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Audience with the participants in the Course on the Internal Forum

At 11.15, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 29th Course on the Internal Forum, which is taking place in Rome, in Palazzo della Cancelleria, from 5 to 9 March 2018.

The following is the Pope's address to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers, good morning!

I greet you all cordially, starting with Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, whom I thank for his words. I greet the whole family of the Apostolic Penitentiary and the participants in the course on the internal Forum, which this year, looking ahead to the next Synod on youth, has dealt with the relationship between sacramental confession and vocational discernment. This is a very appropriate topic that deserves some reflection that I would like to share with you.

You confessors, especially you future confessors, have the advantage – so to speak – of being young, and therefore of being able to live the sacrament of Reconciliation as “young among the young”; and, not infrequently, proximity in age favours sacramental dialogue too, due to the natural affinity of language. This can constitute a facilitation and it is a circumstance to be lived adequately, for the construction of authentic Christian personalities. However, it is a condition not without limits and even risks, because you are at the beginning of your ministry and therefore you still have to acquire all the experience that a “consummate confessor” has after decades of listening to the penitents.

How, then, should one live this circumstance? What care should be taken in listening to sacramental confessions, especially of the young, also in view of a possible vocational discernment?

First of all I would say that it is always necessary to rediscover, as Saint Thomas Aquinas says, the *instrumental dimension* of our ministry. The priest-confessor is the source of neither mercy nor grace: he is certainly the indispensable instrument, but always only an instrument! And when the priest takes charge of this, he prevents God from acting in hearts. This awareness must favour a careful vigilance over the risk of becoming “masters of consciences”, above all in the relationship with young people, whose personality is still being formed and is therefore far more easily influenced. Remembering to be, and having to be, only instruments of Reconciliation is the first requirement for assuming an attitude of humble listening to the Holy Spirit, which guarantees a genuine effort of discernment. Being instruments is not a diminution of the ministry, but, on the contrary, it is its full realization, because to the extent that the priest disappears and Christ the Supreme and Eternal Priest appears more clearly, our vocation of “useless servants” is realized.

Secondly, it is necessary to *know how to listen to questions* before offering the answers. Giving answers, without taking care to listen to the questions of young people and, where necessary, without trying to raise genuine questions, would be the wrong attitude. The confessor is called to be a man of listening: human listening to the penitent, and divine listening to the Holy Spirit. Truly listening to the brother in the sacramental dialogue, we listen to Jesus Himself, poor and humble; listening to the Holy Spirit we place ourselves in attentive obedience, we become hearers of the Word and therefore we offer the greatest service to our young penitents: we put them in touch with Jesus Himself.

When these two elements are present, the sacramental dialogue can truly open up to that prudent and prayerful journey that is *vocational discernment*. Every young person should be able to hear God’s voice both in his own conscience and through listening to the Word. And in this journey it is important to be supported by the wise accompaniment of the confessor, who sometimes can also become – at the request of the young person and never volunteered – spiritual father. The vocational discernment is first of all a reading of the signs which God Himself has already placed in the life of the young, through personal qualities and inclinations, through encounters, and through prayer: a prolonged prayer, in which there are repeated, with simplicity, the words of Samuel: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3: 9).

The colloquy of sacramental confession thus becomes a privileged opportunity for encounter, for both penitent and confessor to listen to the will of God, discovering what His plan may be, regardless of the form of the vocation. Indeed, the vocation does not coincide, nor can it ever coincide, with a form! This would lead to formalism! The vocation is the relationship itself with Jesus: a vital and indispensable relationship.

The categories that define the confessor correspond to reality: “doctor and judge”, “pastor and father”, “teacher and educator”. But especially for the youngest, the confessor is called to be above all a witness. Witness in the sense of “martyr”, called to suffer with brothers for their sins, like the Lord Jesus; and then a witness of mercy, of that heart of the Gospel which is the embrace of the Father to the prodigal son who returns home. The confessor-witness makes the experience of mercy more effective, opening up to the faithful a new and great horizon that only God can give to man.

Dear young priests, future priests and dear Penitentiaries, be witnesses of mercy, be humble listeners to the young and to God’s will for them, always be respectful towards the conscience and freedom of those who approach the confessional, because God Himself loves their freedom. And entrust penitents to she who is the refuge of sinners, and Mother of mercy.
