



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO A GROUP OF PRIESTS AND SEMINARIANS  
WHO HAD TAKEN A COURSE ON THE INTERNAL FORUM  
ORGANIZED BY THE APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY**

*Saturday, 13 March 1999*

1. Your Eminence, prelates and officials of the Apostolic Penitentiary, confessors of the Patriarchal Basilicas of the city, young priests and candidates for the priesthood who have taken the course on the internal forum organized again this year by the Apostolic Penitentiary, I welcome you affectionately to this traditional audience, which is particularly dear to me.

As I thank Cardinal William Wakefield Baum for the sentiments he has expressed in his address, I would like to emphasize the significance of this meeting, which in a way tangibly reaffirms the connection between the priest's mission of reconciliation as a minister of the sacrament of Penance and the See of Peter. Was it not to Peter and his successors that Christ entrusted in universal terms the power, duty, responsibility and, at the same time, the charism - which is extended to my Brothers in the Episcopate and to priests, their co-workers - of freeing souls from the power of evil, that is, from sin and the devil?

Our meeting, shortly before the Easter celebration of our Redemption and the Jubilee Year, acquires the symbolic value of communion lived in the daily effort to serve others and their eternal salvation. Given this universal significance, as I speak to you who are gathered here in the Pope's residence, I see present in spirit all the priests of the Holy Catholic Church, wherever they live and work, and I affectionately address my message to them all.

2. In the harmonious variety of its elements and goals, the Jubilee Year is centred above all on conversion of heart, *metanoia*, with which Jesus begins his public preaching in the Gospel (cf. Mk 1:15). Already in the Old Testament, salvation and life are promised to those who repent: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ez 18:23). The Great Jubilee, now close at hand, commemorates the end

of the second millennium since the birth of Jesus, who at the moment of his unjust condemnation said to Pilate: "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth" (Jn 18:37). The truth to which Jesus bore witness is that he came to save the world, otherwise destined to be lost: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk 19:10).

In the economy of the New Testament, the Lord wanted the Church to be a *universal sacrament of salvation*. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council teaches that "the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1). It is God's will that the forgiveness of sins and the return to divine friendship should be mediated by the Church's action: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19), Jesus solemnly said to Simon Peter, and in him to the Supreme Pontiffs, his successors. He also entrusted the same task to his Apostles and, in them, to the Bishops, their successors: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18). On the evening of the very day of the Resurrection, Jesus would make this power effective by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:23). Because of this mandate, the Apostles and their successors in priestly charity would henceforth be able to say with humility and truth: "*I absolve you from your sins*".

I am fully confident that the Holy Year will be, as it should be, an extraordinarily effective chapter in the history of salvation. In Jesus Christ it finds its culmination and ultimate meaning, for in him we all receive "grace upon grace" and are reconciled with the Father (cf. Bull *Incararnationis mysterium*, n. 1). I therefore trust and pray that through the generous service of priest confessors, the Jubilee Year will be an occasion for the devout and supernaturally serene reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

3. In this regard, you certainly know the in-depth analysis of this fundamental theme in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Nevertheless, I would like to remind you at this meeting of several truly essential points, which you will certainly teach the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care.

- By institution of our Lord Jesus Christ, as explicitly seen in the passage quoted above from the Gospel according to John, sacramental confession is necessary to obtain the forgiveness of mortal sins committed after Baptism. However, if a sinner, touched by the grace of the Holy Spirit, is sorry for his sins out of supernatural love, that is, because they are an offence against God, the Supreme Good, he immediately receives the forgiveness of his sins, even if they are mortal, as long as he has the intention to confess them sacramentally whenever, within a reasonable period of time, he is able.

- The same resolution should be made by a penitent who, having committed serious sins, receives

general absolution without prior individual confession of his own sins to the confessor: this intention is so necessary that, should it be lacking, the absolution would be invalid, as is said in can. 962, §1 of the *Code of Canon Law* and can. 721, §1 of the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*.

- Venial sins can also be forgiven outside sacramental confession, but certainly it is extremely beneficial to confess them sacramentally. Indeed, presupposing the proper dispositions, not only is the sin forgiven, but the special help of the sacramental grace is received to avoid it in the future. It is helpful here to reaffirm the right of the faithful - and the obligation of the priest confessor corresponding to their right - to confess and to receive sacramental absolution even for venial sins. It should not be forgotten that the so-called confession of devotion was the school which formed the great saints.

- For the Eucharist to be received licitly and fruitfully, it must be preceded by sacramental confession when one is aware of having committed a mortal sin. In fact, the Eucharist is the source of all grace, since it is the re-presentation of the saving sacrifice of Calvary; as a sacramental reality, however, it is not directly ordained for the forgiveness of mortal sins: this is clearly and unequivocally taught by the Council of Trent (Session 13, chap. 7 and the relative canon, DS 1647 and 1655), giving a disciplinary and juridical form, so to speak, to the word of God itself: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself" (1 Cor 11:27-28).

4. Thanks to the sacrament of Penance, then, the Jubilee Year should be a special year of great forgiveness and full reconciliation. But God, to whom we are grateful for having reconciled us, or with whom we hope to be reconciled, is our Father: my Father, the Father of all believers, the Father of all human beings. Therefore, reconciliation with God requires and entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters, without which God's forgiveness is not received, as Jesus taught us in the perfect prayer of the *Our Father*: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". The sacrament of Penance presupposes and should foster a generous noble and active fraternal love.

Elevating this attitude to its greatest perfection, the Jubilee Year invites us to profound solidarity in a "marvellous exchange of spiritual gifts, in virtue of which the holiness of one benefits others in a way far exceeding the harm which the sin of one has inflicted upon others. There are people who leave in their wake a surfeit of love, of suffering borne well, of purity and truth, which involves and sustains others. This is the reality of "vicariousness", upon which the entire mystery of Christ is founded" (*Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 10).

Reconciled through the sacrament of Penance and thus assimilated to Christ the Lord and

Redeemer, we must let him - draw us into his saving work and, in particular, into his Passion. This is said in the famous passage of the Letter to the Colossians: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24) (ibid., n. 10).

5. In the sacrament of Penance, once the divisions caused by sin are eliminated, the unity of the Church is strengthened, which has one of its highest expressions in the Jubilee: here too we can see the connatural bond between the Jubilee and the sacrament of Forgiveness.

God's mercy and the Church's mediation also offer a precious corollary to the sacramental forgiveness of sin with the gift of the remission of its temporal punishment through the indulgence. I pointed this out with regard to the Jubilee Year in the Bull of Indiction: "Reconciliation with God does not mean that there are no enduring consequences of sin from which we must be purified. It is precisely in this context that the indulgence becomes important, since it is an expression of the "total gift of the mercy of God"" (*Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 9).

Jesus was born, rather, he was conceived Priest and Victim in his Mother's womb, as the Holy Spirit teaches us in the Letter to the Hebrews (cf. 10:5-7), applying Psalm 40:7-9 expressly to Jesus: "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Lo, I come; in the roll of the book it is written of me; I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart"". The Jubilee of the Year 2000 recalls to our faith, to our hope, to our love that salvation comes from the birth of the Eternal Priest, the Victim of the sacrifice to which he freely offered himself.

Through the intercession of Blessed Mary, who gave the Word of God his Humanity as priest and victim, may we relive his saving mission, even in our littleness and poverty, with personal holiness and in exercising the ministry of Forgiveness, and, as God's instruments, may we restore to sinners grace, joy of heart and the wedding garment which allows entry into eternal life.

Everything I have recalled in this conversation with you is expressed, in a short and marvellous synthesis, in the ritual formula of sacramental absolution: "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".

May my Apostolic Blessing, which I gladly impart to you, be an assurance of this peace for you and for all whom the Lord has entrusted or will entrust to your ministry.

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