



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS AT THE COURSE ORGANIZED
BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY***

Paul VI Audience Hall

Friday, 29 March

2019[\[Multimedia\]](#)

Dear Brothers, Good morning!

I welcome you during this time of Lent, on the occasion of the course on the Internal Forum, which this year is in its 30th edition.

And I would like to add — beyond the text — a word on the term “internal forum”. This is not a trivial expression: it is stated seriously. The internal forum is an internal forum, and it cannot go “outside”. And I say this because I have noticed that some groups in the Church, representatives, superiors — let us put it this way — blend the two things and take from the internal forum to make decisions in the external one, and vice versa. Please, this is a sin! It is a sin against the dignity of the person who trusts the priest, and who expresses his or own situation to ask for forgiveness, and then this is used to organize matters for a group or a movement, perhaps — I don’t know, I am improvising — perhaps even a new congregation, I don’t know. But the internal forum is an internal forum. And it is a sacred thing. I wanted to say this because I am concerned about this.

I offer a cordial greeting to Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, Major Penitentiary, and I thank him for the kind words he addressed to me. With him, I also greet the entire family of the Apostolic Penitentiary.

The importance of the “ministry of mercy” justifies, demands and almost imposes upon us an adequate formation, so that the encounter with the faithful who ask for God’s forgiveness may always be a true encounter of salvation, in which the Lord’s embrace may be perceived in all its strength, capable of changing, converting, healing and forgiving.

Thirty years of experience are not many for your Course on the Sacramental Internal Forum, when one considers the Church's long history and the "ancient history" of the Apostolic Penitentiary, which is the most age-old Tribunal at the service of the Pope: a tribunal of mercy! And I am very pleased that it is so.

Nevertheless, 30 years, in this time of ours, which rushes by so quickly, are a sufficient length of time to be able to reflect and take stock. Moreover, the very high number of participants — this year, more than 700! The cardinal said that he had to discontinue enrolment for logistical reasons! It seems a jest that there is no room in the Vatican! It seems a jest! It indicates how dire the need is for formation and security, with regard to matters that are so important for the very life of the Church and for the fulfillment of the mission that the Lord Jesus has entrusted to her.

While it is held by many that Confession, and with it the sense of sin, is in crisis — and we cannot fail to recognize a certain difficulty of contemporary man in this regard — this abundant participation of priests, newly ordained and ordinands, testifies to the continuing interest in working together to face and overcome the crisis, primarily with "weapons of faith", and by offering an ever more qualified service capable of truly manifesting the beauty of the Divine Mercy.

Jesus came to save us by revealing the merciful face of God and drawing us to him with his loving Sacrifice. Thus, we must always remember that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a true and proper path to holiness; it is the compelling sign that Jesus left to the Church so that the door of the Father's house would always remain open and thus, that men could always return to him.

Sacramental Confession is the path to holiness both for the penitent and for the confessor. And you, dear young confessors, will soon experience this.

For the penitent it is clearly the path to holiness, because, as emphasized many times during the recent Jubilee of Mercy, validly celebrated sacramental absolution restores to us baptismal innocence, full communion with God. That communion that God never interrupts toward man but from which, at times, man removes himself by misusing the wonderful gift of freedom.

"Reconciliation, sister of Baptism" is the motto chosen for this year's meeting with the priests of my diocese. The Sacrament of Penance is the "brother" of Baptism. For us priests, the fourth sacrament is the path of holiness, first of all when, like all sinners, we humbly kneel before the confessor and implore Divine Mercy for ourselves. Before going to the confessional, let us always remember — and this will help us a great deal — that first we are forgiven sinners, and only afterwards ministers of forgiveness.

Moreover — and this is one of the many gifts that Christ's preferential love holds for us — as confessors we have the privilege of continually contemplating the "miracles" of conversions. We must always recognize the powerful action of grace, which is capable of transforming a stony heart

into a heart of flesh (cf. Ez 11:19), of changing a far-fled sinner into a repentant son who returns to his father's house (cf. Lk 15:11-32).

For this reason, with this Course on the Internal Forum, the Penitentiary offers an important ecclesial service, favouring the necessary formation for a correct and effective celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, an indispensable prerequisite for its fruitfulness. This is because every single Confession is always a new and definitive step towards a more perfect sanctification; a tender embrace, full of mercy, which helps expand the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of love, truth and peace.

Reconciliation itself is a benefit that the wisdom of the Church has always safeguarded with all her moral and legal might, with the sacramental seal. Although it is not always understood by the modern mentality, it is indispensable for the sanctity of the sacrament and for the freedom of conscience of the penitent, who must be certain, at any time, that the sacramental conversation will remain within the secrecy of the confessional, between one's conscience that opens to grace, and God, with the necessary mediation of the priest. The sacramental seal is indispensable and no human power has jurisdiction over it, nor can lay any claim to it.

Dear young priests, future priests, dear Penitentiaries, I urge you to always listen with great generosity to the Confessions of the faithful. It requires patience, but always with an open heart, with a Father's Spirit. I urge you to walk with them on the *path to holiness* which is the sacrament, to contemplate the "miracles" of conversion that grace works in the secret of confessionals, miracles that only you and the angels will witness. And may you sanctify yourself above all, in the humble and faithful exercise of the ministry of Reconciliation.

Thank you for your service! And remember to pray for me too. Thank you.