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The vessel of Mercy is our sin

Vatican City, 2 June 2016 – In the second meditation of the Jubilee for Priests, which took place in the Basilica of St. Mary Major, the Pope explained that the receptacle of divine mercy is our sin, offering the example of numerous saints and the transformation mercy worked in them. In this way, St. Paul received mercy in the harsh and inflexible vessel of his judgement, shaped by the Law, and therefore his radical understanding of God's unconditional mercy was the fruit of a mind open to absolute truth. The image of Peter being crucified head down perhaps best expresses this vessel of a hardhead who, in order to be shown mercy, abased himself even in giving the supreme witness of his love for the Lord. John was healed in his pride for wanting to requite evil with fire, a “son of thunder” who ended up speaking only of love. Augustine was healed in his regret for being a latecomer: “Late have I loved thee”. He would find a creative and loving way to make up for lost time by writing his Confessions. Ignatius was healed in his vanity, re-created in his strenuous efforts to seek the greater glory of God.

Francis frequently added extemporaneous remarks to his meditation, and concluded by suggesting the Virgin Mary as the simple and perfect vessel for receiving and bestowing mercy, as her mercy is very much her own, our own and that of the Church. As she says in the Magnificat, she knows that God has looked with favour upon her humility and she recognises that His mercy passes from generation to generation.

The following is an extensive summary of the Pope's meditation:

THE VESSEL OF MERCY

[...] The vessel of mercy is our sin. Our sin is usually like a sieve, or a leaky bucket, from which grace quickly drains. “For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water”. That is why the Lord had to teach Peter the need to “forgive seventy times seven”. God keeps forgiving ... even though He sees how hard it is for His grace to take root in the parched and rocky soil of our hearts. ... He never stops sowing His mercy and His forgiveness. [...]

HEARTS CREATED ANEW

Let us take a closer look at this mercy of God that is always “greater” than our consciousness of our sinfulness.

The Lord never tires of forgiving us; indeed, He renews the wineskins in which we receive that forgiveness. He uses a new wineskin for the new wine of His mercy, not one that is patched or old. That wineskin is mercy itself: His own mercy, which we experience and then show in helping others. A heart that has known mercy is not old and patched, but new and re-created. It is the heart for which David prayed: "A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me". That heart, created anew, is a good vessel; it is no longer battered and leaky. The liturgy echoes the heartfelt conviction of the Church in the beautiful prayer that follows the first reading of the Easter Vigil: "O God who wonderfully created the universe, then more wonderfully re-created it in the redemption". In this prayer, we affirm that the second creation is even more wondrous than the first. Ours is a heart conscious of having been created anew thanks to the coalescence of its own poverty and God's forgiveness; it is a "heart which has been shown mercy and shows mercy". It feels the balm of grace poured out upon its wounds and its sinfulness; it feels mercy assuaging its guilt, watering its aridity with love and rekindling its hope. When, with the same grace, it then forgives other sinners and treats them with compassion, this mercy takes root in good soil, where water does not drain off but sinks in and gives life.

The best practitioners of this mercy that rights wrongs are those who know that they themselves are forgiven and sent to help others. ... We see this with addiction counsellors: those who have overcome their own addiction are usually those who can best understand, help and challenge others. So too, the best confessors are usually themselves good penitents. ... Almost all the great saints were great sinners or, like St. Therese, knew that it was by sheer grace that they were not.

The real vessel of mercy, then, is the mercy which each of us received and which created in us a new heart. This is the "new wineskin" to which Jesus referred, the "healed sore".

Here we enter more deeply into the mystery of the Son, Jesus, Who is the Father's mercy incarnate. Here too we can find the definitive icon of the vessel of mercy in the wounds of the risen Lord. Those wounds remind us that the traces of our sins, forgiven by God, never completely heal or disappear; they remain as scars. ... Scars are sensitive; they do not hurt, yet they remind us of our old wounds. God's mercy is in those scars. ... In the scars of the risen Christ, the marks of the wounds in His hands and feet but also in His pierced heart, we find the true meaning of sin and grace. ... As we contemplate the wounded heart of the Lord, we see ourselves reflected in Him. His heart, and our own, are similar: both are wounded and risen. But we know that His heart was pure love and was wounded because it willed to be so; our heart, on the other hand, was pure wound, which was healed because it allowed itself to be loved. [...]

OUR SAINTS RECEIVED MERCY

We can benefit from contemplating others who let their hearts be re-created by mercy and by seeing the "vessel" in which they received that mercy.

Paul received mercy in the harsh and inflexible vessel of his judgement, shaped by the Law. His harsh judgement made him a persecutor. Mercy so changed him that he sought those who were far off, from the pagan world, and, at the same time showed great understanding and mercy to those who were as he had been. Paul was willing to be an outcast, provided he could save his own people. His approach can be summed up in this way: he did not judge even himself, but instead let himself be justified by a God who is greater than his conscience, appealing to Jesus as the faithful advocate from whose love nothing and no one could separate him. Paul's understanding of God's unconditional mercy was radical. His realisation that God's mercy overcomes the inner wound that subjects us to two laws, the law of the flesh and the law of the Spirit, was the fruit of a mind open to absolute truth, wounded in the very place where the Law and the Light become a trap. The famous "thorn" that the Lord did not take away from him was the vessel in which Paul received the Lord's mercy.

Peter receives mercy in his presumption of being a man of good sense. He was sensible with the sound, practical wisdom of a fisherman who knows from experience when to fish and when not to. But he was also sensible when, in his excitement at walking on water and hauling in miraculous draughts of fish, he gets carried away with himself and realises that he has to ask help from the only one who can save him. Peter was healed of the deepest wound of all, that of denying his friend. Perhaps the reproach of Paul, who confronted him with his

duplicity, has to do with this; it may be that Paul felt that he had been worse “before” knowing Christ, whereas Peter had denied Christ, after knowing Him... Still, once Peter was healed of that wound, he became a merciful pastor, a solid rock on which one can always build, since it is a weak rock that has been healed, not a stumbling stone. In the Gospel, Peter is the disciple whom the Lord most often corrects. ... Jesus is constantly correcting him, even to the end: “What is that to you? Follow me!”. Tradition tells us that Jesus appeared once again to Peter as he was fleeing Rome. The image of Peter being crucified head down perhaps best expresses this vessel of a hard-head who, in order to be shown mercy, abased himself even in giving the supreme witness of his love for the Lord. Peter did not want to end his life saying, “I learned the lesson”, but rather, “Since my head is never going to get it right, I will put it on the bottom”. What he put on top were his feet, the feet that the Lord had washed. For Peter, those feet were the vessel in which he received the mercy of his Friend and Lord.

John was healed in his pride for wanting to requite evil with fire. He who was a “son of thunder” would end up writing to his “little children” and seem like a kindly grandfather who speaks only of love.

Augustine was healed in his regret for being a latecomer ... “Late have I loved thee”. He would find a creative and loving way to make up for lost time by writing his Confessions.

Francis experienced mercy at many points in his life. Perhaps the definitive vessel, which became real wounds, was not so much kissing the leper, marrying Lady Poverty or feeling himself a brother to every creature, as the experience of having to watch over in merciful silence the Order he had founded. Francis saw his brethren divided under the very banner of poverty. The devil makes us quarrel among ourselves, defending even the most holy things “with an evil spirit”.

Ignatius was healed in his vanity, and if that was the vessel, we can catch a glimpse of how great must have been his yearning for vainglory, which was re-created in his strenuous efforts to seek the greater glory of God.

In his *Diary of a Country Priest*, Bernanos recounts the life of an ordinary priest, inspired by the life of the Curé of Ars. There are two beautiful paragraphs describing the reflections of the priest in the final moments of his unexpected illness: “May God grant me the grace in these last weeks to continue to take care of the parish... But I shall give less thought to the future, I shall work in the present. I feel such work is within my power. For I only succeed in small things, and when I am tried by anxiety, I am bound to say that it is the small things that release me”. Here we see a small vessel of mercy, one that has to do with the minuscule joys of our pastoral life, where we receive and bestow the infinite mercy of the Father in little gestures.

The other paragraph says: “It is all over now. The strange mistrust I had of myself, of my own being, has flown, I believe for ever. That conflict is done. I cannot understand it any more. I am reconciled to myself, to the poor, poor shell of me. How easy it is to hate oneself. True grace is to forget. Yet if pride could die in us, the supreme grace would be to love oneself in all simplicity – as one would love any of those who themselves have suffered and loved in Christ”. This is the vessel: “to love oneself in all simplicity, as one would love any of those who themselves have suffered and loved in Christ”. It is an ordinary vessel, like an old jar we can borrow even from the poor.

Blessed José Gabriel del Rosario Brochero, the Argentinian priest soon to be canonised, “let his heart be shaped by the mercy of God”. In the end, his vessel was his own leprous body. He wanted to die on horseback, crossing a mountain stream on the way to anoint a sick person. Among the last things he said was: “There is no ultimate glory in this life”; “I am quite happy with what God has done with me regarding my sight, and I thank Him for that. While I could serve other people, He kept my senses whole and strong. Today, when I can no longer do so, He has taken away one of my physical senses. In this world there is no ultimate glory, and we have our more than enough misery”. Often our work remains unfinished, so being at peace with that is always a grace. We are allowed to “let things go”, so that the Lord can bless and perfect them. We shouldn’t be overly concerned. In this way, we can be open to the pain and joy of our brothers and sisters. Cardinal Van Thuan used to say that, in prison, the Lord taught him to distinguish between “God’s business”, to which he was devoted in his free life as priest and bishop, and God Himself, to whom he was devoted during his imprisonment. [...]

MARY AS VESSEL AND SOURCE OF MERCY

Ascending the stairway of the saints in our pursuit of vessels of mercy, we come at last to Our Lady. She is the simple yet perfect vessel that both receives and bestows mercy. Her free “yes” to grace is the very opposite of the sin that led to the downfall of the prodigal son. Her mercy is very much her own, very much our own and very much that of the Church. As she says in the Magnificat, she knows that God has looked with favour upon her humility and she recognizes that his mercy is from generation to generation. Mary can see the working of this mercy and she feels “embraced”, together with all of Israel, by it. She treasures in her heart the memory and promise of God’s infinite mercy for his people. Hers is the Magnificat of a pure and overflowing heart that sees all of history and each individual person with a mother’s mercy.

During the moments I was able to spend alone with Mary during my visit to Mexico, as I gazed at Our Lady, the Virgin of Guadalupe and I let her gaze at me, I prayed for you, dear priests, to be good pastors of souls. In my address to the bishops, I mentioned that I have often reflected on the mystery of Mary’s gaze, its tenderness and its sweetness that give us the courage to open our hearts to God’s mercy. I would now like to reflect with you on a few of the ways that Our Lady “gazes” especially at priests, since through us she wants to gaze at her people.

Mary’s gaze makes us feel her maternal embrace. She shows us that “the only power capable of winning human hearts is the tenderness of God. What delights and attracts, humbles and overcomes, opens and unleashes is not the power of instruments or the force of the law, but rather the omnipotent weakness of divine love, which is the irresistible force of its gentleness and the irrevocable pledge of its mercy” (Address to the Mexican Bishops, 13 February 2016). What people seek in the eyes of Mary is “a place of rest where people, still orphans and disinherited, may find a place of refuge, a home.” And that has to do with the way she “gazes” – her eyes open up a space that is inviting, not at all like a tribunal or an office. If at times people realise that their own gaze has become hardened, that they tend to look at people with annoyance or coldness, they can turn back to her in heartfelt humility. For Our Lady can remove every “cataract” that prevents them from seeing Christ in people’s souls. She can remove the myopia that fails to see the needs of others, which are the needs of the incarnate Lord, as well as the hyperopia that cannot see the details, “the small print”, where the truly important things are played out in the life of the Church and of the family.

Another aspect of Mary’s gaze to do with weaving. Mary gazes “by weaving”, by finding a way to bring good out of all the things that her people lay at her feet. I told the Mexican bishops that, “in the mantle of the Mexican soul, with the thread of its mestizo features, God has woven in la Morenita the face by which He wishes to be known”. A spiritual master teaches us that “whatever is said of Mary specially is said of the Church universally and of each soul individually”. If we consider how God wove the face and figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe into Juan Diego’s cloak, we can prayerfully ponder how He is weaving our soul and the life of the whole Church.

They say that it is impossible to see how the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was “painted”; it seems to have been somehow “imprinted”. I like to think that the miracle was not only that the image was imprinted or painted, but that the entire cloak was re-created, transformed from top to bottom. Each thread – those threads of maguey leaf that women had learned from childhood to weave for their finest garments – was transfigured in its place, and, interwoven with all the others, revealed the face of our Lady, her presence and her surroundings. God’s mercy does the same thing. It doesn’t “paint” us a pretty face, or airbrush the reality of who we are. Rather, with the very threads of our poverty and sinfulness, interwoven with the Father’s love, it so weaves us that our soul is renewed and recovers its true image, the image of Jesus. So be priests “capable of imitating this freedom of God, Who chooses the humble in order to reveal the majesty of His countenance, priests capable of imitating God’s patience by weaving the new humanity which your country awaits with the fine thread of all those whom you encounter. Do not give into the temptation to go elsewhere, as if the love of God were not powerful enough to bring about change”.

A third aspect is that of attentive care. Mary’s gaze is one of complete attention. She leaves everything else behind, and is concerned only with the person in front of her. Like a mother, she is all ears for the child who has something to tell her. ... “As the wonderful Guadalupe tradition teaches us, la Morenita treasures the gaze of all those who look to her; she reflects the faces of all who come to her. There is something unique in the face of

every person who comes to us looking for God. ... We need to realise this, to open our hearts and to show concern for them. Only a Church capable of attentive concern for all those who knock on her door can speak to them of God. ... Unless we can see into people's suffering and recognise their needs, we will have nothing to offer them. The riches we possess only flow forth when we truly encounter the needs of others, and this encounter take places precisely in our heart as pastors". I asked your bishops to be attentive to you, their priests, and not to leave you "exposed to loneliness and abandonment, easy prey to a worldliness that devours the heart". The world is watching us closely, in order to "devour" us, to make us consumers. All of us need attention, a gaze of genuine concern. As I told the bishops: "Be attentive and learn to read the faces of your priests, in order to rejoice with them when they feel the joy of recounting all that they have 'done and taught'. Also do not step back when they are humbled and can only weep because they 'have denied the Lord'. Offer your support, in communion with Christ, whenever one of them, discouraged, goes out with Judas into 'the night'. In these situations your fatherly care for your priests must never be found wanting. Encourage communion among them; seek to bring out the best in them, and enlist them in great ventures, for the heart of an apostle was not made for small things".

Lastly, Mary's gaze is "integral", all-embracing. It brings everything together: our past, our present and our future. It is not fragmented or partial: mercy can see things as a whole and grasp what is most necessary. At Cana, Mary "empathetically" foresaw what the lack of wine in the wedding feast would mean and she asked Jesus to resolve the problem, without anyone noticing. We can see our entire priestly life as somehow "foreseen" by Mary's mercy; she sees beforehand the things we lack and provides for them. If there is any "good wine" present in our lives, it is due not to our own merits but to her "anticipated mercy". In the Magnificat, she proclaims how the Lord "looked with favour on her loneliness" and "remembered his (covenant of) mercy", a "mercy shown from generation to generation" to the poor and the downtrodden. For Mary, history is mercy.

We can conclude by praying the *Salva Regina*. The words of this prayer are vibrant with the mystery of the Magnificat. Mary is the Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope. ... Her eyes of mercy are surely the greatest vessel of mercy, for their gaze enables us to drink in that kindness and goodness for which we hunger with a yearning that a look of love alone can satisfy. Her eyes of mercy also enable us to see God's mercy at work in human history and to find Jesus in the faces of our brothers and sisters. In Mary, we catch a glimpse of the promised land – the Kingdom of mercy established by our Lord – already present in this life beyond the exile into which sin leads us. ... From her hand and beneath her gaze, we can joyfully proclaim the greatness of the Lord. To Mary we can say: My soul sings of you, Lord, for you have looked with favour on the lowliness and humility of your servant. How blessed I am, to have been forgiven. Your mercy, Lord, that you showed to your saints and to all your faithful people, you have also shown to me. I was lost, seeking only myself, in the arrogance of my heart, yet I found no glory. My only glory is that your Mother has embraced me, covered me with her mantle, and drawn me to her heart. I want to be loved as one of your little ones. I want to feed with your bread all those who hunger for you. Remember, Lord, your covenant of mercy with your sons, the priests of your people. With Mary, may we be the sign and sacrament of your mercy.
