



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE COURSE ORGANIZED BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY

*To my Venerable Brother
Cardinal James Francis Stafford
Major Penitentiary*

This year I once again gladly address you with affection, Your Eminence, and the dear participants taking the Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary and which is now being held for the 20th time. I greet you all with affection, starting with you, venerable Brother. I extend my grateful thoughts to the Regent, to the personnel of the Penitentiary, to the organizers of this meeting as well as to the Religious of the various orders who administer the sacrament of Penance in the Papal Basilicas of Rome.

Your praiseworthy pastoral project that is attracting ever more interest and attention, as the number of enrolments testifies, is a specialized seminar for pastoral updating. Its results do not culminate only in one special publication like the Acts of other congresses but serve as useful guidelines that help the participants provide adequate responses to those they meet in the administration of the sacrament of Penance. These days, the correct formation of believers' consciences is without a doubt one of the pastoral priorities because, unfortunately, as I have reaffirmed on other occasions, to the extent that the sense of sin is lost, feelings of guilt increase which people seek to eliminate by recourse to inadequate palliative remedies. The many invaluable spiritual and pastoral tools that contribute to the formation of consciences should be increasingly developed. Among these I limit myself today to highlighting briefly catechesis, preaching, the homily, spiritual direction, the sacrament of Reconciliation and the celebration of the Eucharist.

First of all, catechesis. Like all the sacraments, the sacrament of Penance too requires catechesis beforehand and a mystagogical catechesis for a deeper knowledge of the sacrament: "*per ritus et*

preces" as the Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of the *Second Vatican Council* clearly underlines (cf. n. 48). Proper catechesis makes a practical contribution to the education of peoples' consciences by leading them to perceive ever better the sense of sin which today has faded somewhat or, even worse, is obscured by a way of thinking and living "*etsi Deus non daretur*", according to the well known words of Grotius that are back in vogue and that infer a relativism closed to the true meaning of life.

Catechesis should be combined with a wise use of preaching, which has had different forms in the Church's history according to the mentality and pastoral needs of the faithful. Today too, our communities employ various types of communication that increasingly use the latest telematic instruments at our disposal. In fact, if on the one hand today's media are a challenge to be reckoned with, on the other they afford providential opportunities for announcing in a new way that is closer to contemporary sensibilities the perennial and immutable words of truth which the divine Teacher has entrusted to his Church. The homily, thanks to the reform desired by the Second Vatican Council, has recovered its "sacramental" role in the only act of worship constituted by the liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 56). It is without a doubt the most widespread form of preaching used to teach the consciences of millions of the faithful every Sunday. At the recent Synod of Bishops, dedicated precisely to The Word of God in the Church, some Synod Fathers appropriately insisted on the value of the homily and the importance of adapting it to suit the contemporary mindset.

"Spiritual direction" also contributes to forming consciences. Today there is a greater need than in the past for wise and holy "spiritual teachers": an important ecclesial service. This of course requires an inner vitality which must be implored as a gift from the Holy Spirit in intense and prolonged prayer and with a special training that must be acquired with care. Every priest moreover is called to administer divine mercy in the sacrament of Penance, through which he forgives sins in the name of Christ and helps the penitent to walk on the demanding path of holiness with an upright and informed conscience. To be able to carry out this indispensable ministry, every priest must tend to his own spiritual life and take care to keep himself pastorally and theologically up to date. Lastly, the believer's conscience is increasingly refined by means of a devout and attentive participation in Holy Mass, which is the sacrifice of Christ for the remission of sins. Every time the priest celebrates the Eucharist, he recalls in the Eucharistic Prayer that the Blood of Christ was poured out for the forgiveness of our sins which is why the Father's merciful encounter with each one of us is fulfilled in sacramental participation in the commemoration of the sacrifice of the Cross.

I urge the participants in the Course to treasure all they have learned about the sacrament of Penance. In the different contexts in which they will live and work, may they succeed in keeping ever alive within them the knowledge that they must be worthy "ministers" of divine mercy and responsible educators of consciences. May they be inspired by the example of holy confessors and spiritual teachers, among whom I would like to remember in particular the Curé d'Ars, St John

Mary Vianney, the 150th anniversary of whose death we are commemorating precisely this year. It was written of him that "he guided the parish entrusted to him wonderfully for more than 40 years... with diligent preaching, prayer and a life of penance. Every day, in the catecheses that he imparted to children and adults, in the reconciliation he administered to penitents and in his works imbued with that ardent love which he drew from the Blessed Eucharist as though from a spring, he advanced so far that he disseminated his advice everywhere and wisely brought a large number to God" (*Martyrology*, 4 August). Here is a model to look to and a protector to call upon every day.

Lastly, the Virgin Mary watches over the priestly ministry of each one. In the Season of Lent we invoke and honour her as the "Disciple of the Lord" and "Mother of reconciliation". With these sentiments, as I urge each one of you to devote himself with commitment to the ministry of Confession and to spiritual direction, I impart my heartfelt Blessing to you, venerable Brother, to all those attending the Course and to their loved ones.

From the Vatican, 12 March 2009

BENEDICTUS XVI