



The Holy See

THE ANNUAL COURSE ON THE INTERNAL FORUM
ORGANIZED BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Paul VI Hall

Friday, 9 March 2011

Dear Friends,

I am very glad 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 Manuel Monteiro de Castro, Major Penitentiary, who has presided at your study sessions for the first time as such, and I thank him for his cordial words.

I likewise greet Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, Regent, the Penitentiary personnel and each one of you who with your presence remind everyone of the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the life of faith, highlighting both the constant need for an adequate theological, spiritual and canonical training in order to be confessors and, especially, the constitutive bond between sacramental celebration and Gospel proclamation.

In fact, the Sacraments and the Proclamation of the Word must never be conceived as separate; on the contrary, “Jesus says that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the goal of his mission; this proclamation, however, is not only a ‘discourse’ but at the same time includes his action; the signs and miracles that Jesus works show that the Kingdom comes as a present reality and in the end coincides with his very Person, with his gift of himself.... The priest represents Christ, the One sent by the Father, he continues his mission, through the ‘word’ and the ‘sacrament’, in this totality of body and soul, of sign and word” (*General Audience, 5 May 2010*).

This totality, rooted in the very mystery of the Incarnation, suggests to us that the celebration of

the Sacrament of Reconciliation is itself a proclamation and therefore a path to take for the work of the New Evangelization.

In what sense then is sacramental confession a “path” for the New Evangelization? First of all because the New Evangelization draws its lifeblood from the holiness of the children of the Church, from the daily journey of personal and community conversion in order to be ever more closely conformed to Christ. Then there is a close connection between holiness and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, witnessed by all the saints of history. The real conversion of our hearts, which means opening ourselves to God’s transforming and renewing action, is the “driving force” of every reform and is expressed in a real evangelizing effort. In confession, through the freely bestowed action of divine Mercy, repentant sinners are justified, pardoned and sanctified and abandon their former selves to be reclothed in the new.

Only those who have let themselves be profoundly renewed by divine grace are able to bear within them — and hence to proclaim — the newness of the Gospel. In his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Blessed John Paul II said: “I am also asking for renewed pastoral courage in ensuring that the day-to-day teaching of Christian communities persuasively and effectively presents the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation” (n. 37).

I would like to reassert this appeal, in the awareness that the New Evangelization must acquaint the people of our time with the face of 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” (*ibid.*).

In an age of educational emergency in which relativism is calling into question the very possibility of an education understood as a gradual introduction to knowledge of the truth, to the profound sense of reality, hence as a gradual introduction to the relationship with the Truth which is God, Christians are called to proclaim energetically the possibility of the encounter between today’s people and Jesus Christ, in whom God made himself so close that that he may be seen and heard.

In this perspective the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which begins with a look at one’s actual condition in life, contributes uniquely to achieving that “openness of heart” which enables one to turn one’s gaze to God so that he may enter one’s life. The certainty that he is close and in his mercy awaits the human being, even one who is involved in sin, in order to heal his weakness with the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, is always a ray of hope for the world.

Dear priests and dear deacons who are preparing for the priesthood, in the administration of this sacrament you are given, or you will be given, the possibility of being instruments of an ever renewed meeting of people with God. All who turn to you, precisely because of their condition as sinners, will experience within them a profound desire: the desire for change, the desire for mercy

and, ultimately, the desire for the encounter with Christ and for him to embrace them once again.

You will therefore be collaborators and protagonists of a great many possible “new beginnings”, as many as the penitents who come to you, bearing in mind that the authentic meaning of every “newness” does not consist so much in the abandonment or excision of the past. Rather it consists in welcoming Christ and in opening yourselves to his Presence, ever new and ever capable of transforming and illuminating all the patches of shade and ceaselessly unfolding new horizons.

The New Evangelization, therefore, also begins in the confessional! That is, it begins in the mysterious encounter between the endless question of human beings, a sign within them of the Creator Mystery and God’s Mercy, the only adequate response to the human need for infinity.

If the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is this, if the faithful have a real experience of that Mercy which Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ has given to us, they themselves will become credible witnesses of that holiness which is the aim of the New Evangelization.

If all this is true for the lay faithful, dear friends, it acquires even greater importance for each one of us. The minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation collaborates with the New Evangelization in the first place by renewing himself, his own awareness that he is a sinner and is in need of receiving sacramental pardon. In this way may be renewed the encounter with Christ, which was begun in Baptism and has found its specific and definitive form in the sacrament of Orders.

This is my hope for each one of you: may the newness of Christ always be the centre and reason for your priestly existence, so that those who meet you through your ministry may exclaim as did Andrew and John “we have found the Messiah” (Jn 1:41). In this way, every Confession, from which each Christian will emerge renewed, will be a step ahead in the New Evangelization. May Mary, Mother of Mercy, Refuge for us sinners and Star of the New Evangelization, accompany us on our way. I thank you warmly and I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you.