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Mercy takes us from estrangement to celebration

Vatican City, 2 June 2016 – Pope Francis' first meditation pronounced in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, extensive extracts from which are given below, was based on the theme "From estrangement to celebration". Through the parable of the Merciful Father, the Pope explains how divine mercy, "mother of hope", makes us aware that we are not only forgiven sinners, but also sinners who have obtained dignity.

FROM ESTRANGEMENT TO CELEBRATION

If, as we said, the Gospel presents mercy as an excess of God's love, the first thing we have to do is to see where today's world, and every person in it, most needs this kind of overflow of love. We have to ask ourselves how such mercy is to be received. On what barren and parched land must this flood of living water surge? What are the wounds that need this precious balm? What is the sense of abandonment that cries out for loving attention? What is the sense of estrangement that so thirsts for embrace and encounter?

The parable which I would now propose for your meditation is that of the merciful Father. We find ourselves before the mystery of the Father. I think we should begin with the moment when the prodigal son stands in the middle of the pigsty, in that inferno of selfishness where, having done everything he wanted to do, now, instead of being free, he feels enslaved. He looks at the pigs as they eat their husks, and he envies them. He feels homesick. He longs for the fresh baked bread that the servants in his house, his father's house, breakfast. Homesickness, nostalgia. Nostalgia is a powerful emotion. Like mercy, it expands the soul. It makes us think back to our first experience of goodness – the homeland from which we went forth – and it awakens in us the hope of returning there. Against this vast horizon of nostalgia, the young man – as the Gospel tells us – came to his senses and realised that he was miserable.

Without dwelling on that misery of his, let us move on to the other moment, once his Father had embraced him and kissed him. He finds himself still dirty, yet dressed for a banquet. He fingers the ring he has been given, which is just like his father's. He has new sandals on his feet. He is in the middle of a party, in the midst of a crowd of people. A bit like ourselves, if ever we have gone to confession before Mass and then all of a sudden found ourselves vested and in the middle of a ceremony.

AN EMBARRASSED DIGNITY

Let us think for a moment about the “embarrassed dignity” of this prodigal yet beloved son. If we can serenely keep our heart balanced between those two extremes – dignity and embarrassment – without letting go of either of them, perhaps we can feel how the heart of our Father beats with love for us. We can imagine that mercy wells up in it like blood. He goes out to seek us sinners. He draws us to himself, purifies us and sends us forth, new and renewed, to every periphery, to bring mercy to all. That blood is the blood of Christ, the blood of the new and eternal covenant of mercy, poured out for us and for all, for the forgiveness of sins. We contemplate that blood by going in and out of His heart and the heart of the Father. That is our sole treasure, the only thing we have to give to the world: the blood that purifies and brings peace to every reality and all people. The blood of the Lord that forgives sins. The blood that is true drink, for it reawakens and revives what was dead from sin.

In our serene prayer, which wavers between embarrassment and dignity, dignity and embarrassment, let us ask for the grace to sense that mercy as giving meaning to our entire life, the grace to feel how the heart of the Father beats as one with our own. It is not enough to think of that grace as something God offers us from time to time, whenever He forgives some big sin of ours, so that then we can go off to do the rest by ourselves, alone.

St. Ignatius offers us an image drawn from the courtly culture of his time, but since loyalty among friends is a perennial value, it can also help us. He says that, in order to feel “embarrassment and shame” for our sins (but without forgetting God’s mercy), we can use the example of “a knight who finds himself before his king and his entire court, ashamed and embarrassed for having gravely wronged him, after having received from him many gifts and many favours”. But like the prodigal son who finds himself in the middle of a banquet, this knight, who ought to feel ashamed before everyone, he suddenly sees the King take him by the hand and restore his dignity. Indeed, not only does the King ask him to follow him into battle, but he puts him at the head of his peers. With what humility and loyalty this knight will serve him henceforth!

Whether we see ourselves as the prodigal son in the midst of the banquet, or the disloyal knight restored and promoted, the important thing is that each of us feel that fruitful tension born of the Lord’s mercy: we are at one and the same time sinners pardoned and sinners restored to dignity.

Simon Peter represents the ministerial aspect of this healthy tension. At every step along the way, the Lord trains him to be both Simon and Peter. Simon, the ordinary man with all his faults and inconsistencies, and Peter, the bearer of the keys who leads the others. When Andrew brings Simon, fresh from his nets, to Christ, the Lord gives him the name Peter, “Rock”. Yet immediately after praising Peter’s confession of faith, which comes from the Father, Jesus sternly reproves him for being tempted to heed the evil spirit telling him to flee the cross. Jesus will go on to invite Peter to walk on the water; He will let him sink into his own fear, only then to stretch out His hand and raise him up. No sooner does Peter confess that he is a sinner than the Lord makes him a fisher of men. He will question Peter at length about his love, instilling in him sorrow and shame for his disloyalty and cowardice, but He will also thrice entrust to him the care of His sheep.

That is how we have to see ourselves: poised between our utter shame and our sublime dignity. Dirty, impure, mean and selfish, yet at the same time, with feet washed, called and chosen to distribute the Lord’s multiplied loaves, blessed by our people, loved and cared for. Only mercy makes this situation bearable. Without it, either we believe in our own righteousness like the Pharisees, or we shrink back like those who feel unworthy. In either case, our hearts grow hardened.

Let us look a little more closely at this, and ask why this tension is so fruitful. The reason, I would say, is that it is the result of a free decision. The Lord acts mainly through our freedom, even though His help never fails us. Mercy is a matter of freedom. As a feeling, it wells up spontaneously. When we say that it is visceral, it might seem that it is synonymous with “animal”. But animals do not experience “moral” mercy, even though some of them may experience something akin to compassion, like the faithful dog keeping watch at the side of his ailing master. Mercy is a visceral emotion but it can also be the fruit of an acute intellectual insight – startling as a bolt of lightning but no less complex for its simplicity. We intuit many things when we feel mercy. We understand, for example that another person is in a desperate state, a situation of limits; something is going on that is greater than his or her sins and failings. We also realise that the other person is our peer, that we could well be standing in his or her shoes. Or that evil is such an immense and devastating thing that it cannot simply be fixed by

justice. Deep down, we realise that what is needed is an infinite mercy, like that of the heart of Christ, to remedy all the evil and suffering we see in the lives of human beings. Anything less than this is not enough. We can understand so many things simply by seeing someone barefoot in the street on a cold morning, or by contemplating the Lord nailed to the cross – for me!

Moreover, mercy can be freely accepted and nurtured, or freely rejected. If we accept it, one thing leads to another. If we choose to ignore it, our heart grows cold. Mercy makes us experience our freedom and, as a result, the freedom of God himself, Who, as he said to Moses, is “merciful with whom he is merciful”. By His mercy the Lord expresses His freedom. And we, our own.

We can “do without” the Lord’s mercy for a long time. In other words, we can go through life without thinking about it consciously or explicitly asking for it. Then one day we realise that “all is mercy” and we weep bitterly for not having known it earlier, when we needed it most!

This feeling is a kind of moral misery. It is the entirely personal realisation that at a certain point in my life I decided to go it alone: I made my choice and I chose badly. Such are the depths we have to reach in order to feel sorrow for our sins and true repentance. Otherwise, we lack the freedom to see that sin affects our entire life. We do not recognise our misery, and thus we miss out on mercy, which only acts on that condition. People do not go to a pharmacy and ask for an aspirin out of mercy. Out of mercy we ask for morphine, to administer to a person who is terminally ill and racked with pain.

The heart that God joins to this moral misery of ours is the heart of Christ, His beloved Son, which beats as one with that of the Father and the Spirit. It is a heart that chooses the fastest route and takes it. Mercy gets its hands dirty. It touches, it gets involved, it gets caught up with others, it gets personal. It does not approach “cases” but persons and their pain. Mercy exceeds justice; it brings knowledge and compassion; it leads to involvement. By the dignity it brings, mercy raises up the one over whom another has stooped to bring help. The one who shows mercy and the one to whom mercy is shown become equals.

That is why the Father needed to celebrate, so that everything could be restored at once, and His son could regain His lost dignity. This realisation makes it possible to look to the future in a different way. It is not that mercy overlooks the objective harm brought about by evil. Rather, it takes away evil’s power over the future. It takes away its power over life, which then goes on. Mercy is the genuine expression of life that counters death, the bitter fruit of sin. As such, it is completely lucid and in no way naïve. It is not that it is blind to evil; rather, it sees how short life is and all the good still to be done. That is why it is so important to forgive completely, so that others can look to the future without wasting time on self-recrimination and self-pity over their past mistakes. In starting to care for others, we will examine our own consciences, and to the extent that we help others, we will make reparation for the wrong we ourselves have done. Mercy is always tinged with hope.

To let ourselves to be drawn to and sent by the beating heart of the Father is to remain in this healthy tension of embarrassed dignity. Letting ourselves be drawn into His heart, like blood which has been sullied on its way to give life to the extremities, so that the Lord can purify us and wash our feet. Letting ourselves be sent, full of the oxygen of the Spirit, to revive the whole body, especially those members who are most distant, frail and hurting.

A priest once told me about a street person who ended up living in a hospice. He was consumed by bitterness and did not interact with others. He was an educated person, as they later found out. Sometime thereafter, this man was hospitalised for a terminal illness. He told the priest that while he was there, feeling empty and disillusioned, the man in the next bed asked him to remove his bed pan and empty it. That request from someone truly in need, someone worse off than he was, opened his eyes and his heart to a powerful sense of humanity, a desire to help another person and to let himself be helped by God. A simple act of mercy put him in touch with infinite mercy. It led him to help someone else and, in doing so, to be helped himself. He died after making a good confession, and at peace.

So I leave you with the parable of the merciful Father, now that we have we have entered into the situation of the son who feels dirty and dressed up, a dignified sinner, ashamed of himself yet proud of his father. The sign that

we have entered into it is that we ourselves now desire be merciful to all. This is the fire Jesus came to bring to the earth, a fire that lights other fires. If the spark does not take, it is because one of the poles cannot make contact. Either excessive shame, which fails to strip the wires and, instead of freely confessing “I did this or that”, stays covered; or excessive dignity, which touches things with gloves.

AN EXCESS OF MERCY

The only way for us to be “excessive” in responding to God’s excessive mercy is to be completely open to receiving it and to sharing it with others. The Gospel gives us many touching examples of people who went to excess in order to receive His mercy. There is the paralytic whose friends let him down from the roof into the place where the Lord was preaching. Or the leper who left his nine companions to come back, glorifying and thanking God in a loud voice, to kneel at the Lord’s feet. Or the blind Bartimaeus whose outcry made Jesus halt before him. Or the woman suffering from a haemorrhage who timidly approached the Lord and touched His robe; as the Gospel tells us, Jesus felt power – dynamis – “go forth” from him. All these are examples of that contact that lights a fire and unleashes the positive force of mercy. Then too, we can think of the sinful woman, who washed the Lord’s feet with her tears and dried them with her hair; Jesus saw her excessive display of love as a sign of her having received great mercy. Ordinary people – sinners, the infirm and those possessed by demons – are immediately raised up by the Lord. He makes them pass from exclusion to full inclusion, from estrangement to embrace. That is the expression: mercy makes us pass “from estrangement to celebration”. And it can only be understood in the key of hope, in an apostolic key, in the key of knowing mercy and then showing mercy.

Let us conclude by praying the Magnificat of mercy, Psalm 50 by King David, which we pray each Friday at Morning Prayer. It is the Magnificat of “a humble and contrite heart” capable of confessing its sin before the God who, in His fidelity, is greater than any of our sins. If we put ourselves in the place of the prodigal son, at the moment when, expecting his Father’s reproof, he discovers instead that his Father has thrown a party, we can imagine him praying Psalm 50. We can pray it antiphonally with him. We can hear him saying: “Have mercy on me, O God, in your kindness; in your compassion blot out my offence” ... And ourselves continuing: “My offences, truly I (too) know them; my sin is always before me”. And together: “Against you, Father, against you, you alone, have I sinned”.

May our prayer rise up from that interior tension which kindles mercy, that tension between the shame that says: “From my sins turn away your face, and blot out all my guilt”, and the confidence that says, “O purify me, then I shall be clean; O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow”. A confidence that becomes apostolic: “Give me again the joy of Your help; with the spirit of fervour sustain me, that I may teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners may return to You”.
