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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 170317d

Friday 17.03.2017

Audience with participants in the Course on the Internal Forum organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary

At 11.30 this morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 28th Annual Course on the Internal Forum organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary (Rome, Palazzo della Cancelleria, 14-17 March 2017).

The following is the full text of the Pope's address to those present at the Audience.

Holy Father's address

Dear brothers,

I am pleased to meet you in this first audience with you after the Jubilee of Mercy, on the occasion of the annual Course on the Internal Forum. I address warm greetings to the Cardinal Major Penitentiary, and thank him for his kind remarks. I greet the Regent, the Prelates, the Officials and the staff of the Penitentiary, the Colleges of the ordinary and extraordinary penitentiaries of the Papal Basilicas in Rome, and all of you, participants in this course.

In reality, I admit, this Penitentiary is the type of Tribunal I truly like! It is a "tribunal of mercy", to which we turn to obtain that indispensable medicine that is divine mercy.

Your course on the internal forum, which contributes to the formation of good confessors, is more useful than ever, and I would say even necessary in our times. Certainly, one does not become a good confessor thanks to a course, no: that of the confessional is a long education, that lasts a lifetime. But who is a "good confessor"? How does one become a good confessor?

I would like to indicate, in this respect, three aspects.

1. The "good confessor" is, first of all, a true *friend of Jesus the Good Shepherd*. Without this friendship, it will be

difficult to develop that fatherliness so necessary in the ministry of Reconciliation. Being friends of Jesus means first of all cultivating *prayer*: both personal prayer with the Lord, incessantly asking for the gift of pastoral charity, and the specific prayer for the exercise of the task of the confessor and for the faithful, brothers and sisters who come to us in search of God's mercy.

A ministry of Reconciliation "bound in prayer" will be a credible response to God's mercy, and will avoid the harshness and misunderstandings that at times can be generated even in the Sacramental encounter. A confessor who prays is well aware of being the first sinner 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 for avoiding harsh attitudes, pointlessly judging the sinner and not the sin.

In prayer it is necessary to implore the gift of a wounded heart, able to comprehend the wounds of others and to heal them with the oil of mercy, that which the good Samaritan poured on the wounds of the poor victim on whom no-one took pity (cf. Luke, 10:34).

In prayer we must ask for the precious gift of humility, so that it may appear increasingly clear that forgiveness is a free and supernatural gift of God, of which we are simple, if necessary, administrators, by the very will of Jesus; and He will certainly be glad if we make extensive use of His mercy.

In prayer, then, let us always invoke the Holy Spirit, Who is the Spirit of discernment and compassion. The Spirit enables us to empathise with the sufferings of our sisters and brothers who enter the confessional, and to accompany them with prudent and mature discernment and with true compassion in their sufferings, caused by the poverty of sin.

2. The good confessor is, in second place, a *man of the Spirit*, a man of *discernment*. How much harm is done to the Church by a lack of discernment! How much harm is done to souls by a way of acting that is not rooted in humbly listening to Holy Spirit and to God's will. The confessor does not act according to his own will and does not teach his own doctrine. He is called always to do the will of God alone, in full communion with the Church, of whom he is the minister, that is, a servant.

Discernment allows us always to distinguish, rather than confuse, and to never "tar all with the same brush". Discernment educates our outlook and our heart, enabling that delicacy of spirit that is so necessary before those who open up the shrine of their own conscience, to receive light, peace and mercy.

Discernment is necessary also because those who approach the confessional may come from the most desperate situations; they could also have spiritual disturbances, whose nature should be submitted to careful discernment, taking into account all the existential, ecclesial, natural and supernatural circumstances. When the confessor becomes aware of the presence of genuine spiritual disturbances – that may be in large part psychic, and therefore must be confirmed by means of healthy collaboration with the human sciences – he must not hesitate to refer the issue to those who, in the diocese, are charged with this delicate and necessary ministry, namely, exorcists. But these must be chosen with great care and great prudence.

3. Finally, the confessional is also a true *place of evangelisation*. Indeed, there is no evangelisation more authentic than the encounter with the God of mercy, with the God Who is Mercy. Encountering mercy means encountering the true face of God, just as the Lord Jesus revealed Him to us.

The confessional is therefore a place of evangelisation and thus of formation. In the dialogue that is woven with the penitent – although brief – the confessor is called to discern what may be most useful or even necessary to the spiritual journey of that brother or sister; at times it becomes necessary to re-proclaim the most elementary truths of faith, the incandescent nucleus, the *kerygma*, without which the same experience of God's love and His mercy would remain as if mute; at times it means indicating the foundations of moral life, always in relation to the truth, good and the will of God. It is a work of prompt and intelligent discernment, that can be of great benefit to the faithful.

The confessor, indeed, is called every day to venture to the “peripheries of evil and sin” – this is an ugly periphery! - and his work is a real pastoral priority. Confessing is a pastoral priority. Please, do not let there be those signs that say, “Confessions only on Monday and Wednesday at such-and-such a time”. One confesses whenever one is asked. And if you are there [in the confessional] praying, stay with the confessional open, which is the open heart of God.

Dear brothers, I bless you and I hope that 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 evangelise.

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

And I would not like to finish without something that came to mind when the Cardinal Prefect spoke. He spoke about keys, and about Our Lady, and I liked this, so I will tell you something ... two things. It was very good for me when I was young to read the book of Saint Alfonso Maria de' Liguori on Our Lady: “The Glories of Mary”. Always, at the end of each chapter, there was a miracle of the Madonna, who entered into life and sorted things out. And the second thing. On Our Lady there is a legend, a tradition that they told me exists in the South of Italy: Our Lady of the Mandarins. It is a land where there are many mandarins, isn't it? And they say that she is the patroness of thieves [laughter]. They say that thieves go to pray there. And the legend – they say – is that the thieves who pray to Our Lady of the Mandarins, when they die, they form a line in front of Saint Peter who has the keys, and opens and lets one pass, then he lets another one pass; and the Madonna, when she sees one of these, makes a sign for them to hide. Then, once everyone has passed by, Peter closes up and comes during the night, and the Madonna calls him from the window, and lets him enter through the window. It is a folk tale but it is beautiful: forgiving with the Mother next to you, forgiving with the Mother. Because this woman, this man who comes to the confessional, has a Mother in Heaven who opens the door and will help them at that moment to enter Heaven. Always the Madonna, because the Madonna helps us too in showing mercy. I thank the Cardinal for these two signs: the keys, and Our Lady. Many thanks.

I invite you – it is time – to pray the Angelus together. “Angelus Domini...”

[Blessing]

Don't say that thieves go to Heaven! Don't say this! [laughter]
