

Papal Address on Internal Forum

"It Is Necessary to Turn to the Confessional"

VATICAN CITY, MARCH 11, 2010 (Zenit.org).- Here is a translation of the address Benedict XVI delivered today upon receiving in audience participants in the course on the internal forum promoted by the Apostolic Penitentiary.

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Dear Friends,

I am happy to meet with you and to address to each one of you my welcome, on the occasion of the annual course on the internal forum, organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary. I cordially greet Archbishop Fortunato Baldelli, who, for the first time as Major Penitentiary, has led your study sessions and thank him for the words he addressed to me. With him I greet Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, regent, the staff of the Penitentiary and all of you who, with your participation in this initiative, manifest the strong need to reflect further on an essential subject for the ministry and life of presbyters.

Your course is placed, providentially, in the Year for Priests, which I proclaimed for the 150th anniversary of the birth in heaven of St. John Mary Vianney, who exercised in a heroic and fruitful way the ministry of reconciliation. As stated in the letter of proclamation: "All of us priests must hear those words which regard us personally that he (the Curé d'Ars) put in Christ's mouth: 'I will charge my ministers with proclaiming to sinners, whom I am always ready to receive, that my Mercy is infinite.' From the Holy Curé d'Ars we priests can learn not only an inexhaustible trust in the sacrament of penance, which drives us to put it at the center of our pastoral concerns, but also the method of the 'dialogue of salvation' that should be carried out in it."

Where do the roots of heroism and fruitfulness sink, with which St. John Mary Vianney lived his own ministry of confessor? First of all in an intense personal penitential dimension. The awareness of one's own limits and the need to take recourse to Divine Mercy to ask for pardon, to convert the heart and to be sustained on the path of sanctity, are essential in the life of the priest: Only one who has first experienced its greatness can be a convinced herald and administrator of the Mercy of God. Every priest becomes minister of penance by his ontological configuration to Christ, High and Eternal Priest, who reconciles humanity with the Father; however, fidelity in administering the sacrament of reconciliation is entrusted to the responsibility of the presbyter.

We live in a cultural context marked by a hedonistic and relativistic mentality, which tends to cancel God from the horizon of life, does not favor the acquisition of a clear picture of values of reference and does not help to discern good from the evil and to mature a correct sense of sin. This situation makes even more urgent the service of administrators of Divine Mercy.

We must not forget, in fact, that there is a sort of vicious circle between obfuscation of the experience of God and the loss of the sense of sin. However, if we look at the cultural context in which St. John Mary Vianney lived, we see that, in several aspects, it was not so dissimilar from ours. Also in his time, in fact, a hostile mentality to faith existed, expressed by forces that sought actually to impede the exercise of the ministry. In such circumstances, the Holy Curé d'Ars made "the church his home," to lead men to God. He lived radically the spirit of prayer, the personal and intimate relationship with Christ, the celebration of Mass, Eucharistic adoration and evangelical poverty, appearing to his contemporaries as such an evident sign of the presence of God, as to drive so many penitents to approach his confessional.

In the conditions of liberty in which it is possible to exercise today the priestly ministry, it is necessary that the presbyters live in a "lofty way" their own response to their vocation, because only one who becomes every day the living and clear presence of the Lord can arouse in the faithful the sense of sin, give courage and have the desire born for the forgiveness of God.

Dear brothers, it is necessary to turn to the confessional, as place in which to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, but also as place in which to "dwell" more often, so that the faithful can find mercy, counsel and comfort, feel loved and understood by God and experience the presence of Divine Mercy, close to the real Presence in the Eucharist.

The "crisis" of the Sacrament of Penance, so often talked about, is a question that faces first of all priests and their great responsibility to educate the People of God to the radical demands of the Gospel. In particular, it asks them to dedicate themselves generously to the listening of sacramental confessions; to guide the flock with courage, so that it will not be conformed to the mentality of this world (cf. Romans 12:2), but will be able to make choices also against the current, avoiding accommodations and compromises. Because of this it is important that the priest have a permanent ascetic tension, nourished by communion with God, and that he dedicate himself to a constant updating in the study of moral theology and of human sciences.

St. John Mary Vianney was able to establish with penitents a real and proper "dialogue of salvation," showing the beauty and greatness of the Lord's goodness and arousing that desire for God and heaven, of which the saints are the first bearers. He affirmed: "The good God knows everything. Before you even confess, he knows that you will sin again and yet he forgives you. How great is the love of our God, which drives him to willingly forget the future, so as to forgive us" (Monnin A., "Il Curato d'Ars. Vita di Gian-Battista-Maria Vianney," Vol. 1, Turin, 1870, p. 130).

It is the priest's task to foster that experience of "dialogue of salvation," which, born of the certainty of being loved by God, helps man to acknowledge his own sin and to introduce himself, progressively, into that stable dynamic of conversion of heart, which leads to the radical renunciation of evil and to a life according to God (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1431).

Dear priests, what an extraordinary ministry the Lord has entrusted to us! As in the Eucharistic Celebration he puts himself in the hands of the priest to continue to be present in the midst of his people, similarly, in the sacrament of reconciliation he entrusts himself to the priest so that men will have the experience of the embrace with which the Father receives the prodigal son, restoring him the filial dignity and reconstituting him fully heir (cf. Luke 15:11-32).

May the Virgin Mary and the Holy Curé d'Ars help us to experience in our life the breadth, the length, the height and the depth of the Love of God (cf. Ephesians 3:18-19), to be faithful and generous administrators. My heartfelt thanks to all of you to whom I willingly impart my blessing.