sins: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and Resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace".

The New Testament speaks on every page of God's love and mercy, which are made visible in Christ. Jesus, in fact, who "receives sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15:2), and with authority affirms: "Man, your sins are forgiven you" (Lk 5:20), says: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5:31-32).

The duty of the priest and the confessor is primarily this: to bring every person to experience the love of Christ, encountering him on the path of their own lives as Paul met him on the road to Damascus. We know the impassioned declaration of the Apostle to the Gentiles after that meeting which changed his life: "[he] loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

This is his personal experience on the way to Damascus: the Lord Jesus loved Paul and gave himself for him. And in Confession this is also our way, our way to Damascus, our experience: Jesus has loved me and has given himself for me.

May every person have this same spiritual experience and, as the Servant of God John Paul II said, rediscover "Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself. It is this face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance" (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 37).

The priest, minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, must always consider it his duty to make transpire, in words and in drawing near to the penitent, the merciful love of God. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, to welcome the penitent sinner, to help him rise again from sin, to encourage him to amend himself, never making pacts with evil but always taking up again the way of evangelical perfection. May this beautiful experience of the prodigal son, who finds the fullness of divine mercy in the father, be the experience of whoever confesses in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Dear brothers, all this means that the priest engaged in the ministry of the Sacrament of Penance is himself motivated by a constant tending to holiness. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* aims high in this demand when it affirms: "The confessor... should have a proven knowledge of Christian behaviour, experience of human affairs, respect and sensitivity toward the one who has fallen; he must love the truth, be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church, and lead the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity. He must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy" (n. 1466).

To be able to fulfil this important mission, always interiorly united to the Lord, the priest must be faithful to the Church's Magisterium concerning moral doctrine, aware that the law of good and evil is not determined by the situation, but by God.

I ask the Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy, to sustain the ministry of priest confessors and to help every Christian community to understand ever more the value and importance of the Sacrament of Penance for the spiritual growth of every one of the faithful. To you present here and to the people dear to you, I impart my blessing with affection.

To Participants in a Vatican Course on the Sacrament of Penance
Pope Benedict XVI
March 16, 2007