



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRO-MAJOR PENITENTIARY
ARCHBISHOP LUIGI DE MAGISTRIS**

*To my Venerable Brother Archbishop Luigi De Magistris
Pro-Major Penitentiary*

1. Again this year, the Lord has granted me the joy to address this Dicastery. I cordially greet you, venerable Brother, as well as the prelates and officials of the Apostolic Penitentiary and the religious of the various families who exercise the ministry of the Sacrament of Penance in the Patriarchal Basilicas of Rome. I also greet the young priests and candidates for the priesthood who are taking part in the traditional course on the internal forum that the Penitentiary organizes as an ecclesial service. I would like this Message to be read as a testimony to the appreciation that the Pope shows not only for the function of the office of the Penitentiary, which carries out in a vicarious form for him the ordinary exercise of the Power of the Keys, but also for the labours of the Father Penitentiaries, who exercise the ministry of reconciliation in direct contact with the consciences of individual penitents, and lastly, to the dedication with which young priests and candidates for the priesthood are preparing for their most important office as confessors.

2. The mission of the priest is effectively summed up in the famous words of St Paul: "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (II Cor 5,20).

On this occasion, I would like to revisit and expand a concept that I expressed during the first audience I gave to the Apostolic Penitentiary and to the Father Penitentiaries of Rome's Patriarchal Basilicas on 30 January 1981. I said then that, "the Sacrament of Penance ... is not only an instrument aimed at destroying sin - the negative phase - but also a valuable exercise of virtue, which is itself expiation, an irreplaceable school of spirituality, and a highly positive process for the regeneration of souls into the *"vir perfectus", "in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi"* [the perfect man, to the measure of the fullness of Christ] (cf. Eph 4,13)" (*L'Osservatore Romano*

English edition, 23 Feb. 1981, p. 20). I would like to emphasize the "positive efficacy" of the Sacrament in order to exhort priests to resort to the Sacrament personally as a valid help on their own journey of sanctification, and, accordingly, to make use of it as an excellent form of spiritual direction.

Indeed, one can concretely reach holiness, and especially priestly holiness, only if one resorts regularly, humbly and confidently to the Sacrament of Penance, understood as a vehicle of grace, which is indispensable when unfortunately grace has been lost through mortal sin. The sacrament is a preferred vehicle when there has been no mortal sin and Sacramental confession is the Sacrament of the living, that not only increases grace itself, but confirms virtues and helps to weaken the tendencies inherited by reason of original sin, and worsened by our personal sins.

3. I would say that one of the greatest gifts that the celebration of the Holy Year 2000 obtained for us from the Lord, was a renewed consciousness on the part of many of the faithful of the crucial role the Sacrament of Penance plays in the Christian life, and consequently, an encouraging increase in the number of those who go to confession.

On the path of Christian asceticism, the Lord can certainly direct souls in ways that transcend ordinary Sacramental mediation. This does not, however, eliminate the necessity of recourse to the Sacrament of Penance nor the subordination of charisms to the responsibility of the hierarchy. This is clear in that famous passage of the First Letter to the Corinthians, where the Apostle Paul says: "*God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers ...*", etc. (cf. I Cor 12,28-31). In the text, the Apostle draws up a hierarchical order of the various institutional and charismatic roles in the structure of the life of the Church. St Paul then confirms this teaching throughout the entire chapter 14 of the Letter, where he set forth the principle of the subordination of the charismatic gifts in the light of his authority as Apostle. Without any hesitation he makes use of the verb *I want* and speaks in the imperative.

4. But it is Jesus Christ himself, the source of every charism, who in the most solemn way, affirms the indispensable place of the Sacrament of Penance for the life of grace. Our Lord entrusted the Sacrament to the Apostles and their successors: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20,22-23).

Thus it is not in conformity with the faith to reduce the forgiveness of sins to a private and individualistic contact between the conscience of the faithful and God. Of course, sin is not forgiven without personal repentance; but in the actual order of Providence, its remission is subordinate to the fulfilment of the positive will of Christ who tied the remission of sin to the ecclesial ministry, or at least, to the serious desire to have recourse to it as soon as possible, when it would not be immediately possible to make a Sacramental confession.

Equally erroneous is the conviction of those who, while not denying a positive value to the

Sacrament of Penance, conceive of it rather as something superfluous, since they suppose that the Lord's pardon would have been given "*semel pro semper*" (once and for all) on Calvary and the sacramental application of divine mercy would not be necessary for the recovery of grace.

5. In the same way, it is helpful to confirm that the Sacrament of Penance is not an act of psychological therapy, but a supernatural reality destined to produce in hearts the effects of serenity and peace that are a fruit of grace. Even when psychological techniques outside the sacrament might be considered useful, they can be recommended with prudence, but never imposed (cf. by analogy, the warning of the Holy Office, 15 July 1961, n. 4).

As for the specific forms of asceticism to which the confessor might direct his penitent, he can make use of them only on condition that they are not inspired by philosophical or religious concepts that are contrary to Christian truth, for example, those concepts that reduce the human being to an element of nature or, on the contrary, exalt him as being the possessor of absolute freedom. It is easy to recognize, especially in the latter case, a renewed form of Pelagianism.

6. The priest, minister of the Sacrament, will keep these truths in mind both in his contact with each penitent and in the catechesis that he is to give to the faithful.

It is likewise obvious that priests, as recipients of the Sacrament of Penance, are called to apply in the first place to themselves the truths just mentioned with their related practical applications. This will help them in their personal quest for holiness and in the living, vital apostolate that they must carry out above all with their example: "*verba movent, exempla trahunt*" (words can move, examples draw others to follow).

In a special way, these criteria must guide those priests, who as confessors and spiritual directors deal with candidates for the priesthood and for consecrated life. The Sacrament of Penance is the principal instrument for the discernment of vocations. In order to pursue the goal of the priesthood, one needs the mature and sound virtue that guarantees, in as much it is humanly possible as far as possible, a well-founded possibility of perseverance in the future. It is certainly true that the Lord can in an instant transform a sinner into a saint as he did with Saul on the road to Damascus.

However, this is not the usual way of divine Providence. Accordingly, those responsible for allowing a candidate to continue on his way towards the priesthood must be "*hic et nunc*" certain of his present suitability. If this is true for every virtue and moral habit, it is clear that it is even more necessary with regard to chastity, since by receiving Orders, the candidate will be bound to perpetual celibacy.

7. I entrust to Jesus, the Eternal High Priest, these reflections, that are now transformed into a heart-felt prayer. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, intercede with her Son so that he may see fit to grant to the Church holy confessors, holy priests and holy candidates for the

priesthood.

With this hope, I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 15 March 2002

JOHN PAUL II

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana