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Celebration of Penance, presided at by the Holy Father

At 17.00 this afternoon, in the Vatican Basilica, the Holy Father Francis presided at the Rite of Reconciliation for several penitents with confession and individual absolution.

The following is the homily pronounced by the Pope during the Penitential Celebration:

Homily of the Holy Father

“The two of them alone remained: mercy with misery” (*In Joh 33, 5*). In this way Saint Augustine sums up the end of the Gospel we have just heard. Those who came to cast stones at the woman or to accuse Jesus with regard to the Law have gone away, having lost interest. Jesus, however, remains. He remains because what is of value in his eyes has remained: that woman, that person. For him, the sinner comes before the sin. I, you, each one of us come first in the heart of God: before mistakes, rules, judgements and our failures. Let us ask for the grace of a gaze like that of Jesus, let us ask to have the Christian perspective on life. Let us look with love upon the sinner before his or her sin; upon the one going astray before his or her error; upon the person before his or her history.

“The two of them alone remained: mercy with misery”. The woman caught in adultery does not represent for Jesus a paragraph of the Law, but instead a concrete situation in which he gets involved. Thus he remains there with the woman, for the most part standing in silence. Meanwhile, he twice performs a mysterious gesture: he writes with his finger on the ground (*Jn 8:6, 8*). We do not know what he wrote and perhaps that is not the most important element: the attention of the Gospel focuses on the fact that the Lord writes. We think of the episode at Sinai when God wrote the tablets of the Law *with his finger* (cf. *Ex 31:18*), just as Jesus does now. Later, God, through the prophets, promised that he would no longer write on tablets of stone, but directly on the heart (cf. *Jer 31:33*), on the tablets of the flesh of our hearts (cf. *2 Cor 3:3*). With Jesus, the mercy of God incarnate, the time has come when God writes on the hearts of men and women, when he gives a sure hope to human misery: giving not so much external laws which often keep God and humanity at a distance, but rather the law of the Spirit which enters into the heart and sets it free. It happens this way for the woman, who encounters Jesus and

resumes her life: she goes off to sin no more (cf. *Jn 8:11*). It is Jesus who, with the power of the Holy Spirit, frees us from the evil we have within us, from the sin which the Law could impede but not remove.

All the same, evil is strong, it has a seductive power: it attracts and fascinates. Our own efforts are not enough to detach ourselves from it: we need a greater love. Without God, we cannot overcome evil. Only his love raises us up from within, only his tender love poured out into our hearts makes us free. If we want to be free from evil, we have to make room for the Lord who forgives and heals. He accomplishes this above all through the sacrament we are about to celebrate. Confession is the passage from misery to mercy; it is God's writing upon the heart. There – in our hearts – we constantly read that we are precious in the eyes of God, that he is our Father and that he loves us even more than we love ourselves.

“The two of them alone remained: mercy with misery”. Those two, alone. How many times do we feel alone, that we have lost our way in life. How many times do we no longer know how to begin again, overwhelmed by the effort to accept ourselves. We need to start over, but we don't know where to begin. Christians are born from the forgiveness they receive in Baptism. They are always reborn from the same place: from the surprising forgiveness of God, from his mercy which restores us. Only by being forgiven can we set out again with fresh confidence, after having experienced the joy of being loved by the Father to the full. Only through God's forgiveness do truly new things happen within us. Let us hear again words the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, I am doing a new thing” (*Is 43:19*). Forgiveness gives us a new beginning, makes us new creatures, helps us take hold of a new life. God's forgiveness is not a photocopy which is identically reproduced in every passage through the confessional. Receiving pardon for our sins through a priest is always a new, distinctive and unique experience. We pass from being alone with our miseries and accusers, like the woman in the Gospel, to being raised up and encouraged by the Lord who grants us a new start.

“The two of them alone remained: mercy with misery”. What do we need to do to come to love mercy, to overcome the fear of Confession? Let us accept once more the invitation of Isaiah: “Do you not perceive it?” (*Is 43:19*). It is important to perceive God's forgiveness. It would be beautiful, after Confession, to remain like that woman, our eyes fixed on Jesus who has just set us free: no longer looking at our miseries, but rather at his mercy. To look at the Crucified One and say with amazement: “That's where my sins ended up. You took them upon yourself. You didn't point your finger at me; instead, you opened your arms and forgave me once again”. It is important to be mindful of God's forgiveness, to remember his tender love, and taste again and again the peace and freedom we have experienced. For this is the heart of Confession: not the sins we declare, but the divine love we receive, of which we are ever in need. We may still have a doubt: “Confessing is useless, I am always committing the same sins”. The Lord knows us, however; he knows that the interior struggle is difficult, that we are weak and inclined to fall, that we often relapse into doing what is wrong. So he proposes that we begin to relapse into goodness, into asking for mercy. He will raise us up and make us new creatures. Let us start over, then, from Confession, let us restore to this sacrament the place it deserves in life and pastoral ministry!

“The two of them alone remained: mercy with misery”. Today, in Confession, we too draw life from this saving encounter: we with our miseries and sins, and the Lord who knows us, loves us and frees us from evil. Let us enter into this encounter, asking for the grace to rediscover its saving power.
