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Audience with participants in the 32nd Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Paul VI Hall, the participants in the 32nd Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary.

The following is the Pope's address to those in attendance:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers, good morning and welcome!

I am glad to meet you on the occasion of the annual Course on the Internal Forum, organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary, which has now reached its thirty-second edition. They are consistent, these, they are consistent. Well done!

I greet Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, Major Penitentiary, and I give him my heartfelt thanks for his words of introduction. 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 the course. There are many of you – around eight hundred clerics! This is a good sign, because today there is a widespread mentality that struggles to understand the supernatural dimension, or would even prefer to deny it. There is always, always the temptation to reduce it. Confession is a dialogue. And dialogue cannot be reduced to three or four pieces of psychological advice to go ahead, this means taking away from the Sacrament its Sacramental essence.

It may do good, not only for you, but for all priests confessors, perhaps taking advantage of the Lenten season, to reread and meditate on the *Note on the Internal Forum and the inviolability of the sacramental seal*, published by the Apostolic Penitentiary in 2019. It touches on aspects of great topicality, and above all helps us to rediscover how precious and necessary, even in our day, the ministry of Reconciliation is, which makes visible and realizes God's mercy, it realizes it.

In a recent interview, using an unusual expression, I stated that “forgiveness is a human right”. We all have the right to be forgiven. All of us. Indeed, it is what the heart of every man longs for most deeply, because, ultimately, to be forgiven means to be loved for what we are, despite our limitations and our sins. And forgiveness is a “right” in the sense that God, in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, has given it in a total and irreversible way to every person willing to accept it, with a humble and repentant heart. By generously dispensing God’s forgiveness, we confessors collaborate in the healing of people and the world; we cooperate in the realization of that love and peace for which every human heart yearns so intensely; with forgiveness we contribute, if I may say so, to a spiritual “ecology” of the world.

I would like to offer you some points for reflection and for reviewing life, based on three key words: *acceptance*, *listening*, and *accompaniment*. Acceptance, listening, and accompaniment. Three essential dimensions of the confessor’s ministry; three faces of love, to which we must add the joy that always accompanies it.

Acceptance must be the first characteristic of the confessor. It is what helps the penitent to approach the Sacrament with the right spirit, not to remain withdrawn into himself and his own sin, but to open himself to the fatherhood of God, to the gift of Grace. Acceptance is the measure of pastoral charity, which you have matured on the path of formation to the priesthood and which is rich in fruits both for the penitent and for the confessor himself, who experiences his paternity, like the father of the prodigal son, full of joy at the return of his son. Do we have this welcome and this joy? The serenity of a confessor who knows how to welcome, day and night – “Please sit down” – and lets people talk. Creating an atmosphere of peace, even of joy.

The second element is *listening*. To listen – we know – is more than hearing. It demands an inner disposition composed of attention, willingness, and patience. One must set aside one’s own thoughts, one’s own mindsets, to open the mind and the heart truly to listening. If, while the other person is speaking, you are thinking of what to say, how to answer, then you are not listening to him or her, but to yourself. It is a bad habit: the confessor who listens to himself. “What shall I say?”. He comes out purified, but do you? You come out of it a sinner, because you do not fulfil your service of listening in order to forgive. In some confessions, it is necessary to say nothing, or almost nothing – I mean in terms of advice or exhortation – but merely to listen and forgive. Listening is a form of love that makes the other person feel truly loved.

And another thing I would like to say about listening: please remove all curiosity. Sometimes there are penitents who are ashamed of what they are saying: they don’t know how to say it, but perhaps they give a sign. The Major Penitentiary taught us a good thing: when we understand, say, “I understand, go ahead, one more thing...”. Save the pain of saying the things they don’t know how to say, and don’t fall into the curiosity of asking, “And how was it? And how many times?” Please! You are not a torturer, you are a loving father. Curiosity is of the devil. “No, I have to know in order to evaluate whether I forgive...”. If Jesus were to treat you like that!

And now often does the confession of the penitent also become an examination of conscience for the confessor! It has happened to me, and to you too, I am sure. Faced with certain faithful souls, we ask ourselves: do I have this awareness of the living Jesus Christ? Do I have this charity towards others? Do I have this capacity to question myself? Listening implies a sort of emptying: emptying myself of my ego in order to welcome the other. It is an act of faith in the power of God, and in the task that the Lord has entrusted to us. It is only by faith that brothers and sisters open their hearts to the confessor; therefore, they have the right to be heard with faith, and with that charity which the Father reserves for his children. And this generates joy!

The third key word is *accompaniment*. The confessor does not decide in place of the faithful: he is not the master of the conscience of the other. The confessor simply accompanies, with all the prudence, discernment and charity he is capable of, in recognition of the truth and the will of God in the concrete experience of the penitent. At times, it means saying a word or two, but the right ones, and not giving a Sunday sermon. The penitent wants to leave as soon as possible, this is clear. Say the right thing to accompany him or her, always. It is always necessary to distinguish the discussion of the confession itself, bound by the seal, from the dialogue of spiritual accompaniment, which is also confidential, albeit in a different form.

And on this I would like to clarify something. I have realized that a relativization of the sacramental seal is

creeping into some groups, some associations. For example, they say: the seal is for the sin, but then everything that comes after the sin or before the sin, you can say. No! And there are some groups that support this; and then the confessor tells the superiors the other things. No. The seal is from the time you begin to the time you end. But if in the middle you talked about that thing...? Nothing, everything is under seal. To be sure about that, I want all the confessors to be specialists in listening. What if something came out that even the penitent would like to be known? You have to ask permission about what you said in confession, "Tell me again or tell me if I can talk about it". Be clear. Some theologians may say, "But that's not the case, it's broader". It is common doctrine - at least in this Pontificate! - that the seal applies from the initial moment to the end. And this is the doctrine to be followed, without entering into these nuances of "from here to there", which then serve only to govern badly.

The confessor always has as his objective the universal call to holiness (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 39-42), and discreetly accompanies one to it. Accompanying means taking care of the other person, walking together with him or her. It is not enough to indicate a destination if one is not willing to walk even a short distance together. However, brief the confessional conversation may be, from a few details one can already understand the needs of the brother or sister: we are required to respond to them, accompanying them above all to the understanding and acceptance of God's will, which is always the way of the greatest good, the way of joy and peace.

Dear brothers, I thank the Lord with you for the ministry you perform, or which will soon be entrusted to you – because there are some deacons here – a ministry in the service of the sanctification of the faithful People of God. And you too, please, confess. You go to ask for forgiveness for your sins, don't you? This is very healthy. It is good for us as confessors to do so. I recommend that you willingly inhabit the confessional, that you welcome, listen, and accompany, in the knowledge that everyone, truly everyone, is in need of forgiveness, that is, feeling beloved as children of God the Father. The words we pronounce: "I absolve you of your sins", mean also that "you, brother, sister, are precious to God; it is good that you are". And this is a powerful medicine for the soul, and also for the psyche of every person.

And I would like to return to a detail that I hinted at earlier. Two testimonies. The detail I mentioned regarded the difficulty of recounting one's sins, and so the penitent says a small part, but we understand that it is larger. So, we must stop, and not torture the penitent. "I understand, go on": "But I must, I am a judge, I must judge". Have you understood? Forgive what you have understood. Period. At times it is true that it is a judgement, but of mercy. There is a beautiful pop opera that was done three or four years ago, one of those groups of musicians from the youth of today, with this music that I don't understand, but they say it's very good. It is an opera about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. After the whole story, in the final part, the son, poor, already soiled by many sins, by many things, even defeated by all those things, feels the need to return to his Father, and says to a friend: "But I do not know if my father will receive me...". And they sing this, "Will he receive me? will he receive me?...". The friend advises: "Send a letter to your father and say: 'Father, I want to repent and tell you to your face, but I am afraid to come to you, if you will be able to receive me or not... I want to come only to ask for forgiveness, I do not deserve to call myself your son, just this'. And following his friend's advice, he wrote: "If you are willing to do this, please put a white handkerchief in the window, so that when I approach home, I will see the handkerchief and come. If I don't see the handkerchief I will go back". He continues the work and then the last act is when the son enters the road leading to the house. He looks at the house: it is covered with white handkerchiefs, full of them! That is, the Mercy of God has no limits. The mercy of a confessor should be the same. Think of the white handkerchiefs! This is beautiful, I liked it.

Then, two testimonies from two confessors I knew. One of them, good, a Sacramentine, a good boy who died at 92 years of age! He was confessor to all the clergy of Buenos Aires. Everyone used to go to him, all the laypeople ... that was how he was. A great confessor. Also as provincial – he was the provincial of his Order – he always found a place in that Basilica where he lived, to confess. When I was provincial, I went to confess to him – so as not to confess to a Jesuit, so they wouldn't know things – he always said, "All right, all right... go ahead!" And he forgave you. One Easter Sunday – I was already vicar general – I went down to the secretariat to see if any faxes had arrived – at that time there was no email yet – and I saw a fax from 23.30, right before the beginning of the Easter Vigil: "At 20.30 Father Aristi died, at 93 years of age". I used to go to lunch with the priests of the rest home, at Easter and at Christmas, and I thought: after lunch I will go there. And so, I did. I went into the Basilica, and there was nobody there, there was the open coffin. Two little old ladies there praying

the Rosary. I approached the coffin. No flowers. "But you who forgave everyone's sins...like this?". I went out, went to the street, where there were florists, I bought some flowers, and I came back. And when I was arranging the flowers, I saw the Rosary and I had a great temptation and I gave in: I stole the Rosary Crucifix from him. He left without the Crucifix. At that moment I said, "Give me half of your mercy", thinking of Elijah and Elisha and that whole story. I asked him for that grace. And I carry that cross in here, always with me, and I ask the Lord to give me mercy. I would like to share that.

The other story is about a Capuchin, 96 years, a great confessor. He continues to do so! He is at the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii in Buenos Aires. There is always a line outside the confessional: laymen, laywomen, priests, bishops, religious sisters, young people, the elderly, poor, rich, everyone. A true river of people. And this man came to see me here, at the beginning of my Pontificate, because he had a conference. This man, when I was archbishop, and he was 86 or 87 years old at the time, came to see me and said, "Take away this torment that I have" – "Why?" – "But you know that I always forgive, I forgive everything, I forgive too much" – "That is why people come to you" – "Yes, but at times I have qualms" – "And tell me, what do you do when you feel qualms about forgiving too much?" – "I go to the chapel and I ask the Lord for forgiveness, and I say, 'Lord, pardon me, today I have forgiven too much'. But then I immediately feel something within: 'But be careful Lord, because you are the one who set me a bad example!'".

These are stories of great confessors. I saw the Superior General of the Capuchins, a few months ago, and he said to me, "Tell me, Holy Father, if you need me to, I can bring your friend the confessor here". As you know, even the Pope needs to be forgiven for bad things he cannot tell others. A good thing, a good witness. You have before you the witness of great confessors, of those who know how to forgive well, with a sense of the Church, with justice, but with great love. With great love.

The Jubilee of 2025 is approaching. I take this opportunity to invite from now on the Penitentiary, to whose care is entrusted, so to speak, the "deepest core" of every Jubilee, to arrange, in agreement with the other bodies concerned, whatever is necessary to make the coming Holy Year as fruitful as possible. And I encourage you to use all the creativity that the Spirit suggests, so that God's mercy may reach everywhere and to everyone: forgiveness and indulgence!

And thank you for your service to the divine Mercy, under the sweet protection of Mary, Refuge of Sinners. She is the Mother, and she always tries to save her children. When you have any doubt, think of the Mother, as the legend says in the country of the so-called "Madonna dei Mandarini", also nicknamed the patroness of thieves. In southern Italy there is a legend that says that Our Lady forgives everything, and if they pray to Our Lady, she will save them. And it is said that from the window Our Lady watches the line of people in front of the gate to Heaven. And Saint Peter judges who will enter and who will not enter. And when Our Lady sees one of her devotees, she makes a sign to them to hide, because Saint Peter definitely will not let them in. And then, later, when dusk comes, before nightfall, Our Lady lets them in through the window. Pray to Our Lady to give you this paternal, and also maternal heart, to forgive and integrate people into the Church. She is the refuge of sinners. I bless you all from my heart. And please remember to pray for me as well, because I have to confess today too. Thank you!
