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Pope Francis and Encountering Jesus in his Mercy

- Introduction
 - In the reform of the Church that begins with our own personal reform to become missionary disciples in communion, it's absolutely essential for us to experience personally the God of love and the love of God in order to share the joy of that encounter with others. For us truly to meet God, we need to meet him in his mercy because his love is always merciful. The reform of the Church involves not just preaching God's merciful love, but helping people to receive it, to live in it, to share it, and to base their entire life on becoming as merciful as our father in heaven is merciful.
 - Jesus constantly preached about mercy and practiced what he preached. We have the parables of the Lost Son, Lost Sheep and Lost Coin. We have his scenes with the woman caught in adultery, the sinful woman in Simon the Pharisees' house, and the Samaritan woman at the well. We have Jesus' calling St. Peter, whose first words were “Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man,” of St. Matthew, a despicable tax collector, of St. Paul who used to murder Christians for a living. We have the parable of the two debtors that show us the enormity of God's forgiveness. We have Jesus' words that he has come to seek and save what was lost, to come as the Divine Physician to heal the sick instead of those who don't think they need a doctor.
 - Today, with the help of Pope Francis, I want to focus on mercy as an essential part of the reform of the Church that Pope Francis is trying to lead. We'll begin with Mercy in Pope Francis' life, in the life of the Church, and in our life as much loved disciples of the God who is “rich in mercy.”
- Mercy in Pope Francis' life.
 - Mercy is central to Pope Francis' self-identity. In the Sept. 19 interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro, when he was asked “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?,” he replied, “I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner... The best summary, the one that comes more from the inside and I feel most true is this: I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.” And he repeats: “I am one who is looked upon by the Lord. I always felt my motto, Miserando atque Eligendo [By Having Mercy and by Choosing Him], was very true for me. ... This is what I said when they asked me if I would accept my election as pontiff.” Then the pope whispers in Latin: “*Peccator sum, sed super misericordia et infinita patientia Domini nostri Jesu Christi confisus et in spiritu penitentiae accepto.*” I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance.”
 - Mercy is the fundamental story of his vocation. He said to the 200,000 in St. Peter's Square on the Vigil of Pentecost (May 18): “One day in particular, though, was very important to me: 21 September 1953. I was almost 17. It was ‘Students' Day,’ for us the first day of spring — for you the first day of autumn. Before going to the celebration I passed through the parish I normally attended, I found a priest that I did not know and I felt the need to go to confession. For me this was an experience of encounter: I found that someone was waiting for me. Yet I do not know what happened, I can't remember, I do not know why that particular priest was there whom I did not know, or why I felt this desire to confess, but the truth is that someone was waiting for me. He had been waiting for me for some time. After making my confession I felt something had changed. I was not the same. I had heard something like a voice, or a call. I was convinced that I should become a priest. This experience of faith is important. We say we must seek God, go to him and ask forgiveness, but when we go, he is waiting for us, he is there first! In Spanish we have a word that explains this well: *primerear* — the Lord always gets there before us, he gets there first, he is waiting for us! To find someone waiting for you is truly a great grace. You go to him as a sinner, but he is waiting to forgive you.”

- To encounter Jesus is to encounter one who has been waiting for us to share us his mercy, it's to meet one who calls us precisely in his merciful love, it's to proclaim when he asks, "Who do you say that I am?," that he is the long-awaited Messiah come to set the captives free, the Son of the Living God who is slow to anger and abounding in merciful love, to the one who awaits us with the love of the Prodigal Father to restore us to communion with him and others.
- Pope Francis said in the interview aboard Shepherd One coming back from Brazil that the Church must follow the path of mercy and that this is a special need of our time: "The Church is a mother: she has to go out to heal those who are hurting, with mercy. If the Lord never tires of forgiving, we have no other choice than this: first of all, to care for those who are hurting. The Church is a mother, and she must travel this path of mercy. And find a form of mercy for all. When the prodigal son returned home, I don't think his father told him: "You, sit down and listen: what did you do with the money?" No! He celebrated! ...And I believe that this is a *kairos*: this time is a kairos of mercy. But John Paul II had the first intuition of this, when he began with Faustina Kowalska, the Divine Mercy... He had something, he had intuited that this was a need in our time."
- During his first Sunday Mass and then Angelus Message on March 17, he proclaimed the beauty of God's undying mercy as not only Jesus' most powerful message but the Church's most powerful continued message to the world: "Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think – and I say it with humility – that this is the Lord's most powerful message: mercy. It was he himself who said: "I did not come for the righteous". The righteous justify themselves. Go on, then, even if you can do it, I cannot! But they believe they can. "I came for sinners" (Mk 2:17).... The Lord never tires of forgiving: never! It is we who tire of asking his forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace not to tire of asking forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving."
- Understanding our need for God's mercy is key for us to recognize who we really are.
 - (*Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio, El Jesuita*) An authentically Christian discipleship begins our recognition that we're sinners in need of salvation and the concomitant experience that that Savior looks on us with merciful love. "For me, feeling oneself a sinner is one of the most beautiful things that can happen, if it leads to its ultimate consequences" the future Pope Francis said in "El Jesuita." At the Easter Vigil, he says, we sing "O Felix culpa," exulting in the "happy sin" that brought us to experience the love of the Redeemer. "When a person becomes conscious that he is a sinner and is saved by Jesus," Cardinal Bergoglio said, "he proclaims this truth to himself and discovers the pearl of great price, the treasure buried in the field. He discovers the greatest thing in life: that there is someone who loves him profoundly, who gave his life for him." Many Catholics have sadly not had this fundamental Christian experience. "There are people who believe the right things, who have received catechesis and accepted the Christian faith in some way, but who do not have the experience of having been saved," he lamented. He then gave a powerful metaphor of what the true experience of God's mercy is like. "It's one thing when people tell us a story about someone's risking his life to save a boy drowning in the river. It's something else when I'm the one drowning and someone gives his life to save me." That's what Christ did for us to save us from the eternal watery grave of the deluge of sin. That's what we should celebrate every day of our life, just like someone whose life has been saved by a hero would never be able to forget it, not to mention thank him enough. Unfortunately, he said, "There are people to whom you tell the story who don't see it, who don't want to see, who don't want to know what happened to that boy, or who always have escape hatches from the situation of drowning and who therefore lack the experience of who they are. I believe that only we great sinners have this grace."
- Everything Jesus did was to share his mercy
 - (July 4, 2013 homily) The Pope based his meditation on the miracle of the healing of a paralytic (Mt 9:1-8). He reflected on the sentiments that must have shocked the crippled man when, while being carried on his bed, he heard Jesus telling him "take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven". Those who were near Jesus and heard his words "said: 'this man is blaspheming'; only God can forgive sins". And Jesus, to make them understand, asked them "Which is easier, to forgive sins or to heal?". Jesus, St Peter said, went about doing good, curing all".
 - "But when Jesus", the Pope continued, "healed a sick man he was not only a healer. When he taught people — let us think of the Beatitudes — he was not only a catechist, a preacher of morals. When

he remonstrated against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees, he was not a revolutionary who wanted to drive out the Romans. No, these things that Jesus did, healing, teaching and speaking out against hypocrisy, **were only a sign of something greater that Jesus was doing: he was forgiving sins**”.

- Reconciling the world in Christ in the name of the Father: “this is Jesus' mission. Everything else — healing, teaching, reprimands — **are only signs of that deeper miracle which is the re-creation of the world**. Thus reconciliation is the re-creation of the world; and **the most profound mission of Jesus is the redemption of all of us sinners**. And Jesus”, the Pope added, “did not do this with words, with actions or by walking on the road, no! He did it with his flesh. It is truly he, God, who becomes one of us, a man, **to heal us from within**”.
- God has a preferential option for those in most need of his mercy
 - (Daily Mass, Nov 7, 2013
 - Indeed, the Holy Father said, God “**has a certain weakness of love for those who are furthest away, who are lost. He goes in search of them**. And how does he search? He searches to the very end. Like the shepherd who journeys into the darkness looking for his lost sheep until he finds it” or “like the woman who, when she loses her coin, lights a lamp, sweeps the house and seeks diligently until she finds it”. God, seeks out the lost because he thinks: “I will not lose this son, he is mine! And I don't want to lose him!”. But God's work does not consist only in seeking out the lost, Pope Francis then added. “When he finds us, when he has found the lost sheep” he neither sets it aside nor does he ask us: “Why did you get lost? Why did you fall?”. Rather, he restores what was lost to its proper place. And when this happens “it is God who rejoices. God rejoices not in the death of the sinner but rather that he be restored to life”.
 - (Aug 25, 2013 Angelus)
 - Some of you, perhaps, might say to me: “But, Father, I am certainly excluded because I am a great sinner: I have done terrible things, I have done lots of them in my life”. No, you are not excluded! Precisely for this reason **you are the favorite**, because Jesus prefers sinners, always, in order to forgive them, to love them. Jesus is waiting for you to embrace you, to pardon you. Do not be afraid: he is waiting for you. Take heart, have the courage to enter through his door.
- Sharing his mercy is God's great joy
 - (April 7 Homily, St. John Lateran Cathedral, for Divine Mercy Sunday): The Father, with patience, love, hope and mercy, had never for a second stopped thinking about [the Prodigal Son], and as soon as he sees him still far off, he runs out to meet him and embraces him with tenderness, the tenderness of God, without a word of reproach: he has returned! And that is the joy of the Father. In that embrace for his son is all this joy: he has returned! God is always waiting for us, he never grows tired. Jesus shows us this merciful patience of God so that we can regain confidence, hope – always!
 - (Sept 15, 2013 Angelus) In the Liturgy today we read chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke, which contains three parables of mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the longest of them, characteristic of St Luke, the parable of the father of two sons. ... All three of these parables speak of the joy of God. ... The joy of God is forgiving, the joy of God is forgiving! ... **The whole Gospel, all of Christianity, is here!** ... Mercy is the true force that can save man and the world from the “cancer” that is sin, moral evil, spiritual evil. Only love fills the void, the negative chasms that evil opens in hearts and in history. Only love can do this, and this is God's joy! Jesus is all mercy, Jesus is all love: he is God made man
- We too must celebrate that mercy (July 5, 2013 daily homily)
 - The message that Jesus wants to give, the Pope said, is one that people have always had trouble understanding: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”. Our God is indeed a God of mercy. You can see it well in the story of Matthew”.
 - Jesus looks at Matthew and awakens “something new” within him, “something that he did not know”. The “gaze of Jesus”, explained the Holy Father, makes him feel an interior “wonder”, and

makes him hear “the call of Jesus: follow me”. “It only took a moment” to understand that that look had changed his life forever. And it is in this moment that “Matthew says yes, leaves everything and goes with the Lord”.

- The first moment of the encounter, which consists of “a deep spiritual experience”, is followed by a second experience: that of celebration. The Gospel continues with Jesus sitting at table with publicans and sinners; those who “were rejected by society”. But for the Pope this rejection “is the contradiction of the celebration of God: the Lord feasts with sinners”. Addressing this point Pope Francis referred to Luke’s Gospel (15) where it clearly says that there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who have no need of repentance. This is why celebration is “very important” for the Pope, because the encounter with Jesus and the mercy of God should be celebrated.
- But life is not one big party, says Pope Francis. There is a time for celebration, but then there must be “daily work, fuelled by the memory of that first encounter”. It is the memory of mercy and of that celebration that “gives Matthew, and everyone” who has chosen to follow Christ, the strength “to go forward”. **This, the Pope added, must be remembered forever. [Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his mercy endures forever (Ps 107)].**
- The way we celebrate that mercy best is by sharing it with others, seeking them out so that they too may rejoice in God’s mercy.
 - July 28 interview on the plane returning from Rio: “The Church has to [go out in search of sinners with love, like the Father went out after his Son.] When there is someone... not only wait for them, but go out and find them! That is what mercy is.”
 - (March 17 Homily) “I think we too are the people who, on the one hand want to listen to Jesus, but on the other hand, at times, like to find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others. And Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think – and I say it with humility – that this is the Lord’s most powerful message: mercy. It was he himself who said: “I did not come for the righteous”. The righteous justify themselves. Go on, then, even if you can do it, I cannot! But they believe they can. “I came for sinners” (Mk 2:17). Think of the gossip after the call of Matthew: he associates with sinners! (cf. Mk 2:16). He comes for us, when we recognize that we are sinners. But if we are like the Pharisee, before the altar, who said: I thank you Lord, that I am not like other men, and especially not like the one at the door, like that publican (cf. Lk 18:11-12), then we do not know the Lord’s heart, and we will never have the joy of experiencing this mercy!
- The Church is made for sinners. It’s a field hospital for sinners.
 - (October 2, 2013 Audience). You could say to me: but the Church is made up of sinners, we see them everyday. And this is true: we are a Church of sinners; and we sinners are called to let ourselves be transformed, renewed, sanctified by God. There has been in history the temptation for some to say: the Church is only the Church of the pure, the perfectly consistent, and expels all the rest. This is not true! This is heresy! The Church, that is holy, does not reject sinners; she does not reject us all; she does not reject because she calls everyone, welcomes them, is open even to those furthest from her, she calls everyone to allow themselves to be enfolded by the mercy, the tenderness and the forgiveness of the Father, who offers everyone the possibility of meeting him, of journeying toward sanctity. “Well! Father, I am a sinner, I have tremendous sins, how can I possibly feel part of the Church? Dear brother, dear sister, this is exactly what the Lord wants, that you say to him: “Lord, here I am, with my sins”. Is one of you here without sin? Anyone? No one, not one of us. We all carry our sins with us. But the Lord wants to hear us say to him: “Forgive me, help me to walk, change my heart!”. And the Lord can change your heart. In the Church, the God we encounter is not a merciless judge, but like the Father in the Gospel parable. You may be like the son who left home, who sank to the depths, farthest from the Gospel. When you have the strength to say: I want to come home, you will find the door open. God will come to meet you because he is always waiting for you, God is always waiting for you, God embraces you, kisses you and celebrates. That is how the Lord is, that is how the tenderness of our Heavenly Father is. The Lord wants us to belong to a Church that knows how to open her arms and welcome everyone, that is not a house for the few, but a house for everyone, where all can be renewed, transformed, sanctified by his love, the strongest and the weakest, sinners, the indifferent, those who feel discouraged or lost. The Church

offers all the possibility of following a path of holiness, that is the path of the Christian: she brings us to encounter Jesus Christ in the Sacraments, especially in Confession and in the Eucharist; she communicates the Word of God to us, she lets us live in charity, in the love of God for all. Let us ask ourselves then, will we let ourselves be sanctified? Are we a Church that calls and welcomes sinners with open arms, that gives courage and hope, or are we a Church closed in on herself? Are we a Church where the love of God dwells, where one cares for the other, where one prays for the others?

- Mercy is in fact the great gift the Church offers the world
 - The Sacrament of Mercy renews the graces of our baptism
 - (November 13, 2013 Catechesis) I cannot be baptized many times, but I can go to Confession and by doing so renew the grace of Baptism. It is as though I were being baptized for a second time. The Lord Jesus is very very good and never tires of forgiving us. Even when the door that Baptism opens to us in order to enter the Church is a little closed, due to our weaknesses and our sins. Confession reopens it, precisely because it is a second Baptism that forgives us of everything and illuminates us to go forward with the light of the Lord
 - We must trust in Jesus enough to trust in what he did.
 - (Nov 20 Catechesis) We must remember that the principal agent in the forgiveness of sins is the Holy Spirit. In his first appearance to the Apostles, in the Upper Room, the Risen Jesus made the gesture of breathing on them saying: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:22,23). Jesus, transfigured in his body, is already the new man who offers the Paschal gifts, the fruit of his death and resurrection. What are these gifts? Peace, joy, the forgiveness of sins, mission, but above all he gives the Spirit who is the source of all these. The breath of Jesus, accompanied by the words with which he communicates the Spirit, signifies the transmission of life, the new life reborn from forgiveness.
 - But before making this gesture of breathing and transmitting the Holy Spirit, Jesus reveals the wounds in his hands and side: these wounds represent the price of our salvation. The Holy Spirit brings us God’s pardon “by passing through” Jesus’ wounds. These wounds he wished to keep; even now in Heaven he is showing the Father the wounds by which he redeemed us. By the power of these wounds, our sins are pardoned: thus, Jesus gave his life for our peace, for our joy, for the gift of grace in our souls, for the forgiveness of our sins. It is very, very beautiful to look at Jesus in this way!
 - And we come to the second element: Jesus gave the Apostles the power to forgive sins. It is a little difficult to understand how a man can forgive sins, but Jesus gives this power. The Church is the depository of the power of the keys, of opening or closing to forgiveness. God forgives every man in his sovereign mercy, but he himself willed that those who belong to Christ and to the Church receive forgiveness by means of the ministers of the community. Through the apostolic ministry the mercy of God reaches me, my faults are forgiven and joy is bestowed on me. In this way Jesus calls us to live out reconciliation in the ecclesial, the community, dimension as well. And this is very beautiful. The Church, who is holy and at the same time in need of penitence, accompanies us on the journey of conversion throughout our life. The Church is not mistress of the power of the keys, but a servant of the ministry of mercy and rejoices every time. Perhaps many do not understand the ecclesial dimension of forgiveness, because individualism, subjectivism, always dominates, and even we Christians are affected by this. Certainly, God forgives every penitent sinner, personally, but the Christian is tied to Christ, and Christ is united to the Church. For us Christians there is a further gift, there is also a further duty: to pass humbly through the ecclesial community. We have to appreciate it; it is a gift, a cure, a protection as well as the assurance that God has forgiven me. I go to my brother priest and I say: “Father, I did this...”. And he responds: “But I forgive you; God forgives you”. **At that moment, I am sure that God has forgiven me!** And this is beautiful, this is having the surety that God forgives us always, he never tires of forgiving us. And we must never tire of going to ask for forgiveness. **You may feel**

ashamed to tell your sins, but as our mothers and our grandmothers used to say, it is better to be red once than yellow a thousand times. We blush once but then our sins are forgiven and we go forward.

- Lastly, a final point: the priest is the instrument for the forgiveness of sins. God's forgiveness is given to us in the Church, it is transmitted to us by means of the ministry of our brother, the priest; and he too is a man, who, like us in need of mercy, truly becomes the instrument of mercy, bestowing on us the boundless love of God the Father. **Priests and bishops too have to go to confession: we are all sinners. Even the Pope confesses every 15 days, because the Pope is also a sinner.** And the confessor hears what I tell him, he counsels me and forgives me, because we are all in need of this forgiveness. Sometimes you hear someone claiming to confess directly to God... Yes, as I said before, God is always listening, but in the Sacrament of Reconciliation he sends a brother to bestow his pardon, the certainty of forgiveness, in the name of the Church.
- The Pope calls us all to examine how often we receive this great gift of God's healing love.
 - (Feb 19, 2014 General audience)
 - The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a Sacrament of healing. When I go to confession, it is in order to be healed, to heal my soul, to heal my heart and to be healed of some wrongdoing. The biblical icon which best expresses them in their deep bond is the episode of the forgiving and healing of the paralytic, where the Lord Jesus is revealed at the same time as the physician of souls and of bodies (cf. Mk 2:1-12; Mt 9:1-8; Lk 5:17-26).
 - The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation flows directly from the Paschal Mystery. In fact, on the evening of Easter the Lord appeared to the disciples, who were locked in the Upper Room, and after addressing them with the greeting, "Peace be with you!", he breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven" (Jn 20:21-23). This passage reveals to us the most profound dynamic contained in this Sacrament.
 - First, the fact that the forgiveness of our sins is not something we can give ourselves. I cannot say: I forgive my sins. Forgiveness is asked for, is asked of another, and in Confession we ask for forgiveness from Jesus. Forgiveness is not the fruit of our own efforts but rather a gift, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit who fills us with the wellspring of mercy and of grace that flows unceasingly from the open heart of the Crucified and Risen Christ. Secondly, it reminds us that we can truly be at peace only if we allow ourselves to be reconciled, in the Lord Jesus, with the Father and with the brethren. And we have all felt this in our hearts, when we have gone to confession with a soul weighed down and with a little sadness; and when we receive Jesus' forgiveness we feel at peace, with that peace of soul which is so beautiful, and which only Jesus can give, only Him.
 - Over time, the celebration of this Sacrament has passed from a public form — because at first it was made publicly — to a personal one, to the confidential form of Confession. This however does not entail losing the ecclesial matrix that constitutes its vital context. In fact, the Christian community is the place where the Spirit is made present, who renews hearts in the love of God and makes all of the brethren one thing in Christ Jesus. That is why it is not enough to ask the Lord for forgiveness in one's own mind and heart, but why instead it is necessary humbly and trustingly to confess one's sins to a minister of the Church. In the celebration of this Sacrament, the priest represents not only God but also the whole community, who sees itself in the weakness of each of its members, who listens and is moved by his repentance, and who is reconciled with him, which cheers him up and accompanies him on the path of conversion and human and Christian growth. One might say: I confess only to God. Yes, you can say to God "forgive me" and say your sins, but our sins are also committed against the brethren, and against the Church. That is why

it is necessary to ask pardon of the Church, and of the brethren in the person of the priest. “But Father, I am ashamed ...”. Shame is also good, it is healthy to feel a little shame, because being ashamed is salutary. In my country when a person feels no shame, we say that he is “shameless”; a “sin verguenza”. But shame too does good, because it makes us more humble, and the priest receives this confession with love and tenderness and forgives us on God’s behalf. Also from a human point of view, in order to unburden oneself, it is good to talk with a brother and tell the priest these things which are weighing so much on my heart. And one feels that one is unburdening oneself before God, with the Church, with his brother. **Do not be afraid of Confession! When one is in line to go to Confession, one feels all these things, even shame, but then when one finishes Confession one leaves free, grand, beautiful, forgiven, candid, happy. This is the beauty of Confession! I would like to ask you — but don’t say it aloud, everyone respond in his heart: when was the last time you made your confession? Everyone think about it ... Two days, two weeks, two years, twenty years, forty years? Everyone count, everyone say ‘when was the last time I went to confession?’. And if much time has passed, do not lose another day. Go, the priest will be good.** Jesus is there, and Jesus is the most benevolent of priests, Jesus receives you, he receives you with so much love. Be courageous and go to Confession!

- Dear friends, celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation means being enfolded in a warm embrace: it is the embrace of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us recall that beautiful, beautiful parable of the son who left his home with the money of his inheritance. He wasted all the money and then, when he had nothing left, he decided to return home, not as a son but as a servant. His heart was filled with so much guilt and shame. The surprise came when he began to speak, to ask for forgiveness, his father did not let him speak, he embraced him, he kissed him, and he began to make merry. But I am telling you: each time we go to confession, God embraces us. God rejoices! Let us go forward on this road. May God bless you!
- Permanent Deacons are called to receive this Sacrament frequently
 - National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States
 - 113. The objectives of the spiritual dimension in formation are (a) to deepen his prayer life— personal, familial, communal, and liturgical— with special emphasis upon participation in Eucharist, daily if possible; daily celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, especially morning and evening prayer; lectio divina , devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints; and regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation; (b) to assist the participant, with the help of his spiritual director and those responsible for formation, to deepen and cultivate a service commitment to God’s word, the Church, and the world; (c) to acquaint him with the Catholic spiritual tradition reflected in classic spiritual writings and in the lives of the saints, and with contemporary developments in spirituality— a faith seeking to be expressed and celebrated; (d) to affirm the Christian witness of matrimonial and celibate spirituality; (e) to incarnate his spirituality in the real life and history of the people whom he encounters each day in places where he lives, works, and serves
 - 193. The aspirant formation community plays a significant role in spiritual formation. The aspirant path should include the following: Regular celebration of the Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
 - NORMS: The spiritual dimension of this path happens through the candidate’s meeting regularly with his spiritual director and those responsible for formation. The goals are for the candidate to increase in holiness; to deepen his prayer life through the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Liturgy of the Hours, and devotions; and to acquaint himself with the Catholic spiritual tradition reflected in classic and modern spiritual writings. (216, 217)

that they make in their spiritual lives.”

- Pope Paul VI described those strides: “Frequent and reverent recourse to this sacrament, even when only venial sin is in question, is of great value. Frequent Confession is not mere ritual repetition, nor is it merely a psychological exercise. Rather it is a constant effort to bring to perfection the grace of our Baptism, so that we carry about in our bodies the death of Jesus Christ who died; so that the life Jesus Christ lives may be more and more manifested in us.”
- Pope Francis has been calling all of us to a renewed appreciation for, and reception of, the Sacrament of Penance. He has said on numerous occasions that he goes to confession every two weeks, because “the Pope, too, is a sinner.” So that you know I practice what I preach — and write! — I see my confessor every week.
- While the Church has never officially defined how frequent someone seeking holiness should partake of the Sacrament of Mercy, it has implied that, like Pope Francis, we should be going at least every two weeks. We glimpse this in the way it handles the conditions necessary for receiving plenary indulgences, where it teaches that to receive such an indulgence, we need to have gone to confession within eight days prior or after.
- If we are going to confession at least every other week, then we would always be open to receiving a plenary indulgence, either for ourselves or for others. The question for each of us would be: Why wouldn’t we want to be in that state of receptivity always?
- St. John Paul used to tell young people that if they wanted to mature faster, one of the best means was frequent confession, because a thorough examination of conscience would help them to get to know themselves, a sorrowful confession would assist them to grow in a sense of personal responsibility, and the firm resolve to change one’s behavior would be an enormous aid in the formation of the virtues. No matter how young we are, these truths remain valid.
- What are the fruits of frequent confession? The Catechism lists several of them: “The regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful” (CCC 1458).
- Pope Pius XII gave a more extended list of the spiritual advantages in his 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis*. “To ensure more rapid progress day by day in the path of virtue, the pious practice of frequent confession, which was introduced into the Church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, should be earnestly advocated,” he wrote. “By it genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased in virtue of the Sacrament itself.”
- Let’s examine briefly the eight benefits he named.
 - *Genuine self-knowledge is increased* — Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. The regular, thorough, courageous examination of our conscience helps us to do an honest appraisal of our behaviors, character and movements of the soul. It allows us to know ourselves with God’s light, both the good and the ugly.
 - *Christian humility grows* — Humility begins with seeing ourselves as we really are, but then extends to looking at and relating to God and others reverently as they really are. Humility helps us to grasp that we hold a treasure in vessels of clay and allows us more easily to serve with love.
 - *Bad habits are corrected* — We all have bad habits, but few of us fight intelligently to extirpate them. Frequent confession helps us to identify our vices, probe with God’s assistance their root causes, and come up with a resolute game plan day-by-day to battle against and eradicate them.
 - *Spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted* — Pondering Jesus’ admonition to the Church of Laodicea (Rev 3:14-19), Pope Benedict said, “The greatest danger for a Christian [is] not that he may say ‘no,’ but that he may say a very lukewarm ‘yes.’ This being lukewarm is what discredits Christianity. Faith must become in us a flame of love ... that fires up my being ...

and so also fires up my neighbor.” Frequent reception of God’s mercy fills us with the flame of his love and burns away spiritual dross.

- *The conscience is purified* — To keep our inner organ of sensitivity attuned to God, we must not only regularly calibrate it through examination our actions in light of God’s guidance but receive the sacramental help God gives. Trying to follow an unpurified conscience is as wise as trying to drive looking through a sullied windshield.
- *The will is strengthened* — A strong will perseveres in doing what’s right and in saying to God, “Thy will be done.” Our failures and falls discourage us and weaken the will. God’s mercy picks us up and inspires us to keep fighting.
- *A saving self-control is attained* — To be Jesus’ disciple, we have to deny ourselves, pick up our Cross and follow him. Frequent confession helps us to control our egomania and discipline our appetites so that we can give ourselves to God and others.
- *Grace is increased in virtue of the Sacrament itself* — Grace is our participation as creatures in the very life and love of God. The sacraments give the grace they signify and the Sacrament of Penance helps us to live in the truly unbelievable, life-changing reality of God’s merciful love.
- For those striving to grow in holiness, how can we neglect these fruits of frequent Confession? During his first Angelus meditation, Pope Francis eloquently stated, “God never tires of forgiving us, but we tire of asking for forgiveness,” and prayed, “May we never tire of asking for what God never tires of giving.” Frequent confession is the means by which we never fatigue of receiving the love God lavishly wants to give.
- We must forgive others if we hope to receive forgiveness from God
 - (July 28 interview on plane) But if a person, whether it be a lay person, a priest or a religious sister, commits a sin and then converts, the Lord forgives, and when the Lord forgives, the Lord forgets and this is very important for our lives. When we confess our sins and we truly say, “I have sinned in this”, the Lord forgets, and so we have no right not to forget, because otherwise we would run the risk of the Lord not forgetting our sins. That is a danger. This is important: a theology of sin. Many times I think of Saint Peter. He committed one of the worst sins, that is he denied Christ, and even with this sin they made him Pope. We have to think a great deal about that.
- Priests must above all be ministers of mercy
 - (Spadaro interview) The ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all. The confessor, for example, is always in danger of being either too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the person. The rigorist washes his hands so that he leaves it to the commandment. The loose minister washes his hands by simply saying, “This is not a sin’ or something like that. In pastoral ministry we must accompany people, and we must heal their wounds.
- Confession isn’t a torture chamber but a place to encounter Christ in his tenderness
 - (April 29, 2013 Daily Homily) The confessional is neither a “laundromat” for sin removal nor “a torture session” where sins are exchanged for beatings. Confession is a meeting place with Jesus, a place of tenderness. We need to approach this sacrament meekly, gladly, with simplicity, with trust and armed with “blessed shame,” the “virtue of humility” by which we recognize ourselves as sinners.
- To preach about mercy doesn’t mean that we take it for granted, as if receiving God’s mercy is not needed. We must recognize how much we need it and come to get it — and not remain in our sins.
 - (May 17, 2013 daily homily) When Peter later remembers how he denied evening knowing Jesus, “he feels ashamed. Peter’s shame.... Peter is a great man. A sinner. But the Lord shows him, him and us all, we are all sinners”. “The problem is not sinning”, but “not repenting of the sin, not feeling ashamed of what we have done. That is the problem”.
 - Pope Francis distinguishes on three different occasions sinners from the corrupt
 - (June 3, 2013 daily homily)
 - “Three types of Christians in the Church come to mind: the sinners, the corrupt, the saints. We don’t need to say too much about sinners because that is what we all are.

We recognize this from within and we know what a sinner is; and, if one of us does not understand himself to be a sinner, he should visit a spiritual doctor: something is not right". The Holy Father took time to explain the characteristics of a corrupt person, referring Gospel: God "called us with love, he protects us. Yet then he gives us freedom, he gives us all this love 'on lease'. It's as if he were to say to us: protect and keep my love just as I safeguard you. This is the dialogue between God and us: to safeguard love. Everything begins with this love".

- Then, however, the tenant farmers to whom the vineyard had been entrusted "thought highly of themselves, they felt independent of God", explained the Pontiff. In this way "they took possession of the land and forfeited their relationship with the Master of the vineyard: We ourselves are the masters! And when someone came to collect the part of the harvest that belonged to the master, they beat him, they treated him shamefully, they killed him". This means losing the relationship with God, no longer feeling the need "for that master". **That is what makes the "corrupt, those who were sinners like us but have gone a step further": they are "solidified in sin and they don't feel the need for God". Or at least they trick themselves into not perceiving it,** because "in our genetic makeup there is this relationship with God, and since they cannot deny it, they create a unique God: themselves". These are the corrupt, and "this is also a danger for us: that we become corrupted"
- The Bishop of Rome concluded, "The Apostle John calls the corrupt the antichrist who are among us but not of us. The word of God speaks of the saints as of a light: they are before God's throne in adoration. Let us ask the Lord for the grace to know that we are sinners — truly sinners. The grace not to become corrupt... the grace to follow the way of sanctity."
- (Daily homily Nov 11, 2013)
 - The Pope based his homily on a passage taken from the Gospel of St Luke: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (cf. Lk 17:1-6). "When I read this passage," he said, "I always see in it a portrait of Jesus... He never tires of forgiving. And he counsels us to do the same". Jesus' attitude towards those who sin and sincerely repent is always one of forgiveness.
 - However, Pope Francis added, there is another passage which reads: "Woe to those by whom scandals come". "Jesus," he said, "is not speaking here about sin but about scandal" and he says: It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea, than that he should scandalize one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves!". The Pope therefore asked: "But what is the difference between sin and scandal?". The difference, he said, is that "whoever sins and repents asks for forgiveness, he feels weak, he sees himself as a child of God, he humbles himself and asks Jesus to save him. But the one who gives scandal and does not repent continues to sin and pretends to be a Christian". It is as though he leads "a double life," and he added, "the double life of a Christian causes great harm".
 - "**This is the difference between a sinner and a man who is corrupt. One who leads a double life is corrupt, whereas one who sins would like not to sin, but he is weak or he finds himself in a condition he cannot resolve, and so he goes to the Lord and asks to be forgiven.** The Lord loves such a person, he accompanies him, he remains with him. And we have to say, all of us who are here: sinner yes, corrupt no".
 - Those who are corrupt, Pope Francis continued, do not know what humility is. Jesus likens them to whitewashed tombs: they appear beautiful on the outside, but inside they are full of dead bones. "And a Christian who boasts of being a Christian but does not lead a Christian life is corrupt". We all know such people, and we all know

“how much harm corrupt Christians, and corrupt priests do to the Church. What harm they do to the Church! They do not live in the spirit of the Gospel, but in the spirit of worldliness. St Paul states it clearly to the Romans: Do not be conformed to this world (cf. Rom 12:2). However, it is even stronger in the original text: do not enter into this world’s schemes, into its framework, because this leads to a double life”.

- Pope Francis concluded: **“A varnished putrefaction: this is the life of someone who is corrupt. And Jesus does not call them simply sinners. He calls them hypocrites. And yet Jesus always forgives, he never tires of forgiving. The only thing he asks is that there be no desire to lead this double life. Let us ask the Lord for the grace to flee from every form of deceit and to see ourselves as sinners. Sinners yes, corrupt no”.**

▪ (Daily Homily, January 14)

- Pope Francis likened the sons of Eli to “the corrupt Christian, the corrupt layperson, the corrupt priest, the corrupt bishop. They take advantage of the situation, of the privilege of faith, of being a Christian. And their hearts become corrupt. We think of Judas: perhaps it was through jealousy and envy that he began to dip his hand into the purse” and “thus his heart began to be corrupted. John — the beloved Apostle who loved the whole world, who preached love — says of Judas: he is a thief. Full stop. It’s clear: he was corrupt. And from a corrupt heart betrayal also comes. He betrays Jesus”.
- “Let us ask the Lord,” Pope Francis concluded, “that these two readings may help us in our Christian lives not to become corrupt like the sons of Eli; not to be lukewarm like Eli; but to be like Jesus, with that zeal to seek out people, to heal people, to love people”.

▪ (Daily Homily, February 13) Solomon

- “The wisest man in the world” lost his faith this way, the Holy Father said. Solomon allowed himself to become corrupt because of “an indiscreet love, without discretion, because of his passions”. Yet, the Pope said, you might say: “But Father, Solomon did not lose his faith, he still believed in God, he could recite the Bible” from memory. To this objection the Pope replied: “having faith does not mean being able to recite the Creed: you can still recite the Creed after having lost your faith!”.
- Solomon, the Pope continued, “was a sinner in the beginning like his father David. But then he “continued living as a sinner” and became “corrupt: his heart was corrupted by idolatry”. His father David “was a sinner, but the Lord had forgiven all of his sins because he was humble and asked for forgiveness”. Instead, Solomon’s “vanity and passions led” him to “corruption”. For, the Pope explained, “the heart is precisely the place where you can lose your faith”.
- Referring to a passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, the Pope expressed his hope that “no evil seed will grow” in the human heart. It was “the seed of evil passions, growing in Solomon’s heart” that “led him to idolatry”. To prevent this seed from developing, Pope Francis indicated “the good counsel” that was suggested in the Gospel reading of the day: “Receive with meekness the Word that has been planted in you and it can lead you to salvation”. With this knowledge, the Pope concluded, “we follow the path of the Canaanite woman, the pagan woman, accepting the Word of God, which was planted in us and will lead us to salvation”. The Word of God is “powerful, and it will safeguard us on the path and prevent us from the destruction of corruption and all that leads to idolatry”

- Overcoming this tendency to dismiss our need for God’s mercy is urgent. We can’t grow accustomed to a mediocre life (Oct 24, 2013 daily homily)
 - Yet we are weak and we often fall. Does this mean that we are not on the road of sanctification, Pope Francis asked? “Yes and no... If you grow accustomed to a life that is mediocre, and you say:

‘I believe in Jesus Christ, but I live as I want’, then this does not sanctify you, it is not all right, it is absurd”. But if you say ‘yes, I am a sinner; I am weak’ and you continually turn to the Lord and say to him: ‘Lord, you have the power, increase my faith; you can heal me’, then through the sacrament of reconciliation even our imperfections are taken up into this way of sanctification”.

- “Fertilizer principle” — God takes our manure, all the refuse, and makes it a principle for new growth.
- It’s a battle that we’re called to win, but we need to be sincere in our examination, confession and amendment (Oct 25, 2013 daily homily)
 - Quoting St Paul, he continued: “I know that nothing good dwells within me, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells in me”.
 - **Pope Francis called this “the Christian battle”.** Paul speaks of it in this way: “when I want to do the good, evil is right beside me. In fact, I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of the mind, making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members”. However, the Pope noted, **“we do not always have the courage to speak about this battle as Paul does. We always seek to justify ourselves”**.
 - It is against this attitude that we must battle.. “If we fail to recognize this, we cannot obtain God’s forgiveness; if being a sinner is only a word or a way of speaking, then we do not need God’s forgiveness. But if it is a reality that enslaves us then we truly need the interior freedom and strength of the Lord”.
 - Paul shows us the way out, the Pope said. “Confess your sin and your tendency to sin to the community, do not hide it. This is the disposition which the Church asks of all of us, which Jesus asks of all of us: humbly to confess our sins”.
 - **The Church in her wisdom points to the sacrament of confession.** “Let us go to our brother the priest and let us make this interior confession, the same confession that Paul himself makes”.
 - **The Pontiff then commented on those who refuse to speak with a priest under the pretense that they confess directly to God.** “It’s easy”, he said. **“It’s like confessing by email... God is there, far away; I say things and there is no face to face, there is not a face to face encounter”**. But Paul “confessed his weakness to his brothers face to face”.
 - Citing the Gospel canticle, Pope Francis confided that he admires the way children make their confession. “During the Alleluia we said: ‘I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden the mysteries of the kingdom from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes’”. He then added, “Little ones have a certain wisdom. When a child comes to make his confession, he never speaks in generalities. He says: ‘Father, I did this, and I did this to my aunt, I did this to someone else, and to someone else I said this word’, and they say the word. They are real, they possess the simplicity of truth. And we always tend to hide the reality of our weakness and poverty”.
 - He then added: “But if there is one thing that is beautiful, it is when we confess our sins in the presence of God just as they are. We always feel the grace of being ashamed. To feel ashamed before God is a grace. It is a grace to say: ‘I am ashamed’. Let us think about St Peter after Jesus’ miracle on the lake: “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinner”. He was ashamed of his sin.
 - Going to confession, the Pope said, is “going to an encounter with the Lord who forgives us, who loves us. And our shame is what we offer him: ‘Lord, I am a sinner, but I am not so bad, I am capable of feeling ashamed’”.
 - The Holy Father concluded: “let us ask for the grace to live in the truth without hiding anything from the Lord and without hiding anything from ourselves”.
- And in this battle, there’s a real opponent, the Devil. (Oct 11, 2013 daily Mass homily)
 - “We cannot obtain the victory of Jesus over evil and the devil by halves” for “he who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters”.
 - “On this point,” Pope Francis said, “there is no shadow of a doubt. A battle exists, a battle in which the eternal salvation of us all is at stake”. There are no alternatives, he said, even if at times we hear about “pastoral proposals” that seem more accommodating. “No! Either you are with Jesus or you are against him”.

- The final guide is watchfulness. “We must always be vigilant against the deception and seduction of the evil one”. Again citing the Gospel, he said: “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace”.
- “We can ask ourselves: Do I keep watch over myself? Do I guard my heart? My feelings? My thoughts? Do I guard the treasure of grace? Do I protect the Holy Spirit's presence within me? If we do not protect this presence”, he continued again to the Gospel, “one stronger than he assails him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoil”.
- Pope Francis also stressed that we mustn't be naive: “the demon is shrewd; he is never cast out forever, this will only happen on the last day”. “No,” he continued returning to the Gospel, “when the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest; and finding none he says: ‘I will return to my house from which I came’. And when he comes he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first”
- “This is the devil's strategy”, Pope Francis warned: “you become a Christian, go forward in your faith, and I will leave you alone; I will leave you in peace. But then, once you have grown accustomed to it, are no longer watchful and feel secure I will return”. However, he continued, “today's Gospel begins with the demon being cast out and concludes with the demon coming back. St Peter said he is like a roaring lion prowling around us”. This is no mere fable, he said: “it is the Word of the Lord”.
- “Please, let's not do business with the devil,” he said. “The devil is on the first page of the Bible and he is still there on the last, when God has his final victory”.
- Pope Francis concluded: “Let us ask the Lord for the grace to take these things seriously. He came to battle for our salvation, and he has conquered the devil”.
- In every confession, we anticipate the judgment and ensure that at that judgment it's God who rejoices, not the devil.
 - (Dec 11, 2013 Audience on Judgment) A further suggestion is offered to us by the Gospel of John, where it explicitly states that “God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (Jn 3:17-18). This means, then, that this final judgment is already in progress, it begins now over the course of our lives. Thus judgment is pronounced at every moment of life, as it sums up our faith in the salvation that is present and active in Christ, or of our unbelief, whereby we close in upon ourselves. But if we close ourselves to the love of Jesus, we condemn ourselves. Salvation is to open oneself to Jesus, it is he who saves us. If we are sinners — and we all are — we ask him for forgiveness and if we go to him with the desire to be good, the Lord forgives us. But for this we must open ourselves to Jesus' love, which is stronger than all else. Jesus' love is great, Jesus' love is merciful, Jesus' love forgives; but you have to open yourself and to open oneself means to repent, to accuse oneself of the things that are not good and which we have done. The Lord Jesus gave himself and he continues to give himself to us, in order to fill us with all of the mercy and grace of the Father. We then, in a certain sense, can become judges of ourselves, by condemning ourselves to exclusion from communion with God and with the brethren. We must not grow weary, then, of keeping watch over our thoughts and our attitudes, in order that we may be given even now a foretaste of the warmth and splendor of God's Face — and this will be beautiful — which in eternal life we shall contemplate in all its fullness. Forward, thinking of this judgment that begins now, which has already begun. Forward, doing so in such a way that our hearts open to Jesus and to his salvation; forward without fear, for Jesus' love is greater and if we ask forgiveness for our sins he will forgive us. This is what Jesus is like. Forward then with this certainly, which will bring us to the glory of heaven!
- Conclusion
 - Story of all those who are fascinated by Francis, stopping me in malls, in rest stops, in post offices, telling me, “I love your Pope.” To a few, I've engaged them in conversation, like Jesus did the rich young man who approached him and called him good. Jesus wanted to lead the RYM to a contemplation of the fact that he recognized a spark of the divine in Jesus, and on the basis of that,

to give him the ability to trust him enough to seek perfection by selling his goods, giving the money to the poor and following him. Likewise, I try to help people to see that what they are fascinated by in Francis, what they really like and love in him, is that he behaves like a man of God should, like someone who is living by a wisdom that exceeds the wisdom of the world, that he is enfleshing the will of God. Then I ask whether they like or admire him enough to put into practice his central message, to recognize their need for God's mercy and come and get it. He speaks about God's untiring mercy because we're always in need of it. I have been moved that some of my interlocutors, like the eunuch of Queen Candace in the Acts of the Apostles with the Deacon Philip and baptism, have said, "What do I need to do to receive that mercy?"

- Likewise, it's not enough for us to know of, or admire, Pope Francis' beautiful words on mercy. We must be "enveloped" by God's mercy (April 7 homily, St. John Lateran) We should respond to the grace to come to receive it, to never tire of coming to receive it, so that we can be made fitting advertisements and agents bringing that mercy to the world!