



JUBILEE OF MERCY
MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION



Card. Ouellet: the Church, sacrament of Mercy in America

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The Church, sacrament of Mercy in America

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INTRODUCTION

“At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives. For this reason I have proclaimed an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy as a special time for the Church, a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective” (Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 3) (MV).

Pope Francis’ appeal resonates today on the American continent in the initiative of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America and of the CELAM Presidency which are currently promoting a continental celebration that symbolizes the general mobilization of our communities in the region. The Pope’s appeal calls upon each one of us personally, but it also solicits us as the Church, that is to say, as diocesan communities scattered across this immense continent from the Canadian North to Patagonia and from the Caribbean to the Galapagos Islands. A single faith, Catholic and apostolic, unites millions of Americans, whether we are descendants of the indigenous peoples of this continent or of the European immigrants who arrived later. In fixing our gaze on mercy, we ask that our personal

and ecclesial witness may become “Stronger and more effective” with the help of this Jubilee of Mercy. How can the Catholic Church bear a better witness to mercy in our societies which are rich in history and religious values but remain marked by poverty, injustice, corruption and secularization?

These challenges pose all the more questions to us as we are living in an epoch deeply troubled by political turmoil, civil wars and international terrorism which create insecurity in the entire planet. All this obliges us to raise our eyes to the source of all mercy, the Father of Jesus Christ who, in answer to the Church’s prayer, responds to his children’s need for peace. Hence the particular nature of our continental meeting, which is not an academic congress but rather a “Celebration of mercy”, quite unique of its kind, of prayer and reflection so that our witness may become stronger and more effective in the areas of both our personal and our collective lives.

The meditation that comes to mind focuses on “The Church, Sacrament of Mercy in America”. This subject is inspired by the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy where it says: “It was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death on the Cross that there came forth ‘The wondrous sacrament of the whole Church’” (S.C. 5, CCC 1067). This beautiful expression is taken up at the very beginning of the Constitution on the Church: “The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men” (LG 1). We shall explore this theme of the Church, Sacrament of Mercy in America, first by alluding to several events and then by explaining the meaning of the sacramentality of the Church with its missionary dimension, to conclude with some pastoral considerations which are intended to stimulate our witness of mercy on this continent.

TAKING OFF

For me the vision of the Church, Sacrament of Mercy, first evokes the memory of a penitential celebration in St Peter’s Basilica during Lent in this Jubilee Year. I went as a penitent to this celebration convoked by Pope Francis not expecting that I would be requisitioned to hear the confessions of some of the thousands of pilgrims who flocked to the event. Exposed for the veneration of the faithful near the Basilica’s main altar were the coffins of St Padre Pio of Pietrelcina and St Leopold Mandi#, two famous confessors of the past century, an Italian and a Slovenian, who silently invited us to repent and to accept mercy, while the penitents approached the confessors in the Basilica’s transepts and side chapels.

What an impression remains with me of the witness borne by this assembly, that of the Pope in particular and that of the faithful approaching confession and receiving absolution! There is nothing better than the example of the Pope himself to relaunch the still neglected practice of this precious sacrament. However, what struck me most on this occasion was the fact that this assembly, united with the Successor of Peter in

Christianity's most important basilica, was proclaiming the Good News of Mercy with one heart. We were not gathered, as usual, for the Holy Eucharist, but in order to proclaim joyfully the forgiveness of sins, the fact that mercy is offered and granted not only to each person who has received sacramental pardon but also to all humanity, by virtue of Christ's Resurrection. Indeed we were confessing a single thing: the Resurrection of Christ which takes away the sin of the world, the Resurrection of Christ which forgives sins through the power of his Spirit and the mediation of the Church. We bear witness to this together, through our own personal confession and also, and especially, by the joy we feel at having been forgiven, the joy which is the best proclamation of mercy, the most beautiful and attractive witness for those who do not know the Gospel.

I cherish this precious memory as a luminous experience of the Jubilee Year, which perfectly illustrates the theme of the Church, Sacrament of Mercy. What indeed could be more significant than an assembly of penitents celebrating forgiveness and the joy of reconciliation which restores communion and brotherhood among human beings? Since this Good News of Mercy is destined for all humanity, the Church's mission is to proclaim it to all by her words, by the sacraments, by charity, by holiness of life and even by art. If you ever go to visit the Shrine of San Giovanni Rotondo in Southern Italy where St Padre Pio's reliquary is kept safely in the crypt, do not omit to contemplate the famous mosaics by Marko Rupnik, SJ, a Slovenian artist who pays homage to the holy and merciful confessor through the light of the Resurrection of Christ, enveloping and illuminating this marvellous crypt, richly decorated with Gospel scenes which attract an unending flow of pilgrims thirsting for mercy and for hope.

Our continental celebration is an echo and a stage of this universal proclamation of the Resurrection of the merciful Christ, which is intended to bring hope and joy to our continent. This event affords us the opportunity to recall the faith of our forefathers in order to remember the courage of our martyrs and above all the charity of our saints who spread the Gospel on this continent. How many things would be worthy of attention on this occasion, starting with the missionary epic which crossed the continent with the arrival of the Europeans but which truly took off with the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to St Juan Diego, on the Hill of Tepeyac on the plateau of Mexico City. Other speakers will recall to us this marvellous exploit where the face of Divine Mercy appeared in that of the Virgin with her mestizo face who revealed herself as "The Mother of the true God".

What better could Pope Francis have done to win over the Americas than to recollect for a long time in silence in the Camerino of the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe! He let himself be gazed on by the Mother of Mercy, the Mother of us all, in order subsequently to bear witness to this same merciful gaze upon all the faithful, the greatest and most beautiful characteristic of his pontificate. We are still moved by this simple gesture which immediately won over the entire Mexican people of whom it is well known that if they are not perfect believers they are perfect Guadalupans, because of the indestructible seed of their numerous martyrs who died to the cry of "Viva Cristo Rey y la Virgen de Guadalupe!" [Long live Christ the King and the Virgin of Guadalupe!].

This cry of spilled blood reverberated throughout the continent, from the North to the South and from the East to the West. It converted persecutors, inspired sacrifices, galvanized troops, sustained resistance and animated struggles for freedom and justice; it also inspired poets, restored

communities and multiplied priestly and religious vocations which express the faith of a people graced by a special gift of the Holy Spirit. Is not this faithful people, clinging to the tilma of the Mother of God, a great sign of the Church, Sacrament of Mercy? A people sturdy in its faith, attached to the Successor of Peter, incomparably enthusiastic in its welcome to sovereign pontiffs, who have favoured it to hold in its country memorable gatherings of a continent-wide if not universal significance.

What memories do I cherish of the Jubilee of Mercy in Ciudad Juarez Prison with Francis visiting the thousand prisoners, two hundred of whom were women! What a moving address that young penitent woman gave on behalf of all, recognizing faults committed and suffering caused but also the injustice undergone in a society in which women are beaten and despised, but where they are also capable of resilience and the courage to stand up and reintegrate themselves into the community. The Church, Sacrament of Mercy in America, is also this continental witness, broadcast on all the radio and television channels, reaching out first to all the other prisons in the country, but also to a great many other poor people listening, prisoners of one form or another of injustice and of wretchedness, but suddenly comforted by a breath of hope.

All the Holy Father's apostolic journeys bear a similar message of mercy and hope for the crowds gathered and the suburbs visited, whether it was at the time of his first contact with three million young people on the beach of Rio de Janeiro in 2013 or again during his meetings with the groups of workers in Bolivia, in Ecuador, or in Paraguay. These gatherings round the Successor of Peter are in themselves blessings, signs of communion, oases of brotherhood and of mercy. Through her witness of hope and joy they show us in concrete form the Church in a State of mission, the Church, Sacrament of Mercy.

CROSSING

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council spoke of the Church as a "sacrament", namely a sign and an instrument which brings about communion with God and the unity of the whole human race (cf. LG 1). But is it exactly a sacrament? The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the sacraments as "Efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us" (CCC 1131). The difficulty today is that we no longer know very well what grace is, and thus we no longer know very well what a sacrament of grace is either. In the secularized cultures of our epoch the Christian language of grace has become almost impenetrable. We imagine grace as a sort of talisman which procures advantages by some magic trick; or else grace is a good fortune or a favour which falls to us by chance; or even a one-off quality which renders our acts of greater merit and so more certain of procuring salvation for us. Yet the notion of salvation is as nebulous as the notion of grace, this is another category forgotten in our day. What then is grace and what is salvation? What then is the Church, Sacrament of Mercy?

The question obliges us to take a backward leap in order to grasp it at its origins, as if we were going back, so to speak, up the waters of a river to its source. What is the source of grace and of the Church? Baptism, which Jesus bequeathed to her at the moment when he left this world : "Go

therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). Now this mission of the Church to evangelize and baptize is rooted in the Baptism of Jesus himself, in the Jordan, and on the Cross. On the Cross, his obedience of love for the Father in the Spirit plunged him into death, thereby bringing about the salvation of the world through his Resurrection from among the dead. Hence the grace of our salvation through Baptism which immerses us in the death and Resurrection of Christ, a dive into Trinitarian love, a bath purifying us of all our faults, the first great sign of divine mercy.

This kerygma having been well established, the question of the Church, Sacrament of Mercy, appears secondly in relation to Christ himself, the first sacrament of mercy. For Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came in the flesh, who took a visible body to make palpable the Trinitarian communion of the invisible God. It is from his one Body, born of Mary, brought up in Nazareth, crucified under Pontius Pilate and hung on the Cross, it is from his transpierced Heart that was born “The wondrous sacrament of the whole Church”(CCC 1067). The Body of the dead and Risen Christ is thus, par excellence, the sign and the visible instrument of the communication of divine life to humanity. Through this authentic Body (Corpus verum), and through it alone, we discover and have access to eternal life which is also an outpouring of Love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, an infinite and absolute Tri-Personal Communion, offered by Christ to every human creature. In short, this invisible Trinitarian mystery became present and life-giving in the Body of Christ, the primordial sacrament of salvation offered to the whole of humanity.

This sacrament of the Body of Christ is familiar to us in the form of his Eucharistic Body, which presupposes all that we have just said and which consequently contains the whole Trinitarian communion. Through this sacrament the latter is given to us as Communion, it envelops us, penetrates us and transforms us in the setting of the Eucharistic celebration, which is the sacrament of mercy par excellence, as a sign and a privileged instrument of the communication of divine life to humanity. This is why our Sunday assemblies are important, from one end of the continent to the other. They form a chain of solidarity round the Risen Christ, giving his sacramental Body to the Church, his Bride, so that she may join her body with him and prolong it as a sacrament of his Love.

Given its capital importance the Eucharist must thus be promoted and sustained by an adequate catechesis and careful preaching in ordinary life, and likewise through movements of adoration, diocesan Eucharistic Congresses, national or international, which highlight it as the source and summit of the life and activity of the Church (SC, 10). In fact from this sacramental mystery, which actualizes the opening of the Heart of the crucified and Risen Christ, ensues the vitality and efficacy of “The wondrous sacrament of the Church”, this social or mystical body which the Holy Spirit gathers and enlivens as one Body of 'Christ. “The Spirit who is the Spirit of communion, abides indefectibly in the Church. For this reason the Church is the great sacrament of divine communion which gathers God’s scattered children together” (CCC 1108).

The gatherings which we have mentioned above, large or small, are outpourings ad extra of Trinitarian Communion, rivers of water that irrigate history and do not stagnate, fertilizing thirsting countries, baptizing the nations, reconciling peoples, uniting personal and collective destinies by

lasting bonds, washing and healing wounds, going to the aid of the hungry and the thirsty, transforming sinners and unbelievers into sons and daughters of God. In short the whole sacramentality of the Church emanates from Baptism, from the Eucharist and from the other sacraments with a view to a single end: *to spread the divine sonship of the children of God, to disseminate the communion of the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, and to share in the divine nature which is nothing but Love and Mercy.*

We must therefore keep well in sight the breadth of divine mercy which transcends the limitations, faults and vicissitudes of human history. It is not limited to the forgiveness of sins, to the reconciliation of sinners and the restoration of brotherhood among men and women; it gives far more, infinitely more, in communicating the Spirit of God to the baptized, endowing them with strength and courage for an authentic witness as disciples of Christ. Thus, when all is said and done, this is what Grace means: as well as the “healing” of sinners by the remission of their sins, it confers a personal “elevation” to sharing in the divine life which the Greek Fathers call “divinization”, relying on Sacred Scripture. The latter speaks effectively of “Partakers in the divine nature” (*Consortes divinae naturae*) (2 Pt 1:4) and of communion in life in the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, in St Paul and in St John.

So when we think of the Church, Sacrament of Mercy, let us never forget this profound dimension of the divine sonship of God's children which defines who we are, and which gives a better foundation than any other motivation to our generous practice of the works of mercy. For it is not by moralizing sermons that we are first incited to mercy, but rather by acquiring a theological awareness of our being sons and daughters of the merciful Father: *Misericordes sicut Pater*, “Merciful Like the Father”, the motto of the Jubilee Year proclaims. In short, our divine sonship in Christ and the Spirit is the most profound dimension of divine mercy and the most important for the new evangelization of the American continent.

Our Sunday gatherings round the Risen Christ will be more attractive and moving if, by means of suitable homilies we are able to discover our divine-humanity, as the Eastern tradition teaches, as well as Fr Rupnik in his new mosaic art. Divine-humanity means *koinonia*, the communion and participation of our human relationships in the Trinitarian relationships. In these divine-human relationships it is families that are first found blessed and sanctified, themselves domestic churches, founded on the sacrament of marriage, which form an “Intimate partnership of life and [...] love” (GS 48), expressing the sacramentality of the Church. In them the communion of human people contains, as it were the communion of the divine Persons, following the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth in which Jesus, Son of God, enables his parents to participate in these Trinitarian relationships. The family, a domestic church, is in fact suffering in our day but remains full of hope, as we still see in the living parishes where numerous families exist that catechize their children and provide the Church with vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. These domestic churches, as the Second Vatican Council called them, are an extraordinary resource for evangelization, a resource still too little known and exploited but which the pastoral conversion promoted by the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* should help us to appreciate better and to guide.

In fact the family is the first school of humanity as a school of love in all its forms, conjugal, parental and fraternal, a school of solidarity and of respect for creation as a common house of humanity. Its

success or its failure determines the quality of the virtues and works of mercy that witness to the sacramentality of the Church. “Consequently, wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy”. (MV 12).

Among these oases of mercy I pay tribute in addition to the basic communities, numerous on the continent, which are built around the word of God, meditated on, shared and lived. America is studded with these basic communities, animated by catechists or delegates of the word, which are like so many stars shining out in the night of religious indifference. Their capillary presence strengthens the sacramentality of the Church in America. For their love of the word of God, nourished as often as possible by Eucharistic Communion, constitutes a solid rampart in the face of the gradual invasion of the practical materialism and the proselytism of the sects. Their witness of brotherhood sincerely nourished by the word of God and open to ecumenism is not only an attractive sign of grace but is also an effective source of mercy and of active charity which constantly regenerates the social fabric of a village, a city and a country.

Within this framework let us not forget either the many associations, fraternities and movements which disseminate the social thought of the Church and her preferential option for the poor, so powerfully brought to the fore by Pope Francis. “How I dream of a Church which is poor and for the poor!”. How could we fail to follow up this cry from the heart of the Successor of Peter which echoes the hope of the poor of his own continent? What hope of peace and lasting reconciliation has been made possible by his discreet but effective mediation for the re establishment of diplomatic and commercial relations between the United States and Cuba! And what hope too is giving birth to the peace process in Colombia, supported by the Church which is involving herself there as a field hospital and a sacrament of mercy.

The Church’s mission on our continent as a Sacrament of Mercy comprises all these elements which we have mentioned so far: the public witness to mercy through the community and personal celebration of the sacrament of forgiveness and reconciliation; popular pilgrimages to shrines of the Mother of God; works of mercy for prisoners and society’s outcasts; the social radiance of Christian communities nourished by the word of God and the Eucharist, starting with the family, the domestic church, in addition to which are the numerous missionary charisms of movements and communities that distinguish themselves through their works of evangelization and mercy.

DESCENT

The last plenary meeting of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America examined another important dimension of the Church’s sacramentality: the involvement of lay faithful in the public life of our countries, a topical subject which prompted a beautiful and powerful message for us from Pope Francis. To the temptation of many people not to be involved in politics because of the corruption which prevails endemically in most of our countries Francis’ response is for them not to be afraid to get their hands dirty and to have the courage to expose themselves in order to purify the public

morals of our societies in the areas of the economy, politics and communications. Under this banner I was impressed to discover in Brazil more than elsewhere Catholic and national television channels which can assure a presence and effective evangelization in a domain dominated by private interests little concerned with the common good. Here again Pope Francis gives the example of pastoral conversion in the field of communications. In particular he leads lay people to become involved in the public life of our countries as intelligent and upright Christians, who assume their responsibilities and invest in projects which can improve the lot of the poor, social justice, the protection of creation and peace in the Americas.

Before concluding may I be permitted to mention a last dimension of the sacramentality of the Church, even more fertile than what we have already spoken of, but which remains hidden and mysterious. I am speaking of certain members of the Body of Christ, the sick, the persecuted or the tortured who live their destiny in union with Christ's Passion. The figure of the Blessed martyr Oscar Arnulfo Romero then comes spontaneously to our minds, he whose violent death could not be more closely associated with Christ's death of love whose Holy Sacrifice he was in the process of offering.

Over and above the action of the Church, which we have described and which is an efficacious sign of mercy, there is the suffering of the Church, the suffering of her sick, persecuted or tortured members who continue to love and to hope in spite of everything. I frequently remember the life of Luz Marina, a young woman from a poor neighbourhood in Manizales whom I regularly visited in the 1980s when I was rector of the Major Seminary. She was then and still is today confined to a pallet, as she has been since the age of 10, following a mysterious paralysis. Her acceptance of suffering made me realize that there are vocations to follow Christ in his Passion, suffering together with him; her faith in the Resurrection as a victory of Love confirmed to me that "Love alone is worthy of faith" (Balthasar), love alone is truly effective in the Church. "To love, to be loved and to make people love love", St Thérèse of the Child Jesus used to say. Such vocations to the passion of love are sources of blessings for every community, they are the pillars of the Church without which there is no neighbourhood, nor city, nor country that can resist. We shall see in heaven all that these souls sacrificed by love have contributed to the Church, Sacrament of Mercy, for the world's salvation. To put it briefly participation in the Passion of Christ through sickness, old age, injustice suffered, persecution or the contemplation of consecrated and cloistered souls, all this is an incomparable source of graces, a sublime expression of the Church's sacramentality, her deepest and most effective dimension for the coming of the Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the Church, Sacrament of Mercy in America, constitutes the full dynamism of the Holy Spirit which is expressed in the communion of the local Churches, thanks to the powerful intercession of holy souls, to the evangelizing dynamism of missionary disciples, to the charity and brotherhood of communities of faith, to the public witness of lay people through their social and professional activity, to political commitment for justice and for the protection of creation; in brief, the power of the Holy Spirit gives life to the missionary communion of the baptized, *communio sanctorum*, which flows from the Eucharistic celebration and surges back in all the loving relations of families, parishes, movements and associations, as it does in the communities of consecrated life which

embody the charismatic riches of the Church at the service of the Kingdom. In all these aspects and these dimensions of the personal and social lives of her members, the Church, Sacrament of the Father's Mercy, is a light and a force of communion which uplifts humanity, frees it from individualism, selfishness, hatred and religious ignorance through the illumination of the Gospel and of Baptism. Her presence and her peace making action on the American continent serve as a bulwark against the assaults of secularization and its dehumanizing consequences, especially through the promotion of popular and Marian piety which protects the people of God from ideologies and from the manipulations of commerce and of the media. "The Church, Sacrament of Mercy in America", is all this and all this is a single testimony, the Trinitarian testimony of the Risen Christ who continues his mission in his ecclesial Body, starting from his Eucharistic Body, source of the Spirit of Love, of Truth and of Peace. May Pope Francis' appeal to fix our gazes more specifically on mercy during this Jubilee open us to all the dimensions which we have mentioned, and transform us into more credible and more effective witnesses to "The wondrous sacrament of the whole Church".

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