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Do not lose your closeness and availability to your people, says Francis to priests at the end of their retreat

Vatican City, 3 June 2016 – The Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls was the location of the Holy Father's third meditation during the retreat for priests participating in the Jubilee. Entitled "The good odour of Christ and the light of His mercy", the text offers an examination of the meaning of the works of mercy in their fruitful and inclusive social dimension. He also spoke of the reunion that is the Sacrament of Reconciliation, explaining that priests should be a sign and instrument, and finally he read a letter from an Italian priest who took care of three parishes and who remarked that often priests are compelled to renounce their spiritual paternity as a result of the administrative apparatus that surrounds parish management, transforming them into "bureaucrats of the sacred". The priest affirmed that on occasions like these it is the faithful who restore to them their life as men, as believers and as priests. "The Lord saves us through His flock", he writes; "this flock that He has entrusted to us and which constitutes the true grace of the pastor." Francis commented, "this is a brother of ours ... who shows us the way. Do not lose this closeness and availability to the people."

The following is an extensive summary of the third meditation:

THE GOOD ODOUR OF CHRIST AND THE LIGHT OF HIS MERCY

In this, our third meeting, I propose that we meditate on the works of mercy, by taking whichever one we feel is most closely linked to our charism, and by looking at them as a whole. We can contemplate them through the merciful eyes of Our Lady, who helps us to find "the wine that is lacking" and encourages us to "do whatever Jesus tells us", so that His mercy can work the miracles that our people need.

The works of mercy are closely linked to the "spiritual senses". In our prayer we ask for the grace so to "feel and savour" the Gospel that it can make us more "sensitive" in our lives. Moved by the Spirit and led by Jesus, we can see from afar, with the eyes of mercy, those who have fallen along the wayside. We can hear the cries of Bartimaeus and feel with Jesus the timid yet determined touch of the woman suffering from haemorrhage, as she grasps his robe. We can ask for the grace to taste with the crucified Jesus the bitter gall of all those who share in his cross, and smell the stench of misery - in field hospitals, in trains and in boats crammed with people. The balm of mercy does not disguise this stench. Rather, by anointing it, it awakens new hope.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in discussing the works of mercy, tells us that "when her mother

reproached her for care for the poor and the sick at home, St. Rose of Lima said to her: ‘When we serve the poor and the sick, we are the good odour of Christ’”. That good odour of Christ – the care of the poor – is, and always has been, the hallmark of the Church. Paul made it the focus of his meeting with Peter, James and John, the “columns” of the Church. He tells us that they “asked only one thing, that we remember the poor”. This reminds me of something I have said many times: when I had just been elected Pope, a brother cardinal embraced me and said, “Do not forget the poor”. It was the first message that the Lord made me receive in that moment. The Catechism goes on to say, significantly, that “those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church, which from her origins, and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defence and liberation” And this is without ideologies, only with the strength of the Gospel.

In the Church we have, and have always had, our sins and failings. But when it comes to serving the poor by the works of mercy, as a Church we have always followed the promptings of the Spirit. Our saints did this in quite creative and effective ways. Love for the poor has been the sign, the light that draws people to give glory to the Father. Our people value this in a priest who cares for the poor and the sick, for those whose sins he forgives and for those whom he patiently teaches and corrects. Our people forgive us priests many failings, except for that of attachment to money. This does not have so much to do with money itself, but the fact that money makes us lose the treasure of mercy. Our people can sniff out which sins are truly grave for a priest, the sins that kill his ministry because they turn him into a bureaucrat or, even worse, a mercenary. They can also recognise which sins are, I will not say secondary, but that have to be put up with, borne like a cross, until the Lord at last burns them away like the chaff. But the failure of a priest to be merciful is a glaring contradiction. It strikes at the heart of salvation, against Christ, who “became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich”. Because mercy heals “by losing something of itself”. We feel a pang of regret and we lose a part of our life, because rather than do what we wanted to do, we reached out to someone else.

So it is not about God showing me mercy for this or that sin, as if I were otherwise self-sufficient, or about us performing some act of mercy towards this or that person in need. The grace we seek in this prayer is that of letting ourselves be shown mercy by God in every aspect of our lives and in turn to show mercy to others in all that we do. As priests and bishops, we work with the sacraments, baptising, hearing confessions, celebrating the Eucharist... Mercy is our way of making the entire life of God’s people a sacrament. Being merciful is not only “a way of life”, but “the way of life”. There is no other way of being a priest. Father Brochero, soon to be canonised, put it this way: “The priest who has scarce pity for sinners is only half a priest. These vestments I wear are not what make me a priest; if I don’t have charity in my heart, I am not even a Christian.”

To see needs and to bring immediate relief, and even more, to anticipate those needs: this is the mark of a father’s gaze. This priestly gaze – which takes the place of the father in the heart of Mother Church – makes us see people with the eyes of mercy. It has to be learned from seminary on, and it must enrich all our pastoral plans and projects. We desire, and we ask the Lord to give us, a gaze capable of discerning the signs of the times, to know “what works of mercy our people need today” in order to feel and savour the God of history who walks among them. For, as Aparecida says, quoting St. Alberto Hurtado: “In our works, our people know that we understand their suffering”.

The proof that we understand is that our works of mercy are blessed by God and meet with help and cooperation from our people. Some plans and projects do not work out well, without people ever realising why. They rack their brains trying to come up with yet another pastoral plan, when all somebody has to say is: “It’s not working because it lacks mercy”, with no further ado. If it is not blessed, it is because it lacks mercy. It lacks the mercy found in a field hospital, not in expensive clinics; it lacks the mercy that values goodness and opens the door to an encounter with God, rather than turning someone away with sharp criticism.

I am going to propose a prayer about the woman whose sins were forgiven, to ask for the grace to be merciful in the confessional, and another prayer about the social dimension of the works of mercy.

I have always been struck by the passage of the Lord’s encounter with the woman caught in adultery, and how, by refusing to condemn her, He “fell short of” the Law. In response to the question they asked to test Him –

“should she be stoned or not?” – He did not rule, He did not apply the law. He played dumb – in this too the Lord is a teacher to us all – and then turned to something else. He thus initiated a process in the heart of the woman who needed to hear those words: “Neither do I condemn you”. He stretched out his hand and helped her to her feet, letting her see a gentle gaze that changed her heart. The Lord stretched out His hand to the daughter of Jairus and told her parents to give her something to eat; he told the dead boy in Nain: “rise!”. The Lord restores us exactly as God wanted mankind to be: on our feet, standing, never on the ground.” Sometimes I feel a little saddened and annoyed when people go straight to the last words Jesus speaks to her: “Go and sin no more”. They use these words to “defend” Jesus from bypassing the law. I believe that Christ’s words are of a piece with His actions. He bends down to write on the ground as a prelude to what He is about to say to those who want to stone the woman, and He does so again before talking to her. This tells us something about the “time” that the Lord takes in judging and forgiving. The time He gives each person to look into his or her own heart and then to walk away. In talking to the woman, the Lord opens other spaces: one is that of non-condemnation. The Gospel clearly mentions this open space. It makes us see things through the eyes of Jesus, Who tells us: “I see no one else but this woman”.

Then Jesus makes the woman herself look around. He asks her: “Where are those who condemned you?” (The word “condemn” is itself important, since it is about what we find unacceptable about those who judge or caricature us...). Once He has opened before her eyes this space freed of other people’s judgements, He tells her that neither will He throw a stone there: “Nor do I condemn you”. Then He opens up another free space before her: “Go and sin no more”. His command has to do with the future, to help her to make a new start and to “walk in love”. Such is the sensitivity of mercy: it looks with compassion on the past and offers encouragement for the future.

Those words, “Go and sin no more” are not easy. The Lord says them “with her”. He helps her put into words what she herself feels, a free “no” to sin that is like Mary’s “yes” to grace. That “no” has to be said to the deeply-rooted sin present in everyone. In that woman, it was a social sin; people approached her either to sleep with her or to throw stones at her. She had no other type of social closeness. That is why the Lord does not only clear the path before her, but sets her on her way, so that she can stop being the “object” of other people’s gaze and instead take control of her life. Those words, “sin no more” refer not only to morality, but, I believe, to a kind of sin that keeps her from living her life. Jesus also told the paralytic at Bethzatha to sin no more. But that man had justified himself with all the sad things that had “happened to him”; he suffered from a victim complex – the woman did not. So Jesus challenged him ever so slightly by saying: “...lest something worse happen to you”. The Lord took advantage of his way of thinking, his fears, to draw him out of his paralysis. He gave him a little scare, we might say. The point is that each of us has to hear the words “sin no more” in his own deeply personal way.

This image of the Lord Who sets people on their way is very typical. He is the God Who walks at his people’s side, Who leads them forward, Who accompanies our history. Hence, the object of His mercy is quite clear: it is everything that keeps a man or a woman from walking on the right path, with their own people, at their own pace, to where God is asking them to go. What troubles Him is that people get lost, or fall behind, or try to go it on their own. That they end up nowhere. That they are not there for the Lord, ready to go wherever He wants to send them. That they do not walk humbly before Him, that they do not walk in love.

THE SPACE OF THE CONFESSIONAL, WHERE THE TRUTH MAKES US FREE

Speaking of space, let us go to the confessional. The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents the confessional as the place where the truth makes us free for an encounter. “When he celebrates the sacrament of penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial Judge whose judgement is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God’s merciful love for the sinner”. The Catechism also reminds us that “the confessor is not the master of God’s forgiveness but its servant. The minister of this sacrament should unite himself to the intention and charity of Christ”.

Signs and instruments of an encounter. That is what we are. An attractive invitation to an encounter. As signs, we must be welcoming, sending a message that attracts people's attention. Signs need to be consistent and clear, but above all understandable. Some signs are only clear to specialists, and these are not useful. Signs and instruments. Instruments have to be effective – do they work or not? – readily available, precise and suitable for the job. We are instruments if people have a genuine encounter with the God of mercy. Our task is "to make that encounter possible", face-to-face. What people do afterwards is their business. There is a prodigal son among the pigs and a father who goes out every afternoon to see if he is returning. There is a lost sheep and a shepherd who goes out to seek him. There is a wounded person left at the roadside and a good-hearted Samaritan. What is our ministry? It is to be signs and instruments enabling this encounter. Let us always remember that we are not the father, the shepherd or the Samaritan. Rather, inasmuch as we are sinners, we are on the side of the other three. Our ministry has to be a sign and instrument of that encounter. We are part of the mystery of the Holy Spirit, Who creates the Church, builds unity, and constantly invites to encounter.

The other mark of a sign and instrument is that it is not self-referential. Put more simply, it is not an end in itself. Nobody sticks with the sign once they understand the reality. Nobody keeps looking at the screwdriver or the hammer, but at the well-hung picture. We are useless servants. Instruments and signs that help two people to join in an embrace, like the father and his son.

The third mark of a sign and instrument is its availability. An instrument has to be readily accessible; a sign must be visible. Being a sign and instrument is about being a mediator, available. Perhaps this is the real key to our own mission in this merciful encounter of God and man. We could even put it in negative terms. St. Ignatius talked about "not getting in the way". A good mediator makes things easy, rather than setting up obstacles. In my country, there was a great confessor, Father Cullen. He would sit in the confessional and when there were no people, he would do one of two things: he would repair worn soccer balls for the local kids, or he would thumb through a big Chinese dictionary. He used to say that when people saw him doing such completely useless things like fixing old soccer balls or trying to master Chinese, they would think: "I'm going to go up and talk to his priest, since he obviously doesn't have much to do!" He was available for what was essential. He got rid of the obstacle of always looking busy and serious. And here is the problem. People do not approach when they see that their pastor is always very, very busy.

Everybody has known good confessors. We have to learn from our good confessors, the ones whom people seek out, who do not make them afraid but help them to speak frankly, as Jesus did with Nicodemus. It is important to understand the language of gestures; do not ask things that are already evident in gestures. If people come to confession it is because they are penitent; repentance is already present. They come to confession because they want to change. Or at least they want to want to change, if they think their situation is impossible. *Ad impossibilia nemo tenetur*, as the old maxim goes: no one is obliged to do the impossible. The language of gestures. I read about the life of a recent saint of these times who experienced war. There was a soldier who was about to be shot, and he went to confess him. And he could see that he had been something of a libertarian, that he often sought pleasure with women. He asked him if he regretted this, and he said "No, it was so good, Father". And this saint did not know what to do. The firing squad was ready, and so he said, "Tell me this, do you at least regret not being repentant?" "This, yes". "Good then!" The confessor always finds the way, and the language of gestures is the language of the possibilities for reaching the point.

We have to learn from good confessors, those who are gentle with sinners, who after a couple of words understand everything, as Jesus did with the woman suffering from a haemorrhage, and straight away the power of forgiveness goes forth from them. I was edified by one of the cardinals of the Curia, whom I had previously considered very rigid. And he, when there was a penitent who was ashamed to confess a sin and began with one or two words, he immediately understood what was being said and added, "Go on, I have understood". And he stopped him, because he had already understood. This is tact. But those confessors who ask questions ... "But tell me, please...". Do you need all the details to forgive, or are you making a film? The integrity of confession is not a mathematics problem. How many times? How? Where? Sometimes people feel less shame in confessing a sin than in stating the number of times they committed it. We have to let ourselves be moved by people's situation, which at times is a mixture of their own doing, human weakness, sin and insuperable conditionings. We have to be like Jesus, Who was deeply moved by the sight of people and their problems, and kept healing them, even when they "didn't ask properly", like that leper, or seemed to beat around the bush, like

the Samaritan woman. She was like a bird we have in South America: she squawked in one place but had her nest in another. Jesus was patient.

We have to learn from confessors who can enable penitents to feel amendment in taking a small step forwards, like Jesus, who gave a suitable penance and could appreciate the one leper who returned to thank him, on whom He bestowed yet more. Jesus had his mat taken away from the paralytic, and He made the blind man and the Syro-Phoenician woman have to ask. It didn't matter to Him if they paid no attention to Him, like the paralytic at the pool of Bethzatha, or told others what He ordered them not to tell, with the result that He himself became the leper, since He could not go into the towns or His enemies found reasons to condemn Him. He healed people, forgave their sins, eased their suffering, gave them rest and made them feel the consoling breath of the Spirit.

In Buenos Aires I knew a Capuchin Friar. He is a little younger than myself and a great confessor. There is always a line before his confessional, lots of people: humble people, rich people, priests, nuns, confessing all day long. He is really good at forgiving. He always finds the way to forgive and to send someone on their way. He forgives, but every once in a while he has scruples about being so forgiving. Once in conversation he told me: "Sometimes I have scruples". So I asked him: "What do you do when you have these scruples?" He replied: "I go before the tabernacle, I look at our Lord and I tell him, 'Lord, forgive me, today I was very forgiving. But let's be clear, it is all Your fault, because You gave me a bad example!'" He added mercy to mercy.

Lastly, as far as confession is concerned, I have two pieces of advice. First, never look like a bureaucrat or a judge, somebody who just sees "cases" to be dealt with. Mercy sets us free from being this kind of priest, who is so used to judging "cases" that he is no longer sensitive to persons, to faces. I remember that when I was studying theology, I went to listen to an examination to be taken in the third year, before ordination. ... On one occasion a companion was asked a question on justice: very intricate, very artificial. And this companion said, very humbly, "But Father, this doesn't happen in life". "But it is in the books!". This morality of books, without experience. The rule of Jesus is to "judge as we would be judged". This is the key to our judgement: that we treat others with dignity, that we don't demean or mistreat them, that we help raise them up, and that we never forget that the Lord is using us, weak as we are, as his instruments. Not necessarily because our judgement is "the best", but because it is sincere and can build a good relationship.

My other bit of advice is not to be curious in the confessional. St. Therese tells us that when her novices would confide in her, she was very careful not to ask how things turned out. She did not pry into people's souls. It is characteristic of mercy to cover sin with its cloak, so as not to wound people's dignity. Like the two sons of Noah, who covered with a cloak the nakedness of their father in his drunkenness.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE WORKS OF MERCY

At the end of the Exercises, St. Ignatius puts "contemplation to attain love", which connects what is experienced in prayer to daily life. He makes us reflect on how love has to be put more into works than into words. Those works are the works of mercy which the Father "prepared beforehand to be our way of life", those which the Spirit inspires in each for the common good. In thanking the Lord for all the gifts we have received from His bounty, we ask for the grace to bring to all mankind that mercy which has been our own salvation.

I propose that we meditate on this social dimension in one of the final paragraphs of the Gospels. There, the Lord himself makes that connection between what we have received and what we are called to give. We can read these conclusions in the key of "works of mercy" which bring about the time of the Church, the time in which the risen Jesus lives, guides, sends forth and appeals to our freedom, which finds in Him its concrete daily realisation.

At the end of the Gospel Matthew tells us that the Lord sends His Apostles to make disciples of all nations, "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded". This "instructing the ignorant" is itself one of the works of mercy. It spreads like light to the other works: to those listed in Matthew 25, which deal more with the so-called "corporal works of mercy", and to all the commandments and evangelical counsels, such as "forgiving",

“fraternally correcting”, consoling the sorrowing, and enduring persecution.

Mark’s Gospel ends with the image of the Lord Who “collaborates” with the Apostles and “confirms the word by the signs that accompany it”. Those “signs” greatly resemble the works of mercy. Mark speaks, among other things, of healing the sick and casting out demons.

Luke continues his Gospel with the “Acts” – praxeis – of the Apostles, relating the history of how they acted and the works they did, led by the Spirit.

John’s Gospel ends by referring to the “many other things” or “signs” which Jesus performed. The Lord’s actions, His works, are not mere deeds but signs by which, in a completely personal way, He shows His love and His mercy for each person.

We can contemplate the Lord who sends us on this mission, by using the image of the merciful Jesus as revealed to Sister Faustina. In that image we can see mercy as a single ray of light that comes from deep within God, passes through the heart of Christ, and emerges in a diversity of colours, each representing a work of mercy.

The works of mercy are endless, but each bears the stamp of a particular face, a personal history. They are much more than the lists of the seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy. Those lists are like the raw material – the material of life itself – that, worked and shaped by the hands of mercy, turns into an individual artistic creation. Each work multiplies like the bread in the baskets; each gives abundant growth like the mustard seed. For mercy is fruitful and inclusive.

We usually think of the works of mercy individually and in relation to a specific initiative: hospitals for the sick, soup kitchens for the hungry, shelters for the homeless, schools for those to be educated, the confessional and spiritual direction for those needing counsel and forgiveness. But if we look at the works of mercy as a whole, we see that the object of mercy is human life itself and everything it embraces. Life itself, as “flesh”, hungers and thirsts; it needs to be clothed, given shelter and visited, to say nothing of receiving a proper burial, something none of us, however rich, can do for ourselves. Even the wealthiest person, in death, becomes a pauper; there are no removal vans in a funeral cortege. Life itself, as “spirit”, needs to be educated, corrected, encouraged and consoled. We need others to counsel us, to forgive us, to put up with us and to pray for us. The family is where these works of mercy are practised in so normal and unpretentious a way that we don’t even realise it. Yet once a family with small children loses its mother, everything begins to fall apart. The cruellest and most relentless form of poverty is that of street children, without parents and prey to the vultures.

We have asked for the grace to be signs and instruments. Now we have to “act”, not only with gestures, but by projects and structures, by creating a culture of mercy. Once we begin, we sense immediately that the Spirit energises and sustains these works. He does this by using the signs and instruments he wants, even if at times they do not appear to be the most suitable ones. It could even be said that, in order to carry out the works of mercy, the Spirit tends to choose the poorest, humblest and most insignificant instruments, those who themselves most need that first ray of divine mercy. They are the ones who can best be shaped and readied to serve most effectively and well. The joy of realising that we are “useless servants” whom the Lord blesses with the fruitfulness of His grace, seats at His table and serves us the Eucharist, is a confirmation that we are engaged in His works of mercy.

Our faithful people are happy to congregate around works of mercy. In penitential and festive celebrations, and in educational and charitable activities, our people willingly come together and let themselves be shepherded in ways that are not always recognised or appreciated, whereas so many of our more abstract and academic pastoral plans fail to work. The massive presence of our faithful people in our shrines and on our pilgrimages is an anonymous presence, but anonymous simply because it is made up of so many faces and so great a desire simply to be gazed upon with mercy by Jesus and Mary. The same can be said about the countless ways in which our people take part in countless initiatives of solidarity; this too needs to be recognised, appreciated and promoted on our part.

As priests, we ask two graces of the Good Shepherd, that of letting ourselves be guided by the *sensus fidei* of our faithful people, and to be guided by their “sense of the poor”. Both these “senses” have to do with the *sensus Christi*, with our people’s love for, and faith in, Jesus.

Let us conclude by reciting the *Anima Christi*, that beautiful prayer which implores mercy from the Lord Who came among us in the flesh and graciously feeds us with His body and blood. We ask Him to show mercy to us and to His people. We ask His soul to “sanctify us”, His body to “save us”, His blood to “inebriate us” and to remove from us all other thirsts that are not of Him. We ask the water flowing from His side “to wash us”, His passion “to strengthen us”. Comfort Your people, crucified Lord! May Your wounds “shelter us”... Grant that Your people, Lord, may never be parted from You. Let nothing and no one separate us from Your mercy, which defends us from the snares of the wicked enemy. Thus, we will sing Your mercies, Lord, with all Your saints when You bid us come to You.
