24 Hours for the Lord

GOD RICH IN MERCY

CELEBRATION OF PENANCE

COMMUNAL RECONCILIATION SERVICE

WITH INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Vatican Basilica

Friday, 13 March 2015

[Multimedia]

This year again, on the eve of the Fourth Sunday of Lent, we are gathered to celebrate the penitential liturgy. We are united with the many Christians who, today, in every part of the world, have accepted the invitation to live this moment as a sign of the Lord's goodness. The Sacrament of Reconciliation, indeed, allows us to draw near to the Father with trust to have the certainty of his forgiveness. He is truly "rich in mercy" and extends it abundantly upon those who appeal to Him with a sincere heart.

Being here to experience his love, in any case, is above all a fruit of his grace. As the Apostle Paul reminded us, God never ceases to demonstrate the wealth of his mercy throughout the centuries. The transformation of the heart that leads us to confess our sins is a "gift from God". We can not do it alone. The power to confess our sins is a gift from God, it is a gift, it is "his work" (cf. Eph 2:8-10).

Being touched with tenderness by his hand and molded by his grace allows us to draw near to the priest without fear for our sins, but with the certainty that we will be accepted by him in the name of God, and understood despite our wretchedness; and even to approach without a defence attorney: we have the One who alone gave his life for our sins! It is He who always defends us before the Father, He always defends us. As we exit the confessional, we will feel his strength which gives new life and restores ardor to the faith. After confession we are reborn.

The Gospel we have heard (cf. Lk 7:36-50) opens to us a path of hope and comfort. It is good to feel Jesus' compassionate gaze upon us, just as it was felt by the sinful woman in the house of the Pharisee. In this passage two words persistently return: *love* and *judgment*.

There is *the love of the sinful woman* who humbles herself before the Lord; but before that is *the merciful love of Jesus* for her, which drives her to approach him. Her tears of repentance and joy wash the feet of the Master, and her hair dries them with gratitude; the kisses are an expression of her pure love; and the perfumed ointment poured in abundance attests to how precious He is in her eyes. This woman's every gesture speaks of love and expresses her desire to have unwavering certitude in her life: that of having been forgiven. And this certitude is beautiful! And Jesus gives her this certitude: in accepting her He demonstrates the love God has for her, just for her, a public sinner! Love and forgiveness are simultaneous: God forgives her many sins, He forgives her for all of them, for "she loved much" (Lk 7:47); and she adores Jesus because she feels that in Him there is mercy and not condemnation. She feels that Jesus understands her with love, she who is a sinner. Thanks to Jesus, God lifts her many sins off her shoulders, He no longer remembers them (cf. Is 43:25). For this is also true: when God forgives, He forgets. God's forgiveness is great! For her now a new era begins; through love she is reborn into a new life.

This woman has truly encountered the Lord. In silence, she opened her heart; in sorrow, she showed repentance for her sins; by her tears, she appealed to divine goodness to receive forgiveness. For her there will be no judgment but that which comes from God, and this is the judgment of mercy. The hero of this encounter is certainly love, a mercy which goes beyond justice.

Simon, the master of the house, the Pharisee, on the contrary, *doesn't manage to find the road of love*. Everything is calculated, everything is thought out.... He stands firm on the threshold of formality. It is an unpleasant thing, formal love, he doesn't understand. He is not capable of taking that next step forward to meet Jesus who will bring him salvation. Simon limits himself to inviting Jesus to lunch, but did not truly welcome him. In his thoughts Simon invokes only justice and in doing so he errs. *His judgment of the woman distances him from the truth* and prevents him from even understanding who his guest is. He stopped at the surface — at formality — incapable of seeing the heart. Before the parable of Jesus and the question of which servant would love more, the pharisee responds correctly: "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more". Jesus doesn't fail to observe: "You have judged rightly" (Lk 7:43). When Simon's judgment is turned to love, then is he in the right.

Jesus' reminder urges each of us never to stop at the surface of things, especially when we have a person before us. We are called to look beyond, *to focus on the heart* in order to see how much generosity everyone is capable of. No one can be excluded from the mercy of God; everyone knows the way to access it and the Church is the *house where everyone is welcomed and no one is rejected*. Her doors remain wide open, so that those who are touched by grace may find the assurance of forgiveness. The greater the sin, the greater the love that must be shown by the Church to those who repent. With how much love Jesus looks at us! With how much love He heals our sinful heart! Our sins never scare Him. Let us consider the prodigal son who, when he decided to return to his father, considers making a speech, but the father doesn't let him speak. He embraces him (cf. Lk 15:17-24). This is the way Jesus is with us. "Father, I have so many sins...." — "But He will be glad if you go: He will embrace you with such love! Don't be afraid".

Dear brothers and sisters, I have often thought of how the Church may render more clear her mission to be a witness to mercy; and we have to make this journey. It is a journey which begins with spiritual conversion. Therefore, I have decided to announce an *Extraordinary Jubilee* which has at its centre the mercy of God. It will be a *Holy Year of Mercy*. We want to live in the light of the word of the Lord: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (cf. Lk 6:36). And this especially applies to confessors! So much mercy!

This Holy Year will commence on the next Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and will conclude on Sunday, 20 November 2016, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe and living face of the Father's mercy. I entrust the organization of this Jubilee to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, in order that it may come to life as a new step on the Church’s journey in her mission to bring the Gospel of mercy to each person.

I am confident that the whole Church, which is in such need of mercy for we are sinners, will be able to find in this Jubilee the joy of rediscovering and rendering fruitful God’s mercy, with which we are all called to give comfort to every man and every woman of our time. Do not forget that God *forgives all*, and God *forgives always*. Let us never tire of asking forgiveness. Let us henceforth entrust this Year to the Mother of Mercy, that she turn her gaze upon us and watch over our journey: our penitential journey, our year-long journey with an open heart, to receive the indulgence of God, to receive the mercy of God.