



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE COURSE ON THE INTERNAL FORUM  
ORGANIZED BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

*To my Venerable Brother William W. Baum  
Major Penitentiary*

1. I thank the Lord that in this year 1998, dedicated to meditating on and invoking the Holy Spirit in preparation for the Great Jubilee, I am again able to address this Message to Your Eminence, to the prelates and officials of the Apostolic Penitentiary, to the Friars Minor, the Friars Minor Conventual, the Dominicans and the Benedictines who serve as confessors respectively in the Archbasilicas of the Lateran, the Vatican, St Mary Major and St Paul-Outside-the-Walls, and to those from various orders serving as extraordinary confessors in the same basilicas, as well as to the young priests and the candidates soon to receive priestly ordination who have taken advantage of the course on the internal forum organized and conducted by the Apostolic Penitentiary, with an increasing number of participants.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to the Lord, the Father of mercies, in the words of the liturgy: "*We give you thanks for your great glory*". We praise and thank the Lord because he works all things for his glory, which his holiness cannot renounce: "*My glory I will not give to another*" (Is 48:11), and by which he orders all things for our salvation: "*For us men and for our salvation*".

God's salvific will, which is the splendour of his glory, is carried out in a preeminent way in the sacramental ministry of Reconciliation, which is the primary objective of the daily service provided by the Penitentiary and the father confessors, and which is the prospective service for which our dear young deacons have been thoroughly prepared, with respect to the internal forum, in the annual course just mentioned.

Given the variety of backgrounds, responsibilities and assignments they represent, my reflection, which will once again take the sacrament of mercy for its theme, is addressed not only to them, but is meant for all the Church's priests, as ministers, and for all the faithful, as beneficiaries, of the forgiveness imparted in sacramental confession.

2. Since 1981, when for the first time I collectively received the Penitentiary and the father confessors (since 1990 they have been joined by those taking the internal forum course), I progressively considered various aspects of the sacrament of Penance: the sacrament itself, its constitutive and disciplinary norms, its strictly sacramental and its ascetical effects, and the duties of satisfaction and reparation that it requires of the faithful. I then examined the task of priests as ministers of the sacrament, recalling the loftiness of their mission, their special qualities and their duty to be intellectually well-prepared, to make themselves generously available and, especially, to practise an inviting charity, wisdom and gentleness, virtues which are all rewarded with spiritual joy over the holiness of their office. Lastly, I dealt with the faithful as recipients of the sacrament from the standpoint of the convictions and dispositions they should have in approaching the sacrament itself, both the habitual nature of their moral world, and their present attitude in receiving it, so that it may be valid and most fruitful.

This intentional insistence on the same theme in itself already indicates how the sacrament of Reconciliation is such a great concern for the Supreme Pontiff and his brothers in the priesthood because of their office as mediators in Christ between God and men.

Today is an appropriate time to consider: the specific goals which the Church intends to pursue and which the faithful must set for themselves in receiving the sacrament of Penance; connected with these goals, or rather as particularly gratifying aspects of these essential purposes of the sacrament, the benefits of interior harmony which flow from grace; and finally, certain results which are subjectively intended by those receiving or administering the sacrament (or are suggested to them by authors who should be disregarded) but which lie outside its supernatural dynamic, including at times the introduction of practices that distort and desecrate the rite, which should be essentially and exclusively religious.

3. The Fathers and theologians have rightly called the sacrament of Penance, among other things, a *second plank after shipwreck*, i.e., second with respect to Baptism. Sin is the shipwreck from which Baptism and Penance save us. Baptism takes away original sin and, if received in adulthood, also takes away personal sins and all the punishment due to them: it is birth, absolute newness of life, in the supernatural order. The sacrament of Penance is meant to take away personal sins committed after Baptism: first of all mortal sins, then venial. If the penitent has committed more than one mortal sin, they can only be remitted all at once. In fact, the remission of serious sin consists in the infusion of the sanctifying grace which has been lost, and grace is incompatible with any and every serious sin. Venial sins are to be regarded differently; they do not entail the loss of grace and can thus coexist with the state of grace. Therefore it is possible for

them not to be remitted because they were not sufficiently detested by the penitent, even on the supposition that mortal sins were remitted by sacramental absolution. Obviously, the faithful who approach the sacrament of Penance also wish to receive the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, even if they are not necessarily taking this punishment into explicit consideration. We must remember in this regard the truth of faith about purgatory, where atonement is made for the temporal punishment remaining after entering eternity. But the sacrament of Penance contains in itself, precisely because it imparts or increases supernatural grace, the power of spurring the faithful to practise fervent charity, to perform the resulting good works and to accept devoutly the sorrows of life, which also merit the remission of temporal punishment.

In this respect the truth of faith and the practice of indulgences are closely connected with the sacrament of Penance. An indulgence is actually the remission before God of the temporal punishment for sins the guilt of which has already been forgiven. Under specific conditions, a properly disposed member of the faithful obtains it with the help of the Church, which, as the minister of Redemption, authoritatively dispenses and applies the treasury of satisfactions of Christ and the saints (CIC, can. 992). Thanks be to God that, wherever the Christian life is lived fervently, the faithful love indulgences and devoutly use them. And since gaining a plenary indulgence first requires the soul's total detachment from affection for sin, they and the sacrament of Penance marvellously complement each other in that essential goal of destroying sin, which, as I said before, is identified concretely with the infusion or increase of sanctifying grace.

In this regard, my thoughts, and indeed those of the whole Church, turn with gratitude to the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI, of venerable memory, who thoroughly treated the subject of indulgences in the Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, an outstanding document of the Magisterium, and with keen pastoral sensitivity revised their norms.

Thus the mention and invocation of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of my Message were intentional, not only in relation to the Great Jubilee but also with respect to the theme discussed here: holiness and the destruction of sin are in fact the marvellous effect of the Spirit who dwells in us: "*But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God*" (1 Cor 6:11); "... *and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us*" (Rom 5:5). The Church then proclaims and administers God's forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance, so that the divine will, which is our sanctification, may be fulfilled in the faithful: "*This is the will of God, your sanctification*" (1 Thes 4:3).

4. The glory of God, which for human beings is identified with their eternal salvation, was announced by the angels at the Lord's birth as being intimately connected with peace: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased*" (Lk 2:14), and Jesus, in the supreme testament of the Last Supper, left his peace as a final inheritance: "*Peace I*

*leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (Jn 14:27). "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (Jn 15:11). By the very fact that it imparts or increases grace, the sacrament of Penance offers the gift of peace. The liturgical rite of sacramental absolution, with the fortunate revision of the formula which has been used since 1973, explicitly emphasizes this divine gift of peace: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church, may God give you pardon and peace".*

To understand correctly the nature of this peace, we must remember that the harmony between body and soul, between the spiritual will and the emotions, was profoundly disturbed as a result of original sin and our personal sins, so that there is often a vigorous struggle within us: *"For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want.... I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members" (Rom 7:19, 22-23). But this conflict does not exclude the person's deep peace of mind: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ... I of myself serve the law of God with my mind" (Rom 7:25).*

Therefore, in the sacrament of Penance the faithful legitimately seek to begin that interior process which leads, as far as possible in their condition as wayfarers, to the progressive conformity of their own psychological state with that higher peace which consists in compliance with God's will. In fact, the reasonable assurance - which cannot be the certitude of faith, as the Council of Trent teaches - that we are in the state of grace, although not eliminating interior conflicts, makes them tolerable and, when holiness is achieved, even desirable. Not without reason did St Francis of Assisi say: *"So great is the good which I await, that every pain is my delight"*. In this same vein, one of the effects of the sacrament of Penance that the faithful can rightly expect and desire is to mitigate the impulses of passion, to correct intellectual or emotional defects (as in the case of the scrupulous), to refine all our free action, as a result of restored and growing supernatural charity. To a great extent, as I recalled in a previous address, these proper but secondary effects of the sacrament of Penance are also linked to the skill and virtue of the priest confessor.

5. One would not be justified, however, in wanting to transform the sacrament of Penance into psychoanalysis or psychotherapy. The confessional is not and cannot be an alternative to the psychoanalyst's or psychotherapist's office. Nor can one expect the sacrament of Penance to heal truly pathological conditions. The confessor is not a healer or a physician in the technical sense of the term; in fact, if the condition of the penitent seems to require medical care, the confessor should not deal with the matter himself, but should send the penitent to competent and honest professionals. Similarly, although the enlightening of consciences requires the clarification of ideas about the proper meaning of God's commandments, the sacrament of Penance is not and should not be the place for explaining the mysteries of life. On these matters, see the *Normae quaedam*

*de agendi ratione confessoriorum circa sextum Decalogi praeceptum* issued on 16 May 1943 by the then Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office, now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which were published long ago but remain very timely. In a similar way, not only because of the sacramental seal but also because of the necessary distinction between the sacramental forum and the juridical and educational responsibility of those involved in formation for the priesthood and religious life, the state of conscience revealed in confession cannot and must not be transferred to canonical decisions regarding vocational discernment; but clearly, the confessor of priesthood candidates has the very serious obligation of making every effort to dissuade from going on to the priesthood those who in confession demonstrate that they lack the necessary virtues (this particularly applies to mastering chastity, which is indispensable for the commitment to celibacy), the necessary psychological balance or sufficient maturity of judgement.

6. We are in the midst of Lent, which reminds us of the fall and prepares us for the resurrection: the sacrament of Penance aids the fallen and gives them resurrection to eternal life, the pledge of which is now possessed by the soul in the state of grace. Jesus is the one, absolute Saviour of every man and of the whole man. The sacrament of salvation, the gift of grace, the gift of holiness, the gift of life, must be considered in this perspective of integral salvation.

The humble awareness of having mediated for the faithful these mercies of the Lord is for us priests now advanced in age a reason for immense gratitude to him who deigned to make us his living instruments. May the expectation of fulfilling this sublime mission spur you, the young hope of the Church, to acquire a fitting intellectual and ascetical preparation, and encourage the greatest generosity for your coming ministry. It is rightly said that even one devoutly celebrated Mass would suffice for the perfect fulfilment of a priestly vocation. May it likewise be said, dear young men, that your charity, offered to the faithful in the sacrament of Reconciliation, will be the fullness and joy of your future life.

In the hope that the Lord's grace will make fruitful these desires and this trust, I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.

*From the Vatican, 20 March 1998.*

**IOANNES PAULUS PP. II**

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