



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - February 2016

LENT 2016 - MERCY, THE LIFEBLOOD OF FORGIVENESS

When Pope Francis announced the Extraordinary Jubilee Year dedicated to the Mercy of God, different voices could be heard: there is nothing extraordinary in this, nothing new, the Church has been proclaiming this truth for two thousand years and, more recently, thanks to two saints - Sr. Faustina and John Paul II - it has become one of the dominant themes of Church teaching. In theory this might be true. In practice, we still have great problems with mercy. On the one hand, we fear that by placing the emphasis on mercy, we might run the risk of exaggerating absolution from the evil committed. On the other hand, for we who might prefer that the law court and justice prevail over grace and forgiveness, it is difficult to accept that, before God, the order is exactly the opposite.

God does not have a court that issues sentences, but rather a mother's womb from which we are reborn, from which we can set off again with a new heart. Asking for forgiveness, therefore, is not a pleading of your own cause before a judge; it is much more: it is a receiving of life.

The experience of evil, of suffering which people inflict on each other, seems to mark the human adventure right from the beginning. Yet God is revealed as a God of mercy and compassion (Ex 34:5); mercy is the face of God that Jesus revealed to us.

Life with God in an increasingly uncertain world is not possible without forgiveness. The weakness of human nature leads to

conflict, suffering and injuries which require proper medicine. Forgiveness is just such a balm on wounds. Human relationships are based on forgiveness. When forgiveness begins to fail, community loses its reason for existing. We are not angels, and will never be able to create an ideal community (spouses, family, religious, friends ...). In every community, sooner or later, conflicts, tensions or differences arise. They are natural, and could even be said to be necessary, because they help to stimulate and develop both the community and its individual members. However, the capacity to forgive and be reconciled is also essential.

The word “forgiveness” means “drawing a line under”, remitting or cancelling a debt. When we do an injustice to someone, we seek their forgiveness in order to restore the relationship. Forgiveness is not granted because a person deserves it. No one deserves to be forgiven. Forgiveness is an act of love, mercy and grace. It is the decision to no longer remain angry with a person, despite what they did to you.

It is necessary to recognize that the wounds inflicted by hatred and enmity can only be remedied by mercy and mutual forgiveness. But it is difficult to practise. Mercy often seems like a utopia, far from our daily reality. There is something in us that constantly tries to convince us that this is how things are, and that only dreamers can think that forgiveness and mercy are possible in our real world, in our communities. This happens because each of us harbours "antibodies ... that prevent us from experiencing 'mercy in the very depths of our being'" [literally ‘visceral mercy’] (Msgr. Nunzio Galantino, the participants of the XXIII Ecumenical Conference Bosa). These antibodies try to convince us that forgiveness and mercy are a sterile exercise.

Instead, in forgiving we imitate God who is rich in mercy. God is a patient, good, compassionate Father, rich in mercy, in forgiveness and patiently waiting for those who have gone astray:

“The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy. He does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults (Psalm 103); “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness“ (Ex 34: 6).

Each one of us is touched by the mercy of God, which knows no boundaries and does not differentiate between people. Jesus said to Sister Faustina: “The greater [one’s] misery ... the greater [the] right to my mercy (Diary, 1182). We should also imitate our Creator and learn from the mercy of God: “Be merciful, as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). Patience, compassion, mercy, willingness to forgive are signs of likeness to Jesus the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:37), and to God the Father.

John Paul II repeatedly wrote and talked about the fact that from the depths of human suffering in all continents rises a cry for mercy: “Where hatred and the thirst for revenge dominate, where war brings suffering and death to the innocent, there the grace of mercy is needed in order to settle human minds and hearts and to bring about peace. Wherever respect for life and human dignity are lacking, there is need of God’s merciful love, in whose light we see the inexpressible value of every human being. Mercy is needed in order to ensure that every injustice in the world will come to an end in the splendour of truth” (Łagiewniki, 17 August 2002).

Showing mercy, and asking it of others, is to satisfy Christ’s wishes and is a form of participation in his salvific work. The apostle of Mercy seeks to convince sorrowing humankind that only Merciful Jesus can heal it, to convince contemporary people, tormented by sin and injustice, not to place their trust in human means and in the settling of scores, but to entrust themselves to the merciful Saviour. Those struck by their own misery and by sin, those who doubt the possibility of a decent life, those who suffer because of injustice and violence, who have lost the hope of living

in peace and in humane conditions, only succeed in finding a sense of security and acceptance in God, discovering once more their own human dignity.

The message of Divine Mercy is also an obligation to live mercy according to our limits as human beings. Divine Mercy educates and sensitizes us, draws goodness out of us. Mercy is not tenderness or sentimentality, but is regaining our dignity in the splendour of God's love and bearing witness to this in everyday life. In our times we have gone back to forgetting the truth of God's love. Every person desires it, everyone wants to love and be loved, incomparably more than to be rich, healthy and famous. Only love makes people better. Shouting and threats do not serve to open the human heart. Only the certainty of God's love and forgiveness can restore hope and give the courage needed for conversion.

The Year of Mercy is therefore a call to conversion: to recognise one's own sin, to do penance and repent, then confessing before the Church and having a firm purpose of amendment. Therefore, sincere confession should be the most important celebration of the Year of Mercy. Disciples of Jesus, confessing their fragility with humility and trust ("I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do"), experience the mercy of God. This transforms their hearts, making them merciful and compassionate towards all creatures. The humble and persevering request, "Jesus, have mercy on us and on the whole world", opens the mind and heart and then, without too many instructions from others, we will see how, where, when and to whom we can show mercy "to us" (ourselves, our family, our work colleagues, our neighbours) and "to the whole world".

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