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Audience with the Community of the College of Vatican Penitentiaries

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Community of Vatican Penitentiaries on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the entrustment of the Ministry of Confessions in Saint Peter's Basilica to the Friars Minor Conventual.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope to those present at the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, Your Eminence, good morning!

I greet Fr. Vincenzo Cosatti and all of you. I am happy to meet you on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the entrustment to the *Friars Minor Conventual* of the ministry of Confessions in Saint Peter's Basilica (cf. Clement XIV, *Motu proprio Miserator Dominus*, 10 August 1774). Clement XIV did this, perhaps one of the good things he did. But, poor man, the other things he did were inspired by that friar of yours, Bontempi, whom I believe is still in hell [*laughter*], but I am not sure. When Clement XVI died, Bontempi sought refuge in the Spanish Embassy, because he was afraid. After a few months had passed, when there was peace, he went to the General and said: "Father General, I am bringing three Bulls here. [In exchange I ask] first, that I may have money – a Franciscan! –; second, that I may live outside the community; and third, that I may travel where I please". And the General, a wise Conventual, took the Bulls: "But, dear man, one is missing". "Which one, Father?". "The one that will guarantee the salvation of your soul!". This is historic, because he had deceived Pope Ganganelli with all these things. Bontempi was wily!

Every day Saint Peter's Basilica is visited by more than forty thousand people, every day! Many come from far away and face journeys, expenses and long queues to be able to arrive; others come for tourism, the majority. But among them, very many come to pray at the tomb of the First of the Apostles, to confirm their faith and their communion with the Church, to entrust dear intentions to the Lord, or to take vows. Others, even of different faiths, enter it as "tourists", attracted by the beauty, the history, the charm of the art. But in everyone there is one

great quest, conscious or unconscious: the quest for God, Beauty and eternal Goodness, whose desire lives and pulsates in every heart of man and woman living in this world. The desire for God.

And your presence in this context is important. For the faithful and pilgrims, because it enables them to encounter the Lord of mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Dear friends, forgive everything, everything, everything. Do it always: forgive everything! We are here to forgive, there will be someone else to quarrel! And for all the others, because it bears witness before them that the Church welcomes them first of all as a community of the saved, forgiven, who believe, hope and love in the light and with the strength of God's tenderness. Let us therefore pause a moment to reflect on the ministry you carry out, emphasizing three particular aspects: *humility*, *listening* and *mercy*.

First: *humility*. This is taught to us by the Apostle Peter, the forgiven disciples, who goes so far as to shed his blood in martyrdom only after having wept humbly for his own sins (*Lk 22:56-62*). He reminds us that every Apostle – and every Penitentiary – bears the treasure of grace that is dispensed in an earthen vessel, “to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (*2 Cor 4:7*). Therefore, dear brothers, to be good confessors, let us be the first to “allow ourselves to be penitents in search of his mercy” (Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 17), diffusing beneath the imposing vaults of the Vatican Basilica the perfume of a humble prayer, that implores and begs for mercy.

Second, *listening*, for everyone and especially for the young and the small. It is the witness of Peter the shepherd, who walks among his flock and who grows in listening to the Spirit through the voice of his brethren (*Acts*, 10:34-48). Indeed, listening is not merely hearing what people say, but first of all welcoming their words as a gift of God for their conversion, docilely, like clay in the potter's hands (cf. *Is 64:7*). It will be good for us, in this regard, never to forget that “By truly listening to a brother or sister in the sacramental dialogue, we listen to Jesus himself, poor and humble ... we become hearers of the Word” (*Address to participants in the Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary*, 9 March 2018), and that only in this way can we hope to offer them the greatest service: that of putting them “in contact with Jesus” (*ivi*). Listen, without asking too many questions; do not be a psychiatrist, please: listen, always listen, meekly. And when you see that a penitent starts to get into difficulty, because he or she is ashamed, say “I understand”; I haven't understood anything, but I understand; God understands and that is the important thing. This was taught to me by a great Cardinal penitentiary: “I understand”, the Lord has understood. But please do not be a psychiatrist: the less you speak, the better. Listen, console and forgive. You are there to forgive!

Finally, the third: *mercy*. As dispensers of God's forgiveness, it is important to be “men of mercy”, cheerful men, generous, ready to understand and to console, in words and in attitudes. Here too Peter is an example to us, with his discourses full of forgiveness (cf. *Acts*, 3:12-20). The confessor – an earthen vessel, as we have said – has a sole medicine to pour on the wounds of his brethren: God's mercy. These three aspects of God: closeness, mercy and compassion. The confessor must be close, merciful and compassionate. When a confessor starts to ask... no, you are acting like a psychiatrist, stop, please. This was taught by Saint Leopold Mandić, who liked to repeat: “Why should we humiliate the most the souls who come to prostrate themselves at our feet? Are they not already humiliated enough? Did Jesus perhaps humiliate the publican, the adulteress, the Magdalene?” and he added, “And if the Lord were to reproach me for being too lenient, I would be able to say, ‘Blessed Father, you set a bad example to me, dying on the cross for our souls, moved by your divine charity’” (cf. Lorenzo da Fara, *Leopold Mandić. L'umanità la santità*, Velar, 1989). May the Lord give us the grace to be able to repeat the same words!

Several times I have told the story of that Capuchin who was a confessor in Buenos Aires – I don't know if I have told you this – I made him Cardinal, not this time, the other. He is 96 years old and continues to confess; I went to him, he forgives everything! Once he came to tell me that he was afraid he had forgiven too much. “And what will you do?”, I asked him. “I will go before the Lord: Lord, will you forgive me? I am sorry, I have forgiven too much! But, mind, it was you who gave me the bad example!”. Always forgive, everything and without asking too much. And if I do not understand? God understands, keep going! Let them feel mercy.

Dear brothers, thank you for your service, for your assiduity and patience, for your fidelity! My confessor died a

few months ago, I go to confess to you, at Saint Peter's. You do well! Thank you for being, in the heart of the Church, ministers of the sacramental presence of God-Love. Continue your ministry in this way: in *humility* – I am worse than you; in *listening*, and not so much in asking questions; and in *mercy*.

Please, do not forget to pray for me. And every time I come to you, forgive me, you understand.
