Francis: Confessors should never judge; 'club of judgment' won't bring sheep back

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Holy Year of Mercy
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Rome
Pope Francis has asked the special group of priests he will commission to hear confessions during the ongoing Jubilee Year of Mercy to never judge those who confess their sins, but to embrace them as if putting a coat on someone in need.

In an audience Tuesday with the priests who will be serving as "Missionaries of Mercy" during the Holy Year, the pontiff also succinctly laid out anew his vision of re-evangelization in the 21st century. "It is not ... with the club of judgment that we will bring back the lost sheep to the fold, but with the holiness of life that is the principle of renewal and reform in the church," the pope told the priests. "Holiness is nourished by love and knows how to bring upon itself the weight of those who are weaker," he said. "A missionary of mercy takes the sinner on his shoulders, and consoles him or her with the power of compassion."

Francis was speaking in a special meeting Tuesday at the Vatican's apostolic palace with hundreds of priests representing the 1,142 clerics from six continents who will be serving in the special role. Support the independent Catholic news source that's on the ground bringing you the full story. Subscribe to NCR today!

Created by the pontiff just for the jubilee year, the priests will receive their mandate Wednesday in a special ceremony in St. Peter's Basilica as part of the Ash Wednesday celebration. They are to hear confessions during the year and will be granted "the authority to pardon even those sins reserved to the Holy See."

In speaking to the priests Tuesday, the pope outlined three particular characteristics they should practice when hearing confessions. The most poignant of the three was a reflection Francis offered on the shame people sometimes feel in coming to confession.

"It is not easy to offer yourself before another man, knowing he represents God, and to confess your sins," said the pontiff. "Shame is an intimate sentiment that affects the personal life and requires from the confessor an attitude of respect and encouragement."

The pope then reflected on how the Bible expresses the shame felt by three characters in the Genesis creation story: Adam and Eve, when they realize they are naked in the Garden of Eden; and Noah, who is found naked after becoming drunk.

"This reading tells me how important our role is in confession," said Francis. "Before us there is a 'naked' person, with his or her weakness and limits, with the shame of being a sinner."

"Do not forget," the pope exhorted the priests. "Before us there is not sin, but the penitent sinner -- A person that feels the desire to be accepted and pardoned."

"A sinner that pledges to not wanting to be further distanced from the house of the Father and that, which the small efforts he or she finds in themselves, wants to do everything to live as a child of God," he continued.

"Therefore, we are not called to judge, with a sense of superiority, as if we were immune from sin," said Francis. "On the contrary, we are called to act like Shem and Japheth, the sons of Noah, who took a robe over their father to hide his shame."

"Being a confessor according to the heart of Jesus means to cover the sinner with the robe of mercy so that they are not ashamed anymore and may recover the joy of their filial dignity," he said. Francis also called on the priests to express the "maternity" of the church and to respect the desire of forgiveness present in the heart of someone who is penitent.

"Going into the confessional, always remember that it is Christ who welcomes; it is Christ who listens; it is Christ who pardons; it Christ who gives peace," said the pontiff.
"We are his ministers; and in the first place we always have need to be forgiven by him," said Francis. "Therefore, whatever the sin being confessed, every missionary is called to remember his true existence as a sinner and to offer himself humbly as a channel of God's mercy."

The missionaries of mercy were introduced to the pope Tuesday by Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella, the president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. Fisichella said the missionaries are coming from all parts of the world and mentioned several of their home countries as examples, including: Lebanon, China, Israel, Burundi, East Timor, Thailand, and Egypt.

The archbishop also said there are priests of the Eastern Catholic Churches who will be serving in the role, and that each of the missionaries have received a special stole to wear to signify their acceptance of their mandate.

Dominican Fr. Pius Pietrzyk, a canon lawyer serving as a missionary of mercy, posted a letter signed by Fisichella explaining their mandate on Twitter shortly after attending the audience Tuesday. "Pope Francis has granted you the faculty to absolve, for the duration of the Jubilee Year, those sins reserved to the Holy See," reads the letter. "By disposition of the Holy Father, this faculty is to be understood as being limited exclusively to the following sins," it continues, outlining:

1. "Profaning the Eucharistic species by taking them away or keeping them for a sacrilegious purpose;"
2. "Use of physical force against the Roman Pontiff;"
3. "Absolution of an accomplice in a sin against the Sixth Commandment of the Decalogue;"
4. "A direct violation against the sacramental seal by a confessor."

"I am certain that you will be a joyful proclaimer of divine mercy and its faithful dispenser," Fisichella concludes. "May I take this opportunity to express our gratitude for your willingness to undertake such an important ministry in the Jubilee Year."