

PAPAL ADDRESS ON SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

"How Many Conversions ... Began in a Confessional"

Dear Friends,

I am very glad to address to each one of you my most cordial welcome. I greet Cardinal Fortunato Baldelli, Major Penitentiary, and I thank him for his courteous words. I greet Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, Regent of the Penitentiary, the personnel, the co-workers and all the participants in the Course on the Internal Forum which has now become a traditional appointment and an important occasion for deepening the knowledge of topics linked to the sacrament of Penance. I would like to reflect with you on an aspect not sufficiently thought about but which is of great spiritual and pastoral importance: the pedagogical value of Sacramental Confession.

Although it is true that it is always necessary to safeguard the objectivity of the effects of the sacrament and its correct celebration in accordance with the norms of the Rite of Penance, it is not out of place to reflect on how much it can educate the faith of both the minister and the penitent. The faithful and generous availability of priests to hear confessions - after the example of the great saints of the past from St John Mary Vianney to St John Bosco, from St Josemaría Escrivá to St Pius of Pietrelcina, from St Joseph Cafasso to St Leopold Mandi - shows all of us that the confessional may be a real "place" of sanctification.

How does the sacrament of Penance educate? In what sense does its celebration have pedagogical value, especially for ministers? We may start by recognizing that the mission of priests is a unique and privileged observation point, from which it is daily granted to contemplate the splendour of divine Mercy. How often in celebrating the sacrament of Penance the priest witnesses real miracles of conversion which, in renewing "the encounter with an event, a person" (Deus Caritas Est, n. 1), reinforces his own faith! Basically, hearing confession means witnessing as many *professiones fidei* as there are penitents, and contemplating the merciful God's action in history, feeling tangibly the saving effects of the Cross and of the Resurrection of Christ, in every epoch and for every person.

We are often faced with true and proper existential and spiritual dramas that find no answer in human words but are embraced and taken up by divine Love, which pardons and transforms: "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow (Is 1:18).

If, on the one hand knowing and, in a certain way, visiting the depths of the human heart, even its darkest aspects, tests the humanity and the faith of the priest himself, on the other, it fosters within him the certainty that it is God who has the last word over human evil and history, it is his Mercy which can make all things new (cf. Rev 21:5).

Then, how much the priest can learn from exemplary penitents: through their spiritual life, the seriousness with which they carry out their examination of conscience, the transparency with which they admit their sins and their docility to the Church's teaching and to the confessor's instructions.

From the administration of the sacrament of Penance we may draw profound lessons of humility and faith! It is a very strong appeal to each priest for knowledge of his own identity. We will never be able to hear the confessions of our brothers and sisters solely by virtue of our humanity! If they approach us, it is only because we are priests, configured to Christ the Eternal High Priest, and enabled to act in his Name and in his Person, to make God who forgives, renews and transforms, truly present. The celebration of the sacrament of Penance has a pedagogical value for the priest, as regards his faith, as well as the truth and poverty of his person, and nourishes within him an awareness of the sacramental identity.

What is the pedagogical value of the sacrament of Penance for penitents? We should state beforehand that first and foremost it depends on the action of Grace and on the objective effect on the soul of the member of the faithful. Of course, sacramental Reconciliation is one of the moments in which personal freedom and an awareness of self need to be expressed particularly clearly. It is perhaps also for this reason, in an epoch of relativism and of the consequent attenuated awareness of one's being, that this sacramental practice is also weakened.

Examination of conscience has an important pedagogical value. It teaches us how to look squarely at our life, to compare it with the truth of the Gospel and to evaluate it with parameters that are not only human but are also borrowed from divine Revelation. Comparison with the Commandments, with the Beatitudes and, especially, with the Precept of love, constitutes the first great "school of penance".

In our time, marked by noise, distraction and loneliness, the penitent's conversation with the confessor can be one of the few - if not the only - opportunities to be truly heard in depth.

Dear priests, do not neglect to allow enough room for the exercise of the ministry of Penance in the confessional: to be welcomed and heard is also a human sign of God's welcoming kindness to his children. Moreover the integral confession of sins teaches the penitent humility, recognition of his or her own frailty and, at the same time, an awareness of the need for God's forgiveness and the trust that divine Grace can transform his life. Likewise, listening to the confessor's recommendations and advice is important for judging actions, for the spiritual journey and for the inner healing of the penitent.

Let us not forget how many conversions and how many truly holy lives began in a confessional! The acceptance of the penance and listening to the words "I absolve you from your sins", are, lastly, a true school of love and hope that guides the person to full trust in the God Love, revealed in Jesus Christ, to responsibility and to the commitment to continuous conversion.

Dear priests, our own prior experience of divine Mercy and of being humble instruments teaches us an ever more faithful celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and profound gratitude to God who "gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18).

I entrust to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mater misericordiae and Refugium peccatorum, the fruits of your Course on the Internal Forum and the ministry of all Confessors, as I bless you all with great affection.