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To the Apostolic Penitentiary: may every absolution be a jubilee of the heart

Vatican City, 4 March 2016 – This morning in the Sala Regia Pope Francis received in audience the participants in the annual course of the internal forum of the Apostolic Penitentiary, which is intended to help recently ordained priests and seminarians soon to be ordained to administer the Sacrament of Reconciliation. "Effectively the celebration of this sacrament requires a suitable and up to date preparation, so that those who partake can 'touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands'", said the Holy Father. The mystery of Christian faith seems to be summed up in the word mercy, which is living, visible and reached its culmination in Jesus of Nazareth. "In this sense, mercy, before being an attitude or a human virtue, is God's definitive choice in favour of every human being for eternal salvation".

This divine mercy can freely reach all those who invoke it. Indeed, the possibility of forgiveness is truly open to all. It may be reached through the opening of the "holy door", a "sincere conscience, the reading of the Word of God, encounter with merciful people, in life experiences that speak to us of wounds, sin, forgiveness and mercy". However there is a "sure way" to mercy, leading from possibility to reality, from hope to certainty. "This way is Jesus, Who has 'the authority on earth to forgive sins', and has transmitted this mission to the Church. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is therefore a special place to experience God's mercy and to celebrate the encounter with the Father".

The Pope reminded the participants in the audience that when they enter the confessional as confessors, they must always bear in mind that they are "instruments of God's mercy" for the brothers and sisters they receive, and must therefore be careful "not to place obstacles to this gift of salvation. The confessor is himself a sinner, a man always in need of forgiveness, and he first of all cannot do without the mercy of God Who has 'chosen' and 'constituted' him for this great task ... for which he must prepare with an attitude of humble and generous faith, with the sole desire that all the faithful may experience the love of the Father".

"Every repentant faithful, after the priest's absolution, has the certainty, through faith, that his sins no longer exist, that they have been cancelled by divine mercy. Every absolution is, in a certain sense, a jubilee of the heart, that brings joy not only to the faithful and the Church, but above all to God Himself", emphasised the bishop of Rome. "It is important, therefore, that the confessor also be a 'channel of joy', and that the faithful, after receiving forgiveness, no longer feel oppressed by guilt but may instead savour the work of God Who has liberated him, live in gratitude, be ready to make amends for the evil committed, and reach out to his brothers

with a good and willing heart".

"In this time of ours, characterised by individualism, many wounds and the temptation to close oneself away, it is a true gift to be able to see and accompany people who seek mercy. This also demands greater evangelical coherence and paternal goodness of us; we are the custodians, never the masters, of both the flock and of grace".

"Let us restore to the centre – and not only in this Jubilee Year – the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a true space of the Spirit in which all, confessors and penitents, are able to experience the only definitive and faithful love, that of God for each one of His children, a love that never disappoints. St. Leopold Mandic reiterated that God's mercy outstrips all our expectations. He used to say to those who suffered, 'We have in Heaven the heart of a mother. The Virgin, our Mother, who at the foot of the Cross experienced all the suffering possible for a human creature, understands our hardships and consoles us'. May Mary, refuge of sinners and Mother of Mercy, always guide and sustain the fundamental ministry of Reconciliation".

With regard to the issue of what a priest should do if he finds himself unable to give absolution, the Holy Father recommended, "First of all, see if there is a way; many times you will find it. Secondly, do not focus only on spoken language, but also on the language of gestures. There are people who do not want to speak but through their gestures demonstrate their repentance, their pain. And thirdly, if you cannot offer absolution, speak like a father: 'Listen, I cannot absolve you of this, but I can assure you that God loves you, that God awaits you. Let us pray together to Our Lady, so that she may protect you, and come, return, as I will await you as God does', and give a blessing. ... This is always the point: there, there is a father. ... God knows how to forgive things better than we do. But may there at least be the image of the Father", concluded Francis.
