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"Sin always cuts, separates, divides"

Continuing his catechesis on the Eucharist, on Wednesday January 3 Pope Francis spoke about the penitential act at the beginning of Mass to prepare ourselves to celebrate the Holy Mysteries worthily.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Resuming the catechesis on the Eucharistic celebration, let us

consider today, in the context of the introductory rites, the *penitential act*. In its sobriety, it promotes the attitude with which we dispose ourselves to celebrate the holy mysteries in a worthy manner, that is, acknowledging our sins before God and our brothers, acknowledging that we are sinners. Indeed, the priest's invitation is addressed to all the community in prayer, as we are all sinners. What can the Lord give to one whose heart is already full of himself, of his own success? Nothing, because the presumptuous is incapable of receiving forgiveness, as he is already satiated with his own assumed righteousness. Let us think of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, in which only the second – the publican – returns home justified, that is, forgiven (cf. *Lk* 18: 9-14). Those who are aware of their own miseries and who lower their eyes with humility, feel the merciful

gaze of God resting on them. We know from experience that only those who can recognize their mistakes and apologize receive the understanding and forgiveness of others.

Listening in silence to the voice of conscience allows us to recognize that our thoughts are distant from divine thoughts, that our words and our actions are often mundane, that is, guided by choices contrary to the Gospel. Therefore, at the beginning of the Mass, we carry out as a community the penitential act through a formula of *general confession*, pronounced in the *first person singular*. Everyone confesses to God and to the brothers “that I have sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do.” Yes, also by omission, or rather, by having neglected to do the good I could have done. Often we feel

we are good because “I have done no harm to anyone.” In reality, it is not enough not to harm others; it is necessary to choose to do good by taking the opportunity to bear good witness that we are disciples of Jesus. It is good to emphasize that we confess to being sinners *both to God and to our brothers*; this helps us understand the dimension of sin that, while it separates us from God, divides us also from our brothers, and vice versa. Sin cuts: it cuts the relationship with God and it cuts the relationship with our brothers, the relationship in the family, in society, in the community: sin always cuts, separates, divides.

The words we say with our mouth are accompanied by the gesture of beating the breast, acknowledging that I have sinned precisely by my own fault, and not that of others. Indeed, it often happens that, out of fear or shame, we point the finger to

accuse others. Confessing our own sins. I remember an anecdote, that an old missionary told me, of a woman who began with the mistakes of her husband; then she went on to recount those of her mother-in-law and then the sins of her neighbours. At a certain point, the confessor said to her, “But, madam, tell me: have you finished? Very good. You have finished with the sins of others. Now start to tell your own”! Tell your own sins!

After the confession of sin, we beg the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Angels and the Saints to pray to the Lord for us. In this too, the *Communion of Saints* is valuable: that is, the intercession of these “friends and models of life” (Preface of 1 November) supports us on our path towards full communion with God, when sin will be definitively annihilated.

Aside from the “I confess,” the Penitential Act can be performed with other formulas, for example: “Have mercy on us, O Lord. / For we have sinned against you. / Show us, O Lord, Your mercy. / And grant us Your salvation” (cf. *Psalm* 123: 3; 85: 8; *Jer* 14: 20). On Sunday in particular we can perform the blessing and the aspersion of water in memory of Baptism (cf. *OGMR*, 51), which cancels all sins. It is also possible, as a part of the Penitential Act, to sing the *Kyrie eléison*: with the ancient Greek expression, we acclaim the Lord – *Kyrios* – and implore His mercy (*ibid.* 52).

The Sacred Scripture offers us shining examples of “penitent” figures who, returning to themselves after having committed sin, find the courage to remove the mask and open themselves up to the grace that renews the heart. Let us think of the King David, and the words attributed

to Him in the Psalm: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (51: 3). Think of the prodigal son who returns to the father; or the invocation of the publican: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (*Lk* 18: 13). Let us think also of Saint Peter, of Zacchaeus, of the Samaritan woman. Measuring oneself with the fragility of the clay of which we are moulded is an experience that strengthens us: while it makes us take stock of our weakness, it opens our heart to invoking the divine mercy that transforms and converts us. And this is what we do in the Penitential Act at the beginning of the Mass.

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