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Pope Francis:

The 'club of judgment' won't bring back the sheep

Joshua J. McElwee
National Catholic Reporter

Pope Francis has asked the special group of priests he commissioned to hear confessions during the 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 with the priests who will be serving as “Missionaries of Mercy” during the Holy Year, the pope 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,” he 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.”

Created by the pontiff just for this Jubilee Year, the priests received their mandate 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 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

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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 a person that feels the desire to be accepted and pardoned – a person who does not want to be further distanced from the house of the Father but wants to do everything to live as a child of God.”

“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 placed a robe over their father to hide his shame.”

“To be a confessor according to the heart of Jesus means to cover the sinner with the robe of mercy so that they are not shamed 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.

“As you go into the confessional, always remember that it is Christ who welcomes; Christ who listens; Christ who pardons; 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.” ■

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