



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 22 September 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Continuing our reflection on the sacrament of Penance, today let us explore a dimension which is one of its essential features: reconciliation. This aspect of the sacrament serves as an antidote or remedy to the destructive nature of sin. By sinning, man not only distances himself from God, but sows the seed of division in himself and in his relations with others. The process of returning to God therefore implies restoration of the unity jeopardized by sin.

2. Reconciliation is the Father's gift: he alone can achieve it. This is why it is primarily an appeal which comes from on high: "In Christ's name: be reconciled to God" (2 *Cor* 5: 20). As Jesus explains in the parable of the prodigal son (cf. *Lk* 15: 11-32), forgiving and reconciling people to himself is a celebration for him. In this as in other Gospel passages, the Father not only offers his forgiveness and reconciliation, but at the same time shows how these gifts are a source of joy for everyone.

In the New Testament there is a significant link between the divine fatherhood and the festive joy of a banquet. The kingdom of God is compared to a joyful feast at which the host is actually the Father (cf. *Mt* 8: 11; 22: 4; 26: 29). The fulfilment of all salvation history is again expressed in the image of a banquet prepared by God the Father for the wedding feast of the Lamb (cf. *Rv* 19: 6-9).

3. The reconciliation that comes from the Father is concentrated in Christ himself, the Lamb without blemish offered for our sins (1 *Pt* 1: 19; *Rv* 5: 6; 12: 11). Jesus Christ is not only the Reconciler, but Reconciliation itself. As St Paul teaches, our becoming new creatures, renewed by the Spirit, "is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 *Cor* 5: 18-19).

It is precisely through the mystery of the Cross that our Lord Jesus Christ overcomes the tragedy of the division between man and God. Indeed, with Easter the mystery of the Father's infinite mercy penetrates the darkest roots of human iniquity. There a movement of grace begins which, if accepted with free consent, leads us to taste the sweetness of full reconciliation.

The abyss of Christ's pain and abandonment is thus turned into an inexhaustible source of compassionate and reconciling love. The Redeemer retraces a path leading back to the Father, making it possible to experience again the filial relationship that was lost and to confer on human beings the necessary strength to preserve this deep communion with God.

4. Unfortunately, even in redeemed existence there is the possibility of sinning again and this calls for constant vigilance. Furthermore, even after forgiveness, the "residue of sin" remains and must be removed and combatted by a programme of penance involving a greater commitment to doing good. This requires first of all the reparation of physical or moral wrongs done to groups or individuals. Conversion thus becomes a continual journey, in which the mystery of reconciliation made present in the sacrament is the point of arrival and departure.

The encounter with the forgiving Christ increases in our hearts that dynamism of Trinitarian love which the *Ordo Paenitentiae* describes in the following way: "In the sacrament of Penance the Father receives the repentant children who come back to him, Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders and brings them back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit resanctifies those who are the temple of God or dwells more fully in them. The expression of all this is the sharing in the Lord's table, begun again or made more ardent; such a return of children from afar brings great rejoicing at the banquet of God's Church" (n. 6; cf. also nn. 5 and 19).

5. In the formula of absolution, the "Rite of Penance" expresses the relationship between forgiveness and peace, offered by God the Father in the Death and Resurrection of his Son, and the mediation of "the ministry of the Church" (*Ordo Paenitentiae*, n. 46). While the sacrament signifies and brings about the gift of reconciliation, it also highlights the fact that reconciliation concerns our relationship not only with God the Father, but also with our brothers and sisters.

These two aspects of reconciliation are closely correlated. Christ's reconciling work occurs in the Church. She cannot reconcile on her own but only as a living instrument of Christ's pardon, on the basis of the Lord's precise mandate (cf. *Jn* 20: 23, *Mt* 18: 18). This reconciliation in Christ is achieved in a pre-eminent way in the celebration of the sacrament of Penance. But the Church's whole inner being in its community dimension is characterized by a permanent disposition to reconciliation.

It is necessary to overcome a certain individualism in the way one thinks of reconciliation: the entire Church cooperates in the conversion of sinners through prayer, exhortation, fraternal correction and charitable support. Without reconciliation with our brothers and sisters, love would

not take flesh in the individual. Just as sin damages the tissue of the Body of Christ, so reconciliation restores solidarity among the People of God.

6. Ancient penitential practice highlighted the community-ecclesial aspect of reconciliation, particularly at the final moment of absolution by the Bishop with full readmission of the penitents into the community. The Church's teaching and the penitential discipline promulgated after the Second Vatican Council urge the faithful to rediscover and restore to honour this community-ecclesial dimension of Reconciliation (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 11 and also *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 27), while maintaining the doctrine on the need for individual confession.

In the context of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, it will be important to offer effective and updated paths of reconciliation which will lead to rediscovering the community dimension not only of penance, but of the Father's entire plan of salvation for humanity. Thus the teaching of the Constitution *Lumen gentium* will be put into practice: "God has willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness" (n. 9).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I extend a warm welcome to the new students of the Pontifical Beda College, and I encourage them to grow each day in their love of the Church, built on the foundation of the Apostles. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Trinidad and Tobago, Australia and the United States of America, I invoke the abundant blessings of almighty God.

Today it is our joy to have among us three young people from the Middle East representing the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, and belonging to the three monotheistic religions of the region.

To this representative group I will present a personal written message which, I hope, will encourage the efforts being made by young people in the Middle East to build a society where peace and harmony among peoples and the followers of different religions will reign supreme. This is our prayer for the entire region, so dear to all the children of Abraham.