



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE PARISH PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

*Paul VI Hall
Thursday, 6 March 2014*

Video

When together with the Cardinal Vicar, we planned this meeting, I told him that I could offer you a meditation on the theme of mercy. At the beginning of Lent, it does us good to reflect together as priests on mercy. We all need it. Also the faithful, since as pastors we must extend great, great mercy!

The passage from the Gospel of Matthew that we heard makes us turn our gaze to Jesus as he goes about the cities and villages. And this is curious. Where was Jesus most often, where he could most easily be found? On the road. He might have seemed to be homeless, because he was always on the road. Jesus' life was on the road. He especially invites us to grasp the depths of his heart, what he feels for the crowds, for the people he encounters: that interior attitude of "compassion"; seeing the crowds, he felt compassion for them. For he saw the people were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd". We have heard these words so many times that perhaps they do not strike us powerfully. But they are powerful! A little like the many people whom you meet today on the streets of your own neighbourhoods.... Then the horizon broadens, and we see that these towns and villages are not only Rome and Italy; they are the world ... and those helpless crowds are the peoples of many nations who are suffering through even more difficult situations....

Thus we understand that we are not here to take part in a pleasant retreat at the beginning of Lent, but rather to hear the voice of the Spirit speaking to the whole Church of our time, which is the time of mercy. I am sure of this. It is not only Lent; we are living in a time of mercy, and have been for 30 years or more, up to today.

In the Church, everything is the time of mercy.

This was an intuition of Bl. John Paul II. He “sensed” that this was the time of mercy. We think of the Beatification and Canonization of Sr Faustina Kowalska; then he introduced the Feast of Divine Mercy. Little by little he advanced and went forward on this.

In his homily for the Canonization, which took place in 2000, John Paul II emphasized that the message of Jesus Christ to Sr Faustina is located, in time, between the two World Wars and is intimately tied to the history of the 20th century. And looking to the future he said: “What will the years ahead bring us? What will man’s future on earth be like? We are not given to know. However, it is certain that in addition to new progress there will unfortunately be no lack of painful experiences. But the light of divine mercy, which the Lord in a way wished to return to the world through Sr Faustina’s charism, will illumine the way for the men and women of the third millennium” (Homily, Sunday, 30 April 2000). It is clear. Here it is explicit, in 2000, but it was something that had been maturing in his heart for some time. Through his prayer, he had this intuition.

Today we forget everything far too quickly, even the Magisterium of the Church! Part of this is unavoidable, but we cannot forget the great content, the great intuitions and gifts that have been left to the People of God. And Divine Mercy is one of these. It is a gift which he gave to us, but which comes from above. It is up to us, as ministers of the Church, to keep this message alive, above all through preaching and in our actions, in signs and in pastoral choices, such as the decision to restore priority to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and to the works of mercy. Reconciliation, making peace through the Sacrament, also with words, and with works of mercy.

What does mercy mean for priests?

It occurs to me that some of you have phoned, written a letter, then I spoke on the phone ... “But Father, what have you got against priests?”. Because they were saying that I bash priests! I do not wish to bash you here ...

Let us ask ourselves what mercy means for a priest, allow me to say for us priests. For us, for all of us! Priests are moved to compassion before the sheep, like Jesus, when he saw the people harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus has the “bowels” of God, Isaiah speaks about it very much: he is full of tenderness for the people, especially for those who are excluded, that is, for sinners, for the sick who no one takes care of.... Thus, in the image of the Good Shepherd, the priest is a man of mercy and compassion, close to his people and a servant to all. This is a pastoral criterion I would like to emphasize strongly: closeness. Closeness and service, but closeness, nearness!... Whoever is wounded in life, in whatever way, can find in him attention and a sympathetic ear.... The priest reveals a heart especially in administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation; he reveals it by his whole attitude, by the manner in which he

welcomes, listens, counsels and absolves.... But this comes from how he experiences the Sacrament firsthand, from how he allows himself to be embraced by God the Father in Confession and remains in this embrace.... If one experiences this in one's own regard, in his own heart, he can also give it to others in his ministry. And I leave you with the question: How do I confess? Do I allow myself to be embraced? A great priest from Buenos Aires comes to mind, he is younger than I, he is around the age of 72.... Once he came to see me. He is a great confessor: there are always people waiting in line for him there.... The majority of priests confess to him... He is a great confessor. And once he came to see me: "But Father...."; "Tell me"; "I have a small scruple, because I know that I forgive too much!"; "Pray... if you forgive too much...". And we spoke about mercy. At a certain point he said to me: "You know, when I feel this scruple keenly, I go to the chapel, before the Tabernacle, and I say to Him: Excuse me, but it's Your fault, because it is you who has given me the bad example! And I go away at peace....". It is a beautiful prayer of mercy! If one experiences this in his own regard in Confession, in his own heart, he is able to give it to others.

The priest is called to learn this, to have a heart that is moved. Priests who are — allow me to say the word — "aseptic", those "from the laboratory", all clean and tidy, do not help the Church. Today we can think of the Church as a "field hospital". Excuse me but I repeat it, because this is how I see it, how I feel it is: a "field hospital". Wounds need to be treated, so many wounds! So many wounds! There are so many people who are wounded by material problems, by scandals, also in the Church.... People wounded by the world's illusions.... We priests must be there, close to these people. Mercy first means treating the wounds. When someone is wounded, he needs this immediately, not tests such as the level of cholesterol and one's glycemic index.... But there's a wound, treat the wound, and then we can look at the results of the tests. Then specialized treatments can be done, but first we need to treat the open wounds. I think this is what is most important at this time. And there are also hidden wounds, because there are people who distance themselves in order to avoid showing their wounds closer.... The custom comes to mind, in the Mosaic Law, of the lepers in Jesus' time, who were always kept at a distance in order not to spread the contagion.... There are people who distance themselves through shame, through shame, so as not to let their wounds be seen.... And perhaps they distance themselves with some bitterness against the Church, but deep down inside there is a wound.... They want a caress! And you, dear brothers — I ask you — do you know the wounds of your parishioners? Do you perceive them? Are you close to them? It's the only question....

Mercy means neither generosity nor rigidity.

Let us return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It often happens that we priests hear our faithful telling us they have encountered a very "strict" priest in the confessional, or very "generous", i.e., a *rigorist* or a *laxist*. And this is not good. It is normal that there be differences in the style of confessors, but these differences cannot regard the essential, that is, sound moral doctrine and mercy. Neither the laxist nor the rigorist bears witness to Jesus Christ, for neither the one nor the

other takes care of the person he encounters. The rigorist washes his hands of them: in fact, he nails the person to the law, understood in a cold and rigid way; and the laxist also washes his hands of them: he is only apparently merciful, but in reality he does not take seriously the problems of that conscience, by minimizing the sin. True mercy *takes the person into one's care*, listens to him attentively, approaches the situation with respect and truth, and accompanies him on the journey of reconciliation. And this is demanding, yes, certainly. The truly merciful priest behaves like the Good Samaritan... but why does he do it? Because his heart is capable of having compassion, it is the heart of Christ!

We are well aware that *neither laxity nor rigorism foster holiness*. Perhaps some rigorists seem holy, holy.... But think of Pelagius and then let's talk... Neither laxity nor rigorism sanctify the priest, and they do not sanctify the faithful! However, mercy accompanies the journey of holiness, it accompanies it and makes it grow.... Too much work for a parish priest? It is true, too much work! And how do we accompany and foster the journey of holiness? Through pastoral suffering, which is a form of mercy. What does pastoral suffering mean? It means suffering for and with the person. And this is not easy! To suffer like a father and mother suffer for their children; I venture to say, also with anxious concern....

To explain, I'll put to you some questions that help me when a priest comes to me. They also help me when I am alone before the Lord!

Tell me: Do you weep? Or have we lost our tears? I remember that in the old Missals, those of another age, there is a most beautiful prayer to ask the gift of tears. The prayer began like this: "Lord, who commanded Moses to strike the rock so that water might gush forth, strike the stone of my heart so that tears...": the prayer went more or less like this. It was very beautiful. But, how many of us weep before the suffering of a child, before the breakup of a family, before so many people who do not find the path?... The weeping of a priest.... Do you weep? Or in this presbyterate have we lost all tears?

Do you weep for your people? Tell me, do you offer intercessory prayer before the Tabernacle?

Do you struggle with the Lord for your people, as Abraham struggled?

"Suppose they were fewer? Suppose there were 25? And suppose they were 20?... (cf. Gen 18:22-33). This courageous prayer of intercession.... We speak of *parrhesia*, of apostolic courage, and we think of pastoral plans, this is good, but the same *parrhesia* is also needed in prayer. Do you struggle with the Lord? Do you argue with the Lord as Moses did? When the Lord was annoyed, tired of his people, he said to him: "Don't worry.... I will destroy everything, and I will make you the head of another people". "No. No. If you destroy the people, destroy me too". But, these were real men! Do we have enough guts to struggle with God for our people?

Another question I ask: in the evening, how do you conclude your day? With the Lord or in front of the television? How is your relationship with those who help you to be more merciful? That is, how is your relationship with the children, with the elderly, with the sick? Do you know how to reassure them, or are you embarrassed to caress an elderly person?

Do not be ashamed of the flesh of your brother (cf. *Reflexiones en esperanza*, Ch. 1). In the end, we will be judged on our ability to draw close to “all flesh” — this is Isaiah. Do not be ashamed of the flesh of your brother. “Making ourselves close”: closeness, nearness, being close to the flesh of one’s brother. The priest and the Levite who had passed by before the Good Samaritan did not know how to draw close to the person who had been beaten by bandits. Their hearts were closed. Perhaps the priest had looked at his watch and said: “I have to go to Mass, I cannot be late for Mass”, and he left. Excuses! How often we justify ourselves, to get around the problem, the person. The other, the Levite, or the doctor of the law, the lawyer, said: “No, I cannot because if I do this tomorrow I will have to go and testify, I will lose time...”. Excuses!... Their hearts were closed. But a closed heart always justifies itself for what it has not done. Instead, the Samaritan opens his heart, he allows his heart to be moved, and this interior movement translates into practical action, in a concrete and effective intervention to help the person.

At the end of time, only those who have not been ashamed of the flesh of their brother who is injured and excluded will be permitted to contemplate the glorified flesh of Christ.

I admit, sometimes it does me good to read the list on which which I will be judged, it benefits me: it is contained in Matthew 25.

These are the things that came to my mind to share with you. It is a bit rough and ready as things came to mind ... [Cardinal Vallini: “A good examination of conscience”] It will do us good.
[applause]

In Buenos Aires — I am speaking of another priest — there was a well known confessor: he was a Sacramentine. Almost all of the priests confessed to him. On one of the two occasions he came, John Paul II had requested a confessor at the Nunciature, and he went. He was old, very old.... He had served as Provincial in his Order, as a professor ... but always as a confessor, always. And a long line was always awaiting him in the Church of the Most Blessed Sacrament. At the time, I was Vicar General and was living in the Curia, and every morning, early, I would go down to the fax to see if anything was there. And on Easter morning I read a fax from the community superior: “Yesterday, a half hour before the Easter Vigil, Fr Aristi died at the age of 94 — or 96? The funeral will be on such and such a day...”. And on Easter morning I was to go to lunch with the priests at the retirement home — I usually did on Easter — and then —, I said to myself — after lunch I will go to the Church. It was a large church, very large, with a beautiful crypt. I went down into the crypt and the coffin was there; only two old ladies were praying there, but not a single flower. I thought: but this man, who forgave the sins of all the clergy of Buenos Aires, including mine, not

even a flower ... I went up and went to a florist — because in Buenos Aires there are flower shops at the crossroads, on the streets, where there are people — and I bought flowers, roses ... And I returned and began to decorate the coffin with flowers.... And I looked at the Rosary in his hands... And immediately it came to mind — the thief that we all have inside of us, don't we? — And while I was arranging the flowers I took the cross off the Rosary, and with a little effort I detached it. At that moment I looked at him and said: "Give me half of your mercy". I felt something powerful that gave me the courage to do this and to say this prayer! And then I put the cross here, in my pocket. But the Pope's shirts don't have pockets, but I always carry it here in a little cloth bag, and that cross has been with me from that moment until today. And when a uncharitable thought against someone comes to mind, my hand always touches it here, always. And I feel the grace! I feel its benefit. What good the example of a merciful priest does, of a priest who draws close to wounds...

If you think about it, surely you have known many, many of them, because Italian priests are good! They are good. I believe that if Italy is still so strong, it is not because of us who are Bishops, rather it is because of the parish priests, the priests! It is true, this is true! It is not a little incense to comfort you, I truly believe it to be so.

Mercy. Think of the many priests who are in heaven and ask of them this grace! May they grant you the mercy they had with their faithful. This does good.

Thank you for having listened and for having come here.