

catechesis

# MERCY

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# CATECHESIS ON MERCY

2015-2016

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# 1. Why have a Jubilee of Mercy?

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

Yesterday I opened here, in St Peter's Basilica, the Holy Door of the Jubilee of Mercy, after having previously opened it in the Cathedral of Bangui, Central Africa. Today I would like to reflect together with you on the meaning of this Holy Year, responding to the question: *Why have a Jubilee of Mercy?* What does this mean?

The Church is in need of this extraordinary occasion. I am not saying: this extraordinary occasion is good for the Church. I am saying: the Church needs this extraordinary occasion. In this era of profound changes, the Church is called to offer her particular contribution, rendering visible the signs of the presence and closeness of God. The Jubilee is a favourable time for all of us, because by contemplating Divine Mercy, which overcomes all human limitations and shines in the darkness of sin, we are able to become more certain and effective witnesses.

Turning our gaze to God, merciful Father, and to our brothers and sisters in need of mercy, means focusing our attention on the *essential contents of the Gospel*: Jesus, Mercy made flesh, who renders the great mystery of the Trinitarian Love of God visible to our eyes. Celebrating a Jubilee of Mercy is equivalent to placing once again the specific nature of the Christian faith, namely Jesus Christ, the merciful God, at the centre of our personal life and that of our communities.

It is a Holy Year, therefore, so as to *live mercy*. Yes, dear brothers and sisters, this Holy Year is offered to us so that we may experience in our lives the sweet and gratifying touch of God's forgiveness, his presence beside us and his closeness especially in the moments of greatest need.

This Jubilee, in other words, is a privileged moment for the Church to learn to choose only "*what pleases God most*". What is it that "*pleases God most*"? Forgiving his children, having mercy on them, so that they may in turn forgive their brothers and sisters, shining as a flame of God's mercy in the world. This is what pleases God most. St Ambrose, in a theological book that he wrote about Adam, takes up the story of the creation of the world and says that each day after God made something — the moon, the sun or the animals — [the Bible] says: "God saw that it was good". But when he made man and woman, the Bible says: "He saw that it was very good". St Ambrose asks himself: "Why does He say 'very good'? Why is God so content after the creation of man and woman?". Because finally he had someone to forgive. This is beautiful: God's joy is forgiving, God's being is mercy. This is why we must open our hearts this year so that this love,

this joy of God may fill us all with this mercy. The Jubilee will be a “favourable time” for the Church if we learn to choose “*what pleases God most*”, without giving in to the temptation of thinking that something else is more important or primary. Nothing is more important than choosing “*what pleases God most*”, in other words, his mercy, his love, his tenderness, his embrace and his caresses!

The necessary work of renewing the institutions and structures of the Church is also a way that should lead us to make a living and vivifying experience of God’s mercy, which alone can guarantee that the Church is that city set on a hill that cannot be hid (cf. Mt 5:14). Only a merciful Church shines! Should we forget, for even just a moment, that mercy is “*what pleases God most*”, our every effort would be in vain, for we would become slaves to our institutions and our structures, inasmuch as they may be renewed. But we would always be slaves.

“To experience strongly within ourselves the joy of having been found by Jesus, the Good Shepherd who has come in search of us because we were lost” (*Homily of First Vespers of Divine Mercy Sunday*, 11 April 2015): this is the objective that the Church establishes for herself in this Holy Year. In this way we will strengthen in ourselves the certainty that mercy can truly help in the edification of a more human world. Especially in our time, in which forgiveness is a rare guest in the spheres of human life, the call to mercy is made more urgent, and this is so in every place: in society, in institutions, at work and even in the family.

Of course, someone could object: “Father, shouldn’t the Church do something more this Year? It is right to contemplate the mercy of God, but there are so many urgent needs!”. It is true, there is much to do, and I for one never tire of remembering this. However, we must bear in mind that whenever mercy is obliterated *self-love* is at the root. In the world, this takes the form of exclusively seeking one’s own interests, pleasures and honours joined with the desire to accumulate wealth, whereas in the life of a Christian it is often disguised in hypocrisy and worldliness. All of these things are contrary to mercy. Surges of self-love, which make mercy a stranger in the world, are so abundant and numerous that we are often unable to recognize them as limitations and as sin. This is why it is necessary to recognize ourselves as sinners, so as to strengthen within us the certainty of divine mercy. “Lord, I am a sinful man; Lord, I am a sinful woman: come with your mercy”. This is a beautiful prayer. It is an easy prayer to say every day: “Lord, I am a sinner: come with your mercy”.

Dear brothers and sisters, I hope that, in this Holy Year, each one of us may experience God’s mercy, in order to be witnesses to “*what pleases God most*”. Is it naïve to believe that this can change the world? Yes, humanly speaking, it is foolish, but “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25).

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## 2. The signs of the Jubilee

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

On Sunday the Holy Door was opened in the Cathedral of Rome, the Basilica of St John Lateran, and a *Door of Mercy* was opened in the Cathedral of every diocese of the world, and also in shrines and churches indicated by bishops. The Jubilee is throughout the world, not only in Rome. I wanted this sign of the Holy Door to be present in every particular Church, so that the Jubilee of Mercy could be an experience shared by each person. The Holy Year, therefore, has begun in the entire Church and is being celebrated in every diocese as in Rome. Also, the first Holy Door was opened in the very heart of Africa. Rome, of course, is the visible sign of universal communion. May this ecclesial communion become ever more intense, so that the Church may be the living sign of the Father's love and mercy in the world.

The date 8 December was also meant to highlight this need, by linking, separated by 50 years, the beginning of the Jubilee with the conclusion of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. In fact, the Council contemplated and introduced the Church to the light of the mystery of communion. Scattered throughout the world and articulated in many particular Churches, however, it is always and only the one Church of Jesus Christ, the one that he wanted and for which he offered himself. The "one" Church that lives of the very communion of God.

This mystery of communion, which makes the Church a sign of the Father's love, grows and matures in our heart, when the love, which we recognize in the Cross of Christ and in which we immerse ourselves, enables us to love as we are loved by Him. It is an unending Love, which has the face of forgiveness and mercy.

However, mercy and forgiveness must not remain as pleasant words, but must be made manifest in daily life. *Loving and forgiving are tangible and visible signs that faith has transformed our hearts* and allow us to express God's very life in ourselves. Loving and forgiving as God loves and forgives. This is a programme of life that can know no interruptions or exceptions, but it pushes us always to go farther without ever tiring, with the certainty of being sustained by the paternal presence of God.

This great sign of Christian life is then transformed into many other signs that are characteristic of the Jubilee. I think of those who will pass through one of the Holy Doors, which this year are the true Doors of Mercy. The Door points to Jesus himself, who said: "I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (Jn 10:9). *Passing through the Holy Door is the sign of our trust in the Lord Jesus* who came not to judge but to save (cf. Jn 12:47).



Be careful that no one rather swift or too shrewd tells you that you have to pay: no! Salvation is not paid for. Salvation is not bought. The Door is Jesus, and Jesus is gratis! He himself speaks about those who do not enter as they should, and he simply says that they are thieves and robbers. Again, be mindful: salvation is free. Passing through the Holy Door is a sign of the true conversion of our heart. When we pass through that Door it is good to remember that we must also keep the door of our heart wide open. I am before the Holy Door and I ask: “Lord, help me to thrust open the door of my heart!”. The Holy Year will not be very effective if the door of our heart does not allow the passage of Christ who urges us to go toward others, in order to bring him and his love. Thus, as the Holy Door stays open, because it is the sign of the welcome that God himself holds for us, may our door, that of the heart, also be always wide open so as to exclude no one. Not even he or she who bothers me: no one.

Another important sign of the Jubilee is *confession*. Approaching the Sacrament by which we reconcile ourselves with God is equal to directly experiencing his mercy. It is finding the Father who forgives: God forgives everything. God understands us even in our limitations, and he even understands us in our contradictions. Not only this, but He tells us with his love that precisely when we recognize our sins he is even closer and he spurs us to look forward. He says even more: that when we recognize our sins and we ask for forgiveness, there is a celebration in Heaven. Jesus celebrates: this is his mercy: let us not be discouraged. Onward, forward with this!

How often have I heard: “Father, I can’t forgive my neighbour, a coworker, the lady next door, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law”. We have all heard this: “I can’t forgive”. But how can we ask God to forgive us, if we are unable to forgive? Forgiving is something great, yet forgiving is not easy, because our heart is poor and with its efforts alone we cannot do it. However, if we open ourselves up to welcome God’s mercy for ourselves, in turn we become capable of forgiveness. So often I have heard: “I couldn’t see that person: I hated her. But one day, I drew close to the Lord and I asked him to forgive my sins, and I forgave that person too”. These are everyday matters. And this opportunity is close to us.

Therefore, take courage! Let us live out the Jubilee by beginning with these signs that carry the great power of love. The Lord will accompany us in order to lead us to experience other important signs for our life. Take courage and step forward!

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### 3. The Mercy of God

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Today we shall begin the catecheses on *mercy according to the biblical perspective*, in order to learn mercy by listening to what God himself teaches us through his Word. We shall start with the *Old Testament*, which prepares us and leads us to the full revelation of Jesus Christ, in whom the mercy of the Father is fully revealed.

In Sacred Scripture, the Lord is presented as a “*merciful God*”. This is his name, through which he unveils, so to speak, his face and his heart to us. As the Book of Exodus recounts, on revealing himself to Moses he defined himself in this way: “*the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*” (34:6). We also find this formula in other texts, with certain variations, but the emphasis is always placed on mercy and on the love of God who never tires of forgiving (cf. Gen 4:2; Joel 2:13; Ps 86 [85]: 15, 103 [102]: 8, 145[144]:8; Neh 9:17). Together let us consider, one by one, these words of Sacred Scripture which speak to us about God.

The Lord is “*merciful*”: this word evokes a tender approach like that of a mother toward her child. Indeed, the Hebrew term used in the Bible evokes the viscera or even the maternal womb. Therefore, the image it suggests is that of a God *who is moved and who softens for us* like a mother when she takes her child in her arms, wanting only to love, protect, help, ready to give everything, even herself. This is the image that this term evokes. A love, therefore, which can be defined in the best sense as “visceral”.

Then it is written that the Lord is “*gracious*”, in the sense of having grace, he has compassion and, in his greatness, he bends down to those who are weak and poor, *ever ready to welcome, to understand, to forgive*. He is like the father in the parable recounted in the Gospel of Luke (cf. Lk 15:11-32): a father who does not withdraw in resentment at the younger son for having forsaken him, but on the contrary, he continues to await him — he begot him — and then he runs to meet him and embraces him. He does not even let him explain — as though he had covered his mouth — so great is his love and joy at having found him again. Then the father also goes to call the older son who is offended and does not want to join in the celebration, the son who always stayed home and who lived more as a servant than as a son. To him too, the father bends down, invites him to enter, tries to open his heart to love, so that no one is excluded from the celebration of mercy. Mercy is a celebration!

It is also said of this merciful God that he is “*slow to anger*”, literally, “of great breadth”, that is, having a *broad capacity of forbearance and patience*. God knows how to wait, his time is not the impatient one of man; he is like the wise farmer who knows how to wait, allowing time for the good seed to grow, in spite of the weeds (cf. Mt 13:24-30).

Lastly, the Lord proclaims himself “*abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*”. How beautiful this definition of God is! It is all-encompassing. For God is great and powerful, and this greatness and power are used to love us, who are so small, so incompetent. The word “*love*”, used here, indicates *affection, grace, goodness*. It is not soap opera love.... It is love which takes the first step, which does not depend on human merit but on immense gratuitousness. It is divine solicitude that nothing can impede, not even sin, because it is able to go beyond sin, to overcome evil and forgive it.

Abounding in “*faithfulness*”: this is the final word of God’s revelation to Moses. God’s faithfulness never fails, because the Lord is the guardian who, as the Psalm says, never slumbers but keeps constant vigil over us in order to lead us to life: “May he not suffer your foot to slip; may he slumber not who guards you: Indeed he neither slumbers nor sleeps, the guardian of Israel.... The Lord will guard you from all evil; he will guard your life. The Lord will guard your coming and your going, both now and forever” (Ps 121[120]:3-4, 7-8).

This merciful God is faithful in his mercy and St Paul says something beautiful: if you are not faithful to him, he will remain faithful, for he cannot deny himself. Faithfulness in mercy is the very being of God. For this reason God is totally and always trustworthy. A solid and steadfast presence. This is the assurance of our faith. Thus, in this Jubilee of Mercy, let us entrust ourselves to him totally, and experience the joy of being loved by this “God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness”.

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## 4. God hears our cry and makes a covenant

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

In Sacred Scripture, God's mercy is present throughout the entire history of the people of Israel.

With his mercy, the Lord accompanies the journey of the Patriarchs, gives them children despite being barren, leads them on paths of grace and reconciliation, as demonstrated by the story of Joseph and his brothers (cf. Gen ch. 37-50). I think of the many brothers and sisters in a family who are distant and do not speak to each other. This Year of Mercy is a good opportunity to meet again, embrace, forgive and forget the bad things. But as we know, in Egypt, life is hard for the people. It is precisely when the Israelites are about to give in to resignation, that the Lord intervenes and works salvation.

One reads in the Book of Exodus: "In the course of those many days the King of Egypt died. And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition" (2:23-25). Mercy cannot remain indifferent to the suffering of the oppressed, to the cry of those who are subjected to violence, reduced to slavery, condemned to death. It is a painful reality that afflicts every era, including ours, and which often makes us feel powerless, tempted to harden our heart and think of something else. However, God "is not indifferent" (*Message for the Celebration of the 2016 World Day of Peace*, n. 1). He does not look away from our human pain. The God of mercy responds and takes care of the poor, of those who cry out in desperation. God listens and intervenes in order to save, raising men able to hear the groan of suffering and to work in favour of the oppressed.

And so begins the story of Moses as the mediator of freedom for the people. He confronts the Pharaoh to convince him to let the Israelites depart; and he then leads the people, across the Red Sea and the desert, toward freedom. Moses — whom just after his birth, divine mercy saved from death in the waters of the Nile — becomes the mediator of that very mercy, allowing the people to be born to freedom, saved from the waters of the Red Sea. In this Year of Mercy we too can do this work of acting as mediators of mercy through the works of mercy in order to approach, to give relief, to create unity. So many good things can be done.

God's mercy always operates to save. It is quite the opposite of the work of those who always act to kill: for example, those who wage war. The Lord, through his servant Moses, guides Israel in the desert as if Israel were a son, educates the

people to the faith and makes a covenant with Israel, creating a bond of the strongest love, like that of a father with his child and of a groom with his bride.

Divine mercy goes that far. God offers a special, exclusive, privileged relationship of love. When he gives instructions to Moses regarding the covenant, he says: “if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5-6).

Of course, God already possesses all the earth because he created it; but his people become for him a different, special possession: his personal “reserve of gold and silver” such as King David stated he had given for the construction of the Temple.

So we become thus for God, by accepting his covenant and letting ourselves be saved by him. The Lord’s mercy renders man precious, like a personal treasure that belongs to him, which he safeguards and with which he is well pleased.

These are the wonders of divine mercy, which reaches complete fulfillment in the Lord Jesus, in the “new and eternal covenant” consummated in his blood, which annuls our sin with forgiveness and renders us definitively Children of God (cf. 1 Jn 3:1), precious gems in the hands of the good and merciful Father. And as we are Children of God and have the opportunity to receive this legacy — that of goodness and mercy — in comparison to others, let us ask the Lord that in this Year of Mercy we too may do merciful things; let us open our heart in order to reach everyone with the works of mercy, to work the merciful legacy that God the Father showed toward us.

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## 5. Mercy and mission

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Day by day we enter more deeply into the Holy Year of Mercy. By his grace, the Lord guides our footsteps as we pass through the Holy Door and he comes to meet us and stay with us always, despite our failings and contradictions. Let us never tire of feeling in need of his forgiveness. For when we are weak, being close to him strengthens us and enables us to live the faith with greater joy.

Today I wish to speak to you about the close relationship between *mercy* and *mission*. As St John Paul II reminds us: “The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy... and when she brings people close to the sources of the Savior’s mercy” (*Dives in Misericordia*, n. 13). As Christians, we are called to be missionaries of the Gospel. When we receive good news, or when we experience beautiful moments, we naturally seek to share them with others. We feel inside that we cannot hold back the joy that we have been given; and we want to spread it. The joy that stirs within is such that it drives us to share it.

It ought to be the same when we encounter the Lord: the joy of this encounter and of his mercy, share the mercy of the Lord. Indeed, the concrete sign that we have truly encountered Jesus is the joy that we show in communicating it to others. And this is not “proselytizing”, this is giving a gift: I give you what gives me joy. Reading the Gospel we see that this was the experience of the first disciples: after their first encounter with Jesus, Andrew went immediately to tell his brother Peter (cf. Jn 1:40-42), and Philip did the same with Nathanael (cf. Jn 1:45-46). To encounter Jesus is to experience his love. This love transforms us and makes us able to transmit to others the power it gives. In a way we could say that from the day of our Baptism each one of us is given a new name in addition to the one given to us by our mom and dad; this name is “Christopher”. We are all “Christophers”. What does that mean? “Bearers of Christ”. It is the name of our attitude, the attitude of a bearer of the joy of Christ, of the mercy of Christ. Every Christian is a “Christopher”, that is, a bearer of Christ!

The mercy that we receive from the Father is not given as a private consolation, but makes us instruments that others too might receive the same gift. There is a wonderful interplay between mercy and mission. Experiencing mercy renders us missionaries of mercy, and to be missionaries allows us to grow ever more in the mercy of God. Therefore, let us take our Christian calling seriously and commit to live as believers, because only then can the Gospel touch a person’s heart and open it to receive the grace of love, to receive this great, all-welcoming mercy of God.

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## 6. Mercy and justice

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

Sacred Scripture presents God to us as infinite mercy and as perfect justice. How do we reconcile the two? How does one reconcile the reality of mercy with the demands of justice? It might appear that the two contradict each other; but in fact it is not so, for it is the very mercy of God that brings true justice to fulfilment. But what kind of justice are we talking about?

If we think of the legal administration of justice, we see that those who consider themselves victims of injustice turn to a judge in a tribunal and ask that justice be done. It is retributive justice, which inflicts a penalty on the guilty party, according to the principle that each person must be given his or her due. As the Book of Proverbs says: “He who is steadfast in righteousness will live, but he who pursues evil will die” (11:19). Jesus, too, speaks about it in the parable of the widow who went repeatedly to the judge and asked him: “Vindicate me against my adversary” (Lk 18:3). This path however does not lead to true justice because in reality it does not conquer evil, it merely checks it. Only by responding to it with good can evil be truly overcome.

There is then another way of doing justice, which the Bible presents to us as the royal road to take. It is a process that avoids recourse to the tribunal and allows the victim to face the culprit directly and invite him or her to conversion, helping the person to understand that they are doing evil, thus appealing to their conscience. In this way, by finally repenting and acknowledging their wrong, they can open themselves to the forgiveness that the injured party is offering them. And this is beautiful: after being persuaded that what was done was wrong, the heart opens to the forgiveness being offered to it. This is the way to resolve conflicts in the family, in the relationship between spouses or between parents and children, where the offended party loves the guilty one and wishes to save the bond that unites them. Do not sever that bond, that relationship.

Certainly, this is a difficult journey. It requires that those who have been wronged be ready to forgive and desire good and salvation for their offender. Only in this way can justice triumph, because thus, if the culprit acknowledges the evil done and ceases to do it, the evil is no more; and he who was unjust becomes just, because he is forgiven and is helped to rediscover the path of goodness. And this is where forgiveness and mercy come in.

This is how God acts towards us sinners. The Lord continually offers us his pardon and helps us to accept it and to be aware of our wrong-doing so as to free us of it. For God wants not our condemnation, but our salvation. God does not



want to condemn anyone! One of you might ask me: “But Father, didn’t Pilate deserve condemnation? Did God want that?” No! God wanted to save Pilate as well as Judas, everyone! He, the Lord of Mercy, wants to save everyone! The difficulty is in allowing him to enter our hearts. Every word of the prophets is a passionate appeal full of love which seeks our conversion. This is what the Lord says through the Prophet Ezekiel: “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked... and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?” (18:23; cf. 33:11), that’s what pleases God!

This is the heart of God, the heart of a Father who loves and wants his children to live in goodness and in justice, and thus that they might live to the fullest and be happy. The heart of a Father who goes beyond our little concept of justice to open us to the limitless horizons of his mercy. His is the heart of a Father who does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults, as the Psalm says (103[102]:9-10). His is precisely the heart of the father whom we want to encounter when we go to the confessional. Perhaps he will say something to help us better understand our sin, but we all go to find a father who helps us to change our lives; a father who gives us the strength to go on; a father who forgives us in the name of God. That is why being a confessor is such an important responsibility, because that son, that daughter who comes to you is only looking for a father. And you, priest in the confessional, you are there in the place of the Father who does justice with his mercy.

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## 7. The Jubilee in the Bible. Justice and sharing

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning and have a good Lenten journey!*

It is fitting and meaningful to hold this Audience on Ash Wednesday. We are beginning the Lenten journey, and today we stop to consider the ancient institution of the “jubilee”, an ancient custom attested in Sacred Scripture. In particular we find it in the Book of Leviticus, who presents it as a culminating moment in the religious and social life of the people of Israel.

Every 50 years, “on the day of atonement” (Lev 25:9), when the Lord’s mercy is invoked upon the whole people, the sound of the trumpet announced the great event of liberation. In fact we read in Leviticus: “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his family[...]. In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property” (25:10, 13). In accordance with these dispositions, if someone had been compelled to sell his land or his house, in the jubilee year he could regain possession of it; and if someone had contracted debts and, being unable to pay them, was compelled to place himself in the service of the creditor, he could return debt free to his family and regain all of his property.

It was a type of “general pardon”, by which everyone was allowed to return to their original situation, with the cancellation of all debts, the restitution of land, and the opportunity for freedom to be enjoyed once again by the members of the People of God: a “holy” people, where regulations such as that of the jubilee year served to combat poverty and inequality, guaranteeing a dignified life to all and an equitable distribution of land on which to live and from which to draw sustenance. The central idea is that the land originally belonged to God and has been entrusted to man (cf. Gen 1:28-29), and therefore no one may claim exclusive possession, thereby creating situations of inequality. Today we can consider and reconsider this; each one in our heart think about whether we have too many things. Why not leave them to those who have nothing? Ten per cent, fifty per cent.... I say: may the Holy Spirit inspire each of you.

With the jubilee, those who had become poor returned to having the necessities of life, and those who had become rich restored to the poor what they had taken from them. The goal was a society based on equality and solidarity, where freedom, land and money became once again a resource for all and not just for a few, as happens now, if I’m not mistaken.... The figures are approximate, but more or less 80 per cent of human wealth is in the hands of less than 20 percent of the population. It is a jubilee year — and I say this remembering our salvation history — for converting, so that our heart may become larger, more generous,

more a child of God, with more love. I'll tell you one thing: if this wish, if the Jubilee does not touch the pocket, it is not a true jubilee. Do you understand? This is in the Bible! This Pope did not invent it: it is in the Bible. The goal — as I said — is a society based on equality and solidarity, where freedom, land and money become a resource for all and not just for the few. Indeed the function of the jubilee was to help the people experience practical fraternity, made of mutual help. We might say that the biblical jubilee was a “jubilee of mercy”, because it was lived in sincerely seeking the good of the brother in need.

Along the same lines, other institutions and other laws also governed the life of the People of God, so that it could experience the mercy of the Lord through that of men. In those laws we find indications that are valid even today, which call for reflection. For example, the biblical law required “tithing” to benefit the Levites, [the priests] in charge of worship, the landless, and to the poor, the fatherless, and widows (cf. Deut 14:22-29). It provided, in other words, for one tenth of the harvest, or of the proceeds of other work, to be given to those who were without protection and in a state of need, thus fostering conditions of relative equality within a people in which everyone had to behave as brothers.

There was also a law concerning the “first fruits”. What is this? The first part of the harvest, the most valuable part, which had to be shared with the Levites and with strangers (cf. Deut 18:4-5; 26:1-11), those who owned no fields, thus ensuring for them too that the land be a source of nourishment and life. “The land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me”, says the Lord (Lev 25:23). We are all guests of the Lord, awaiting the heavenly country (cf. Heb 11:13-16; 1 Pet 2:11), called to render habitable and human the world which welcomes us. As regards the “first fruits”, the more fortunate could give more to those who are in difficulty! So many first fruits! The first harvest not only of the yield of the fields, but of every other product of work, of wages, of savings, of so many things that are owned and that at times are wasted. This happens today too. In the Office of Papal Charities so many letters are received containing a little money: “this is a part of my wages in order to help others”. This is beautiful; helping others, charitable institutions, hospitals, rest homes...; also giving to strangers, those who are foreigners and sojourners. Jesus was a sojourner in Egypt.

Precisely in this consideration, Sacred Scripture persistently exhorts a generous response to requests for loans, without making petty calculations and without demanding impossible interest rates: “And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit” (Lev 25:35-37). This lesson is always timely. How many families there are on the street, victims of profiteering. Please let us pray, that in this Jubilee Year the Lord remove from every heart this desire to have more, to exploit. That we may return to being generous, great. How many situations of exploitation we are forced to see and how much suffering and anguish they cause families! And so often, in desperation, how many men end up committing suicide because they cannot manage and do not have hope, they do not have a helping hand extended to them; only the hand that comes to make them pay interest. It is a grave sin, usury is a sin that cries out in the presence of God. The Lord instead promised his blessing to those who open their hand to give

generously (cf. Deut 15:10). He will give to you twofold, perhaps not in money but in other things, but the Lord will always give you double.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Bible's message is very clear: be courageously open to sharing, and this is mercy! If we want mercy from God, let us begin to practice it. It is this: beginning to practice it among ourselves, among compatriots, among families, among peoples, among continents. Contributing to the realization of a world with no poor means building a society without discrimination, based on solidarity that leads to sharing whatever we possess, in a distribution of resources founded on brotherhood and on justice. Thank you.

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## 8. Mercy and commitment

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

The Jubilee of Mercy is a true opportunity to enter deeply into the mystery of the goodness and love of God. In this Season of Lent, the Church invites us to learn to know the Lord Jesus ever better, and to live the faith in a consistent way with a lifestyle that expresses the mercy of the Father. It is a commitment that we are called to take on in order to offer to those we meet the concrete sign of God's closeness. My life, my attitude, the way of going through life, must really be a concrete sign of the fact that God is close to us. Small gestures of love, of tenderness, of care, that make people feel that the Lord is with us, is close to us. This is how the door of mercy opens.

Today I would like to pause briefly to reflect with you on the theme of this expression I used: the theme of commitment. What is a commitment? What does it mean to be committed? When I commit myself, it means that I assume a responsibility, a task, for someone; it also means the way, the attitude of faithfulness and dedication, the particular care with which I carry out this task. Each day we are asked to put our heart and soul into what we do: prayer, work, study, but also in sport and recreation.... Committing ourselves, in other words, means making every effort to do our best in order to improve life.

God too has committed himself to us. His first commitment was that of creating the world, and despite our attempts to ruin it — and there are many — He is committed to keeping it alive. But his greatest commitment was that of giving us Jesus. This is God's great commitment! Yes, Jesus is really the supreme commitment that God has assumed for us. St Paul also recalled this when he wrote that God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Rom 8:32). Accordingly, together with Jesus, the Father will give us everything that we need.

How is God's commitment to us made manifest? It is very easy to verify it in the Gospel. In Jesus, God completely committed himself in order to restore hope to the poor, to those who were deprived of dignity, to strangers, to the sick, to captives, and to sinners, whom he welcomed with kindness. In all this, Jesus was the living expression of the Father's mercy. I would like to touch upon this: Jesus welcomed sinners with kindness. If we think in a human way, a sinner would be an enemy of Jesus, an enemy of God, but he approached them with kindness, he loved them and changed their hearts. We are all sinners: everyone! We all have some fault before God, but we must not harbour doubt. He approaches us in order to give us comfort, mercy, forgiveness. This is God's commitment and this is why he sent Jesus: to draw close to us, to all of us, and to open the door of his love, of his heart, of his mercy. This is really beautiful. Very beautiful!

Starting with the merciful love through which Jesus expressed God's commitment, we too can and must reciprocate his love with our commitment, and do so above all in serious situations of need, where there is a greater thirst for hope. I think, for example, of our commitment to forsaken people, to those who have severe disabilities, to the most seriously ill, to the dying, to those who are unable to express gratitude.... In all these situations we convey God's mercy through life-giving commitment, which witnesses to our faith in Christ. We must always bring God's tender caress — because God has caressed us with his mercy — bringing it to others, to those who are in need, to those who have anguish in their hearts or are sad: approach them with God's caress, which is the same that he gave to us.

May this Jubilee Year help our mind and our heart to experience God's commitment to each one of us and, thanks to this, to transform life into a commitment of mercy for all.

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## 9. Mercy and power

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

We continue with our catecheses on mercy in Sacred Scripture. Various passages speak of the powerful, of kings, of men “in high places”, and also of their arrogance and their abuse of power. Wealth and power are situations that can be good and beneficial to the common good, if placed at the service of the poor and of all, with justice and charity. But when, as too often occurs, they are experienced as a privilege, with selfishness and high-handedness, they are transformed into instruments of corruption and death. This is what happened in the episode of Naboth’s vineyard, described in the First Book of Kings, Chapter 21, which we shall pause to consider today.

In this text it is recounted that Ahab, the King of Israel, wants to buy the vineyard of a man called Naboth, because this vineyard borders the royal palace. The offer appears legitimate, even generous, but land holdings in Israel were considered as practically inalienable. In fact the Book of Leviticus states: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me (Lev 25:23). The land is sacred, because it is a gift of the Lord, which as such, must be safeguarded and preserved, as a sign of the divine blessing that passes from generation to generation and guarantees dignity for all. Thus one can understand Naboth’s negative reply to the king: “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers” (1 Kings 21:3).

King Ahab reacts to this refusal with bitterness and disdain. He feels offended — he is the king, the powerful man — his sovereign authority vitiated, and his desire for ownership frustrated. Seeing him so dejected, his wife Jezebel, a pagan queen who had promoted idolatrous worship and who had had the Lord’s prophets killed (cf. 1 Kings 18:4), — she was not bad, she was evil! — decided to intervene. The words she addressed to the king are quite significant. Listen to the wickedness that was behind this woman: “Do you now govern Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful. I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite” (1 Kings 21:7). She emphasizes the king’s prestige and power, which, in her way of looking at it, are called into question by Naboth’s rejection. Instead, it is a power that she considers absolute, and through which the powerful king’s every desire becomes an order. The great St Ambrose wrote a little book about this episode. It’s called “Naboth”. It will be good for us to read it in this Season of Lent. It is really beautiful, very practical.

Jesus, recalling these things, tells us: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and

whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Mt 20:25-27). Should a person lose this dimension of service, power can transform into arrogance and become domination and oppression. This is exactly what happened in the episode of Naboth’s vineyard. Jezebel, the queen, in an unscrupulous manner, decides to eliminate Naboth and puts her plan into action. She uses false pretences of a perverse legal system: in the king’s name, she sends letters to the elders and nobles of the city, ordering that false witnesses publicly accuse Naboth of having cursed God and the king, a crime punishable by death. Thus, with Naboth dead, the king was able to take possession of the vineyard. This is not a story of former times, it is also a story of today, of the powerful who, in order to have more money, exploit the poor, exploit people. It is the story of the trafficking of people, of slave labour, of poor people who work “under the table” and for a minimal wage, thus enriching the powerful. It is the story of corrupt politicians who want more and more! This is why I said that it would be good for us to read St Ambrose’s book about Naboth, because this text is relevant to modern day.

That is where the exercise of authority without respect for life, without justice, without mercy leads. And that is where the thirst for power leads: it becomes greed that wants to own everything. A text of the Prophet Isaiah is especially enlightening in this regard. In it, the Lord cautions against the avidity of wealthy landowners who want to own more and more houses and lands. The Prophet Isaiah says:

“Woe to those who join house to house,  
who add field to field,  
until there is no more room,  
and you are made to dwell alone  
in the midst of the land” (Is 5:8).

The Prophet Isaiah was not a communist! God, however, is greater than the wickedness and of the underhanded dealings of human beings. In his mercy he sends the Prophet Elijah to help Ahab to convert. Now let us turn the page over, and how does the story continue? God sees this crime and also knocks at the heart of Ahab, and the king, his sins placed before him, understands, humbles himself and asks for forgiveness. How beautiful it would be if today’s powerful exploiters did the same! The Lord accepts his repentance; however, an innocent man has been killed, and the evil perpetuated leaves painful scars. Indeed, the evil committed leaves its painful vestiges, and the history of mankind bears the wounds. Mercy shows, in this case too, the royal road that must be followed. Mercy can heal wounds and can change history. Open your heart to mercy! Divine mercy is stronger than the sins of men. It is stronger, this is the example of Ahab! We know its power, when we recall the coming of the Innocent Son of God who became man to destroy evil with his forgiveness. Jesus Christ is the true King, but his power is completely different. His throne is the Cross. He is not a king who kills, but on the contrary, who gives life. His going toward everyone, especially the weakest, vanquishes loneliness and the deadly fate to which sin leads. Jesus Christ, with his closeness and tenderness, leads sinners into the place of grace and pardon. This is the mercy of God.



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## 10. Mercy and correction

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

In speaking about divine mercy, we have often evoked the figure of the father of a family, who loves his children, helps them, cares for them, forgives them. As father, he teaches them and corrects them when they make mistakes, helping them to develop and grow in goodness. This is how God is presented in the first chapter of the Book of Prophet Isaiah, in which the Lord, a loving but also a careful and strict father, turns to Israel, accusing them of disloyalty and corruption, in order to lead them back to the path of justice. This is how our text begins: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; / for the Lord has spoken: / ‘Sons have I reared and brought up, / but they have rebelled against me. / The ox knows its owner, / and the ass its master’s crib; / but Israel does not know, / my people does not understand’” (1:2-3).

Through the prophet, God speaks to the people with the bitterness of a disappointed father, who raised his children, and now they have rebelled against him. Even animals are loyal to their master and recognize the hand that feeds them; yet, the people no longer recognize God, they refuse to understand. Although wounded, God lets love speak, and he appeals to the conscience of these degenerate children, that they may mend their ways and allow themselves to be loved again. This is what God does! He comes to meet us so that we may allow him, our God, to love us.

The father-son relationship, to which the prophets often refer in speaking about the Covenant relationship between God and his people, has been distorted. A parent’s mission to educate aims to raise children in freedom, teaching them how to be responsible, able to do good things for themselves and for others. But, because of sin, freedom becomes the pretext of autonomy, the pretext of pride, and pride leads to opposition and the illusion of self-sufficiency.

Thus God reprimands his people: “You have lost your way”. Lovingly and bitterly he says “my” people. God never disowns us; we are his people. Even the worst of men, the worst of women, the worst of people are his children. This is God: he never ever disowns us! He always says: “Come, son, come daughter”. This is the love of our Father; this is the mercy of God. Having such a Father gives us hope, gives us confidence. This belonging should be lived out in trust and obedience, with the knowledge that everything is a gift that comes from the Father’s love. Instead, there is vanity, stupidity and idolatry.

This is why the prophet now directly addresses this people with severe words in order to help them to understand the gravity of their fault: “Ah, sinful nation, / [...]

sons who deal corruptly! / They have forsaken the Lord, / they have despised the Holy One of Israel, / they are utterly estranged” (v. 4).

The consequence of sin is a state of suffering, of which the country also feels the effects, devastated and rendered desolate, to the point that Zion — that is, Jerusalem — becomes uninhabitable. Where God and his paternity are rejected, life is no longer possible, existence loses its roots, everything appears depraved and annihilated. However, even this painful moment is in view of salvation. The purpose of trial is that the people may experience the bitterness of those who abandon God, and thus confront the distressing emptiness of choosing death. Suffering, the inevitable consequence of a self-destructive decision, must make sinners reflect in order for them to be open to conversion and forgiveness.

This is the way of divine mercy. God does not deal with us according to our faults (cf. Ps 103[102]:10). Punishment becomes an instrument to spur reflection. Thus, one can understand that God forgives his people, he forgives and does not destroy all, but always leaves the door open to hope. Salvation entails the decision to listen and allow oneself to convert, but it is always freely given. Therefore the Lord, in his mercy, indicates a path that is not that of ritual sacrifices, but rather of justice. Worship is criticized not because it is useless in itself, but because, instead of expressing conversion, it puts itself forward; and it thus becomes a quest for one’s own justice, creating the misleading conviction that it is the sacrifices that save, not divine mercy that forgives sin.

To understand this clearly: when a person is sick he goes to the doctor; when a person feels he is a sinner he goes to the Lord. If, instead of going to the doctor, he goes to a sorcerer, he is not healed. So often we do not go to the Lord, but prefer to take the wrong path, seeking justifications, justice or peace without him. God, says the prophet Isaiah, does not delight in the blood of bulls and of lambs (1:11), particularly if the offering is made by hands stained with our brothers’ blood (v. 15).

I am thinking of several benefactors of the Church who come with an offering — “Take this offering for the Church” — which is the fruit of the blood of so many exploited, mistreated, enslaved people and their poorly paid work! I would say to these people: “Please, take back your cheque, burn it”. The People of God, namely, the Church, does not need dirty money. They need hearts open to the mercy of God. It is important to approach God with clean hands, avoiding evil and practising goodness and justice. The way the prophet concludes is beautiful: “cease to do evil, / learn to do good; / seek justice, / correct oppression; / defend the fatherless, / plead for the widow” (vv. 16-17).

Think of the many refugees who land in Europe and do not know where to go. Now, the Lord says, your sins, though they be scarlet, shall become white as snow, pure white like wool, and the people will be able to eat the good of the land and live in peace (cf. v. 19).

This is the miracle of forgiveness that God — the forgiveness that God as Father — wants to give to his people. God’s mercy is offered to everyone, and the prophet’s words are valid today for all of us, who are called to live as Children of God.

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# 11. Mercy and service

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

We are approaching the celebration of Easter, the central mystery of our faith. The Gospel of John — which we just heard — recounts that, before dying and rising for us, Jesus made a gesture that was carved into the memory of his disciples: the washing of feet. That gesture was so unexpected and unsettling that Peter didn't want to accept it. I would like to reflect on Christ's concluding words: "Do you know what I have done to you? [...] If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:12, 14). In this way Jesus indicates to his disciples that *service* is the way to live out their faith in him and to bear witness to his love. Jesus applied to himself the "Servant of God" image used by the Prophet Isaiah. He, who is Lord, makes himself servant!

By washing the feet of the Apostles, Jesus wished to reveal God's mode of action in regard to us, and to give an example of his "new commandment" (Jn 13:34) to love one another as He has loved us, that is, laying down his life for us. John repeats this in his First Letter: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. [...] Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth" (3:16, 18).

Love, therefore, is the *practical service* that we offer to others. Love is not a word, it is a deed, a service; *humble service*, *hidden* and *silent*, like Jesus said himself: "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Mt 6:3). It entails putting at others' disposal the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given us, so that the community might thrive (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11). Furthermore, it is expressed in the *sharing* of material goods, so that no one be left in need. This sharing with and dedication to those in need is the lifestyle that God suggests, even to non-Christians, as the authentic path of humanity.

Finally, let us not forget that by washing the feet of his disciples and asking them to do the same, Jesus invites that we too confess our failings and pray for one another in order to learn how to forgive with the heart. In this sense, let us remember the words of Bishop St Augustine, when he wrote: "Nor should the Christian think it beneath him to do what was done by Christ. For when the body is bent at a brother's feet, the feeling of such humility is either awakened in the heart itself, or is strengthened if already present. [...] Let us therefore forgive one another his faults, and pray for one another's faults, and thus in a manner wash one another's feet (*In Joh* 58:4-5). Love, charity is service, helping others, serving others. There are many people who go through life like this, in service to others. Last week I received a letter from a person who thanked me for the Year of Mercy; she asked me to pray for her, that she might be able to grow closer to the

Lord. The life of this person is caring for her mother and her brother: her mother is bedridden, elderly, lucid but unable to move; and her brother is disabled, in a wheelchair. This person, her life, is serving, supporting. And this is love! When you can forget yourself and think of others, this is love! And with the washing of feet the Lord teaches us to be servants, and more: to serve as he has served us, each and every one of us.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, *being merciful like the Father means following Jesus on the path of service.* Thank you.

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## 12. Mercy and consolation

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

In the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 30 and 31 are called the “Book of Consolation”, because God’s mercy is presented with his great capacity to comfort and open to hope the heart of the afflicted. Today we too want to hear this message of consolation.

Jeremiah addresses the Israelites who have been deported to a foreign land and he foretells their return to the homeland. This return is a sign of the infinite love of God the Father who never abandons his children, but who takes care of them and saves them. Exile was a devastating experience for Israel. Their faith had wavered because in a strange land, without the Temple, without worship, after seeing their homeland destroyed, it was difficult continue to believe in the goodness of the Lord. What comes to mind is nearby Albania and how, after so much persecution and destruction, it has managed to rise up in dignity and in faith. This is how the Israelites suffered in exile.

We too can experience a sort of exile at times, when loneliness, suffering, death make us think we have been abandoned by God. How often have we heard these words “God has forgotten me” said by people who suffer and feel abandoned. Yet how many of our brothers and sisters at this time are living out an actual and dramatic situation of exile, far from their homeland, still shocked by the ruins of their homes, with fear in their heart and often, sadly, mourning the loss of loved ones! In these cases you might ask yourself: where is God? How is it possible that so much suffering can afflict innocent men, women and children? When they try to enter by some other route, the door is closed to them. They are there, at the border because so many doors and so many hearts have closed. Today’s migrants who suffer the cold, are without food. They cannot enter. They do not feel welcome. It really pleases me when I hear and see that nations and authorities open hearts and open doors!

The Prophet Jeremiah gives us a first response. The exiled people are able return to see their land and to feel the Lord’s mercy. It is the great message of consolation: God is not absent, not even today in these tragic situations, God is near, and he does great works of salvation for those who trust in him. One must not succumb to desperation, but continue to be certain that good conquers evil and that the Lord will dry every tear and free us from all fear.

Thus Jeremiah lends his voice to God’s words of love for his people: “I have loved you with a love everlasting; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall

adorn yourself with timbrels, and shall go forth in the dance of the merry-makers (31:3-4). The Lord is faithful, he does not leave one to despair. God loves with boundless love, which not even sin can restrain, and thanks to him the heart of man is filled with joy and consolation.

The consoling dream of returning to the homeland continues in the words of the prophet who, turning to those who shall return to Jerusalem, says: "They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more" (31:12).

In joy and in gratitude, the exiled will return to Zion, climbing the holy mountain toward the House of God, and in this way they will be able once more to raise hymns and prayers to the Lord who has freed them. This return to Jerusalem and its bounty is described with a verb that literally means "to stream, to flow". The people are seen, in a paradoxical movement, as a river in flood that flows toward the high ground of Zion, climbing back up toward the mountain's summit. It is a bold image to describe how great the Lord's mercy is!

The land, which the people had to abandon, has been plundered by enemies and devastated. Now, however, it comes back to life and blossoms once more. The exiled themselves shall resemble a watered garden, a fertile ground. Israel, led back to its homeland by the Lord, takes part in the victory of life over death and of blessing over curse.

Thus the people are strengthened and comforted by God. This word is important: comforted! The repatriated receive life from a font that freely waters them.

At this point, the prophet announces the fullness of joy, and again in the name of God proclaims: "I will turn their mourning in to joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow" (31:13).

The psalm tells us that when they return to their homeland their lips will break into smile; it is such a great joy! It is the gift that the Lord also wants to give to each one of us, with his forgiveness which transforms and reconciles.

The Prophet Jeremiah has given us the message, portraying the return of the exiled as a great symbol of consolation given to the heart which converts. The Lord Jesus, for his part, has brought this message of the prophet to fulfillment. The true and radical return from exile and the comforting light, after the dark crisis of faith, is experienced at Easter, in the full and definitive experience of God's love, the merciful love that gives joy, peace and eternal life.

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## 13. The Easter Triduum during the Jubilee of Mercy

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

Our reflection on the mercy of God introduces us today to the Easter Triduum. We will live Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday as powerful moments that allow us to enter ever further into the great mystery of our faith: the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything in these three days speaks of mercy, because it makes visible the extent of God's love. We will listen to the account of the final days of Jesus' life. John the Evangelist offers us the key to understanding its profound meaning: "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). The love of God has no bounds. As St Augustine often repeated, it is a love that goes "to the end without end". God truly offers all of himself for each of us and holds nothing back. The Mystery which we adore in this Holy Week is a great history of love which knows no obstacles. The Passion of Jesus lasts until the end of the world, because it is a story of sharing in the suffering of all humanity and a permanent presence in the events of the private life of each of us. Indeed, the Easter Triduum is the commemoration of a drama of love which gives us the certainty that we will never be abandoned in life's trials.

On *Holy Thursday* Jesus institutes the Eucharist, anticipating in the Passover banquet his sacrifice on Golgotha. In order to make the Apostles understand the love which enlivens him he washes their feet, offering once again in the first person the example of how they must act. The Eucharist is the love that becomes service. It is the sublime presence of Christ who wishes to relieve from hunger every man and woman, especially the weakest, to enable them to undertake a journey of witnessing amid the difficulties of the world. Moreover, in giving himself to us as food, Jesus attests that we must learn to share this nourishment with others so that it may become a true communion of life with those who are in need. He gives himself to us and asks us to dwell in him in order to do likewise.

*Good Friday* is the culminating moment of love. The death of Jesus, who on the Cross surrenders himself to the Father in order to offer salvation to the entire world, expresses love given to the end, a love without end. A love that seeks to embrace everyone, that excludes no one. A love that extends over time and space: an inexhaustible source of salvation to which each of us, sinners, can draw. If God has shown us his supreme love in the death of Jesus, then we too, regenerated by the Holy Spirit, can and must love one another.

Lastly, *Holy Saturday* is the day of God's silence. It must be a day of silence, and we must do everything possible so that for us it may truly be a day of silence, as it was in that time: the day of the silence of God. Jesus laid in the sepulchre shares with all of humanity in the tragedy of death. It is a silence which speaks and expresses love as solidarity with those who have always been neglected, whom the Son of God reaches, filling the emptiness that only the infinite mercy of God the Father can fill.

God is silent, but out of love. On this day, love — that silent love — becomes the expectation of life in the resurrection. Let us think about Holy Saturday: it will do us good to consider the silence of Our Lady, “the Believer”, who awaited the Resurrection in silence. Our Lady will be, for us, the icon of Holy Saturday. Think hard about how Our Lady lived that Holy Saturday; in expectation. It is love that has no doubt, but which hopes in the word of the Lord, that it may be made manifest and resplendent on the day of Easter.

It is all a great mystery of love and mercy. Our words are poor and insufficient to express it fully. We may find helpful the experience of a young woman, not very well known, who wrote sublime pages about the love of Christ. Her name was Julian of Norwich. She was illiterate, this girl who had visions of the passion of Jesus and who then, after becoming a recluse, described, with simple but deep and intense language, the meaning of merciful love. She said: “Then our good Lord asked me: ‘Are you glad that I suffered for you?’. I answered him: ‘Yes, good Lord, and I am most grateful to you; yes, good Lord, may You be blessed’. Then Jesus, our good Lord, said: ‘If you are glad, so too am I. Having suffered the passion for you is for me joy, happiness, eternal bliss; and if I could suffer more I would’”. This is our Jesus, who says to each of us: “If I could suffer more for you, I would”.

How beautiful these words are! They allow us to truly understand the immense and boundless love that the Lord has for each one of us. Let us allow ourselves to be wrapped in this mercy which comes to meet us; and in these days, as we keep our gaze fixed on the passion and death of the Lord, let us receive in our heart his boundless love and, like Our Lady on Saturday, in silence, await the Resurrection.

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## 14. Mercy blots out sin at the root

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

Today we shall complete the catecheses on mercy in the Old Testament, and do so by meditating on Psalm 51[50], known as the *Miserere*. It is a penitential prayer in which the request for forgiveness is preceded by the confession of sins and in which the one praying allows himself to be purified by the Lord's love. Thus, he becomes a new creature, capable of obedience, steadfastness of spirit, and of sincere praise.

The "title" that the ancient Hebrew tradition gave to this Psalm refers to King David and his sin with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. We are quite familiar with the event. King David, called by God to shepherd the people and guide them on the paths of obedience to divine Law, betrayed his mission and, after committing adultery with Bathsheba, has her husband put to death. A terrible sin! The prophet Nathan shows David his sin and helps him to recognize it. It is the moment of reconciliation with God, in confessing his sin. Here David was humble. He showed greatness!

Those who pray with this Psalm are called to feel the same sense of remorse and of trust in God, which David felt when he mended his ways. Although the king, he humbled himself without being afraid to confess his crime and show his misery to the Lord, yet confident that the Lord's mercy was assured. What he had done was not a minor sin, a small lie: he had committed adultery and murder!

The Psalm begins with these words of supplication:

"Have mercy on me, O God, / according to thy steadfast love; / according to thy abundant mercy / blot out my transgressions. / Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, / and cleanse me from my sin! (vv. 1-2).

The invocation is addressed to the God of mercy in order that, moved by a love as great as that of a father or mother, he have mercy, that is, grant grace, show his favour with benevolence and understanding. It is a heartfelt plea to God, who alone can free one from sin. Very descriptive images are used: blot out, wash me, cleanse me. Made manifest in this prayer is man's true need: the only thing that we truly need in our life is that of being forgiven, freed from evil and from its consequence of death. Unfortunately, life often makes us experience these situations. In [such circumstances] we must first trust in mercy. God is greater than our sin. Let us not forget this: God is greater than our sin! "Father, I do not know how to say it. I have committed many, serious [sins]!". God is greater than all the sins we can commit. God is greater than our sin. Shall we say it together?

All together: “God is greater than our sin!”. Once again: “God is greater than our sin!”. Once more: “God is greater than our sin!”. His love is an ocean in which we can immerse ourselves without fear of being overcome: to God forgiving means giving us the certainty that he never abandons us. Whatever our heart may admonish us, he is still and always greater than everything (cf. 1 Jn 3:20), because God is greater than our sin.

In this sense, whoever prays with this Psalm seeks forgiveness, confesses his sin, but in acknowledging it celebrates the justice and holiness of God. Moreover he asks to be granted grace and mercy. The Psalmist trusts in the goodness of God. He knows that divine goodness is immensely effective, because [God] creates what he says. He does not hide the sin but destroys and blots it out. He blots it out from the very root, not as they do at the dry cleaners’ when we take a suit and they remove a stain. No! God blots out our sin from the very root, completely! Therefore the penitent person becomes pure again; every stain is eliminated and now he is whiter than pure snow. We are all sinners. Is this true? If any of you does not feel you are a sinner, raise your hand.... No one. We all are sinners. We sinners, with forgiveness, become new creatures, filled by the spirit and full of joy. Now a new reality begins for us: a new heart, a new spirit, a new life. We, forgiven sinners, who have received divine grace, can even teach others to sin no more. “But Father, I am weak, I fall, I fall”. — “If you fall, get up! Stand up!”. When a child falls, what does he do? He raises his hand to mom, to dad so they help him to get up. Let us do the same! If out of weakness you fall into sin, raise your hand: the Lord will take it and help you get up. This is the dignity of God’s forgiveness! The dignity that God’s forgiveness gives us is that of lifting us up, putting us back on our feet, because he created men and woman to stand on their feet.

The Psalmist says:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, / and put a new and right spirit within me [...]. / Then I will teach transgressors thy ways, / and sinners will return to thee” (vv. 10, 13).

Dear brothers and sisters, God’s forgiveness is what we all need, and it is the greatest sign of his mercy. It is a gift that every forgiven sinner is called to share with every brother and sister he meets. All those whom the Lord has placed beside us, family, friends, coworkers, parishioners... everyone needs, as we do, the mercy of God. It is beautiful to be forgiven, but you too, if you want to be forgiven, forgive in turn. Forgive! May the Lord allow us, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy, to be witnesses to his forgiveness, which purifies the heart and transforms life. Thank you.

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## 15. The Gospel of Mercy

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

After reflecting on the mercy of God in the Old Testament, today we begin to meditate on how Jesus fulfilled it. It was a mercy he expressed, realized and communicated throughout his earthly life. Encountering the multitudes, proclaiming the Gospel, healing the sick, being close to the least, forgiving sinners, Jesus made visible the love that is open to us all: none excluded! Open to all without borders. A love that is pure, freely-given, absolute. A love that culminates in the Sacrifice of the Cross. Yes, the Gospel is truly the “Gospel of Mercy”, for Jesus is Mercy!

All four Gospels testify that Jesus, before taking up his ministry, *wanted to be baptized by John the Baptist* (Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21-22; Jn 1:29-34). This event gives decisive direction to Christ’s entire mission. Indeed, he did not present himself to the world in the splendour of the temple: he could have done so. He did not announce himself with the sounding of trumpets: he could have so. And he did not come vested like a judge: he could have so. Instead, after 30 years of a hidden life in Nazareth, Jesus went to the River Jordan, together with many of his people, and there waited in line with sinners. He wasn’t ashamed: he was there with everyone, with sinners, to be baptized. Therefore, from the very beginning of his ministry, he manifested himself as the Messiah who takes upon himself the human condition, moved by solidarity and compassion. As he said in the synagogue of Nazareth by identifying with the prophecy of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19). Everything that Jesus accomplished after his baptism was the realization of that initial design: to bring to all people the saving love of God. Jesus did not bring hatred, he did not bring hostility: he brought us love! A love that saves!

He made himself neighbour to the lowliest, communicating to them God’s mercy that is forgiveness, joy and new life. Jesus, the Son sent by the Father, is truly the start of the time of mercy for all humanity! Those present on the banks of the Jordan did not immediately understand the full extent of Jesus’ gesture. John the Baptist himself was stunned by his decision (cf. Mt 3:14). But not the Heavenly Father! He let his voice be heard from on high: “Thou art my beloved son, with thee I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). In this way, the Father confirmed the path that Son has taken up as Messiah, as the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. Thus, Jesus’ heart beats, so to speak, in unison with the heart of the

Father and of the Spirit, showing to all men that salvation is the fruit of God's mercy.

We can contemplate even more clearly the great mystery of this love by *directing our gaze to Jesus Crucified*. As the Innocent One is about to die for us sinners, he pleads to the Father: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). It is on the Cross that Jesus presents the sin of the world to the mercy of the Father: the sin of all people, my sins, your sins, everyone's sins. There, on the Cross, he presents them to the Father. And with the sin of the world, all our sins are wiped away. Nothing and no one is left out of this sacrificial prayer of Jesus. That means that we must not be afraid of acknowledging and confessing ourselves as sinners. How many times have we said: "Well, this one is a sinner, he did this and that...", we judge others. And you? Every one of us ought to ask ourselves: "Yes, he is a sinner. And me?". We are all sinners, but we are all forgiven. We all have the opportunity to receive this forgiveness which is the mercy of God. Therefore, we mustn't be afraid to acknowledge that we are sinners, to confess that we are sinners, because every sin was borne by the Son on the Cross. When we confess it, repenting, entrusting ourselves to him, we can be certain of forgiveness. The Sacrament of Reconciliation makes present to each one of us that power of forgiveness that flows from the Cross and renews in our life the grace of mercy that Jesus purchased for us! We must not be afraid of our defects: we each have our own. The power of the love of the Crucified One knows no bounds and never runs dry. This mercy wipes away our defects.

Beloved ones, in this Jubilee Year let us ask God for the grace to experience the power of the Gospel: the Gospel of mercy that transforms, that lets us enter the heart of God, that makes us capable of forgiving and looking at the world with more goodness. If we accept the Gospel of the Crucified and Risen One, our whole life will be formed by his renewing love.

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## 16. Mercy and almsgiving

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

The Gospel passage we have heard allows us to discover an essential aspect of mercy: *almsgiving*. It might seem simple to give alms, but we must be careful not to empty this gesture of its importance. Indeed, the term “alms”, derives from the Greek and actually means “mercy”. Therefore, almsgiving must carry with it all the richness of mercy. And as mercy has a thousand paths, a thousand ways, thus almsgiving is expressed in many ways, in order to alleviate the hardship of those who are in need.

The duty to give alms is as ancient as the Bible. Sacrifice and almsgiving were two duties that a devout person had to comply with. There are two important passages in the Old Testament where God demands special attention for the poor, who at times are destitute, strangers, orphans and widows. In the Bible this continuous refrain — the needy, the widow, the stranger, the sojourner, the orphan — is recurrent. Because God wants his people to watch over these brothers and sisters of ours; moreover, I would say that they are at the very centre of the message: to praise God through sacrifice and to praise God through almsgiving.

Along with the obligation to remember them, a precious direction is also given: “you shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him” (Dt 15:10). This means, first of all, that charity requires an attitude of inner joy. Offering mercy cannot be a burden or an annoyance from which to free ourselves in haste. How many people justify their not giving alms by saying: “What kind of person is this? If I give him something perhaps he will go buy wine to get drunk”. If he gets drunk, it is because he sees no alternatives! And you, what do you do in secret, that no one sees? Yet you judge that poor man who asks you for a coin for a glass of wine? I like to recall the episode of the elderly Tobit who, after receiving a large sum of money, called his son and instructed him, saying: “Give alms... to all who live uprightly [...]. Do not turn your face away from any poor man, and the face of God will not be turned away from you” (Tob 4:7-8). These are very wise words that help us understand the value of almsgiving.

Jesus, as we heard, gave us an irreplaceable lesson in this regard. In the first place, he asks us not to give alms in order to be praised and admired by people for our generosity: do so in such a way that your right hand does not know what your left hand is doing (cf. Mt 6:3). It is not appearances that count, but the capacity to stop in order to look in the face of that person asking for help. We can each ask ourselves: “Am I able to stop and look in the face, in the eye of that person who is asking me? Am I able?”. Thus, we must not identify almsgiving with the simple

coin offered in haste, without looking at the person and without stopping to talk so as to understand what he or she truly needs. At the same time, we must distinguish between the poor and the various forms of begging that do not render a good service to the truly poor. Thus, almsgiving is a gesture of love that is directed at those we meet: it is a gesture of sincere attention to those who approach us and ask for our help, done in secret where God alone sees and understands the value of the act performed.

Giving alms must be for us too something that is a sacrifice. I remember a mother: she had three children, six, five and three years old, more or less. She always taught her children that one should give alms to the people who ask for it. They were at lunch: each one was eating a Milanese cutlet, as we say in my land, “breaded”. There was a knock at the door. The oldest went to open the door and returned: “Mamma, there’s a poor person asking for something to eat”. — “What should we do?”, the mother asked. “Let’s give him something”, they all said, “let’s give something to him!”. — “Okay: take half of your cutlet, you the other half, you the other half, and we’ll make two sandwiches” — “Ah, no, mamma, no!” — “No? You give him some of yours, give something that costs you”. This is involving yourself with the poor person. I deprive myself of something of my own in order to give it to you. I say to parents: raise your children to give alms in this way, to be generous with what they have.

Thus, let us make the words of the Apostle Paul our own: “In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, who said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35; cf. 2 Cor 9:7). Thank you!

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## 17. I desire mercy, and not sacrifice (Mt 9:13)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

We have heard the Gospel account of the call of Matthew. Matthew was a “publican”, namely, a tax collector on behalf of the Roman Empire, and for this reason was considered a public sinner. But Jesus calls Matthew to follow him and to become his disciple. Matthew accepts, and invites Jesus along with the disciples to have dinner at his house. Thus an argument arises between the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus over the fact that the latter sit at the table with tax collectors and sinners. “You cannot go to these people’s homes!”, they said. Jesus does not stay away from them, but instead goes to their houses and sits beside them; this means that they too can become his disciples. It is likewise true that being Christian does not render us flawless. Like Matthew the tax collector, each of us trusts in the grace of the Lord regardless of our sins. We are all sinners, we have all sinned. By calling Matthew, Jesus shows sinners that he does not look at their past, at their social status, at external conventions, but rather, he opens a new future to them. I once heard a beautiful saying: “There is no saint without a past nor a sinner without a future”. This is what Jesus does. There is no saint without a past nor a sinner without a future. It is enough to respond to the call with a humble and sincere heart. The Church is not a community of perfect people, but of disciples on a journey, who follow the Lord because they know they are sinners and in need of his pardon. Thus, Christian life is a school of humility which opens us to grace.

Such behaviour is not understood by those who have the arrogance to believe they are “just” and to believe they are better than others. Hubris and pride do not allow one to recognize him- or herself as in need of salvation, but rather prevent one from seeing the merciful face of God and from acting with mercy. They are a barrier. Hubris and pride are a barrier that prevents a relationship with God. Yet, this is precisely Jesus’ mission: coming in search of each of us, in order to heal our wounds and to call us to follow him with love. He says so explicitly: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (v. 12). Jesus presents himself as a good physician! He proclaims the Kingdom of God, and the signs of its coming are clear: He heals people from disease, frees them from fear, from death, and from the devil. Before Jesus, no sinner is excluded — no sinner is excluded! Because the healing power of God knows no infirmity that cannot be healed; and this must give us confidence and open our heart to the Lord, that he may come and heal us.

By calling sinners to his table, he heals them, restoring to them the vocation that they believed had been lost and which the Pharisees had forgotten: that of being guests at God’s banquet. According to the prophecy of Isaiah: “On this mountain

the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined.... It will be said on that day, 'Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (25:6, 9).

When the Pharisees see only sinners among the invited, and refuse to be seated with them, Jesus to the contrary reminds them that they too are guests at God's table. Thus, sitting at the table with Jesus means being transformed and saved by him. In the Christian community the table of Jesus is twofold: there is the table of the Word and there is the table of the Eucharist (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 21). These are the medicines with which the Divine Physician heals us and nourishes us. With the first — the Word — He reveals himself and invites us to a dialogue among friends. Jesus was not afraid to dialogue with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes.... No, he was not afraid: he loved everyone! His Word permeates us and, like a scalpel, operates deep in the heart so as to free us from the evil lurking in our life. At times this Word is painful because it discloses deception, reveals false excuses, lays bare hidden truths; but at the same time it illuminates and purifies, gives strength and hope; it is an invaluable tonic on our journey of faith. The Eucharist, for its part, nourishes us with the very life of Jesus, like an immensely powerful remedy and, in a mysterious way, it continuously renews the grace of our Baptism. By approaching the Eucharist we are nourished of the Body and Blood of Jesus, and by entering us, Jesus joins us to his Body!

Concluding that dialogue with the Pharisees, Jesus reminds them of a word of the prophet Hosea (6:6): "Go and learn what this means, *'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice'*" (Mt 9:13). Addressing the people of Israel, the prophet reproaches them because the prayers they raised were but empty and incoherent words. Despite God's covenant and mercy, the people often lived with a "façade-like" religiosity, without living in depth the command of the Lord. This is why the prophet emphasized: "I desire mercy", namely the loyalty of a heart that recognizes its own sins, that mends its ways and returns to be faithful to the covenant with God. "And not sacrifice": without a penitent heart, every religious action is ineffective! Jesus also applies this prophetic phrase to human relationships: the Pharisees were very religious in form, but were not willing to sit at the table with tax collectors and sinners; they did not recognize the opportunity for mending their ways and thus for healing; they did not place mercy in the first place: although being faithful guardians of the Law, they showed that they did not know the heart of God! It is as though you were given a parcel with a gift inside and, rather than going to open the gift, you look only at the paper it is wrapped in: only appearances, the form, and not the core of the grace, of the gift that is given!

Dear brothers and sisters, all of us are invited to the table of the Lord. Let us make our own this invitation and sit beside the Lord together with his disciples. Let us learn to look with mercy and to recognize each of them as fellow guests at the table. We are all disciples who need to experience and live the comforting word of Jesus. We all need to be nourished by the mercy of God, for it is from this source that our salvation flows. Thank you!

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## 18. The tears of the sinful woman who is forgiven (Lk 7:36-50)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Today we would like to stop and wonder at an aspect of mercy which is well presented in the passage we heard from the Gospel of Luke. It deals with something that happened to Jesus while he was the guest of a Pharisee called Simon. He wanted to invite Jesus to his home because he had heard others speak well of him as a great prophet. And while they were seated at a meal, there entered a woman, known throughout the city to be a sinner. This woman, without saying a word, threw herself at Jesus' feet and burst into tears; her tears bathed the feet of Jesus and she dried them with her hair, then kissed them and anointed them with the perfumed oil she had brought with her.

Two figures stand out: Simon, the zealous servant of the law, and the anonymous sinful woman. While the former judges others based on appearances, the latter, through her actions, expresses the sincerity of her heart. Simon, though having invited Jesus, does not want to compromise himself or entangle his life with the Master; the woman, on the contrary, entrusts herself completely to him with love and veneration.

The Pharisee cannot fathom why Jesus would let himself be “contaminated” by sinners. He thinks that were Jesus a real prophet he would recognize them and keep his distance in order to keep from being sullied, as if they were lepers. This attitude is typical of a certain way of understanding religion, and it is based on the fact that God and sin are radically opposed. The Word of God, however, teaches us to distinguish sin from the sinner: one should not have to compromise with sin, but sinners — that is, all of us! — are like the sick, who need to be treated. And in order to heal them the doctor needs to get close, examine them, touch them. Naturally, the sick person, in order to be healed, must recognize that he needs the doctor!

Between the Pharisee and the sinful woman, Jesus sides with the latter. Jesus, free of the prejudices that hinder the expression of mercy, lets her do it. He, the Holy One of God, lets her touch him without fear of contamination. Jesus is free, because he is close to God who is the merciful Father. And this closeness to God, the merciful Father, gives Jesus freedom. Furthermore, by entering into a relationship with the sinner, Jesus puts an end to that state of isolation to which the ruthless judgment of the Pharisee and of her fellow citizens — the same who exploited her — had condemned her: “Your sins are forgiven” (Lk 7:48). The woman can now go “in peace”. The Lord sees the sincerity of her faith and

conversion; thus before everyone he proclaims: “Your faith has saved you” (v. 50). On one side there is the lawyer’s hypocrisy, on the other, the sincerity, humility and faith of the woman. We are all sinners, but too often we fall into the temptation of hypocrisy, of believing ourselves to be better than others and we say: “Just look at your sin...”. We all need, however, to look to our own sins, our own shortcomings, our own mistakes, and to look to the Lord. This is the lifeline of salvation: the relation between the “I” of the sinner and the Lord. If I feel I am righteous, there is no saving relationship.

At this point, an even greater wonder assails all those at the table: “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” (v. 49). Jesus does not answer explicitly, but the conversion of the sinner is before the eyes of all and it shows that from him there emanates the power of the mercy of God, which is able to transform hearts.

The sinful woman teaches us the connection between faith, love, and recognition. “Many sins” have been forgiven her and therefore she has loved much; “but he who is forgiven little, loves little” (v. 47). Even Simon himself has to admit that the one who is guiltiest loves more. God has wrapped each and every one of us in the same mystery of mercy; and from his love, which always comes to us first, we learn how to love. As St Paul recalls: “in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to his grace which he lavished on us” (Eph 1:7-8). In this passage, “grace” is virtually synonymous with mercy, and we are told that God has “lavished” it upon us, meaning that it far exceeds our expectations, since it brings to fulfillment God’s saving plan for each one of us.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us recognize the gift of faith, let us give thanks to the Lord for his love which is so great and unmerited! Let us allow the love of Christ be poured into us: the disciple draws from this love and founds himself on it; from this love each one of us can be nourished and fed. Thus, in the grateful love that we in turn pour out upon our brothers and sisters, in our homes, in our families and in our societies, the mercy of the Lord may be communicated to everyone.

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## 19. Go and do likewise (cf. Lk 10:25-37)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Today let us reflect on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). A doctor of the Law puts Jesus to the test with this question: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 25). Jesus asks him to answer the question himself, and the man answers perfectly: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (v. 27). Jesus then concludes: “Do this, and you will live” (v. 28).

Then the man asks another question, which is very meaningful for us: “Who is my neighbor” (v. 29), and he emphasizes, “my relatives? my compatriots? Those of my religion?...”. Thus, he wants a clear rule that allows him to classify others as “neighbor” and “non-neighbor”, as those who can become neighbors and those who cannot become neighbors.

Jesus responds with a parable, taking the example of a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. The first two are figures linked to Temple worship; the third is a schismatic Jew, considered a stranger, pagan and impure, namely the Samaritan. On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho the priest and the Levite come upon a dying man, whom robbers have attacked, stripped and abandoned. The Law of the Lord in similar situations imposes the duty to assist him, but both pass by without stopping. They were in a hurry.... The priest, perhaps, looked at his watch and said “I am late for Mass.... I must say Mass”. The other may have said: “I don’t know if the Law permits me to, because there is blood there and I will be impure...”. They take another way and do not approach him. Here the parable offers us the first lesson: those who attend the house of God and know his mercy do not automatically know how to love their neighbor. It is not automatic! You may know the whole Bible, you may know all the liturgical rubrics, you may know all theology, but from this knowledge love is not automatic: loving has another path, it requires intelligence, but also something more.... The priest and the Levite see but ignore; they look but they do not offer to help. Yet there is no true worship if it is not translated into service to neighbor. Let us never forget this: before the suffering of so many people exhausted by hunger, violence and injustice, we cannot remain spectators. What does it mean to ignore the suffering of man? It means to ignore God! If I do not draw close to that man, that woman, that child, that elderly man or woman who are suffering, I do not draw close to God.

Let us come to the core of the parable: the Samaritan, namely the despised man, the one whom no one would have bet on, and who also had his own commitments

and things to do, when he saw the wounded man, he did not pass by like the other two, who were linked to the Temple, but “he had compassion” (v. 33). Thus the Gospel says: “He had compassion”, that is, his heart, his emotions, were moved! This is the difference. The other two “saw”, but their hearts remained closed, cold. While the Samaritan was in synchrony with the very heart of God. Indeed, “compassion” is an essential characteristic of God’s mercy. God has compassion on us. What does this mean? He suffers with us, he feels our suffering. Compassion means “suffer with”. The verb indicates that the physique is moved and trembles at the sight of the evil of man. In the gestures and deeds of the Good Samaritan we recognize the merciful acts of God in all of salvation history. It is the same compassion with which the Lord comes to meet each one of us: He does not ignore us, he knows our pain, he knows how much we need help and comfort. He comes close and never abandons us. Each of us, ask and answer the question in our heart: “Do I believe? Do I believe that the Lord has compassion on me, just as I am, a sinner, with many problems and many issues?”. Think about that and the answer is: “Yes!”. But each one must see in his heart whether he has faith in this compassion of God, of the good God who draws close, heals us, caresses us. If we reject him, he waits: he is patient and is always beside us.

The Samaritan acts with true mercy: he binds up that man’s wounds, takes him to an inn, takes care of him personally, and provides for his care. All this teaches us that compassion, love, is not a vague sentiment, but means taking care of the other even paying for him. It means compromising oneself, taking all the necessary steps so as to “approach” the other to the point of identifying with him: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”. This is the Lord’s Commandment.

When the parable ends, Jesus reverses the question of the doctor of the Law, and asks him: “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” (v. 36). The response is completely unequivocal: “The one who showed mercy on him” (v. 37). At the beginning of the parable, for the priest and the Levite, the neighbor was the dying man. At the end, the neighbor is the Samaritan who drew near”. Jesus reverses the perspective: do not stand by classifying others by sight who is neighbor and who is not. You can become neighbor to any needy person you meet, and you will know that you have compassion in your heart, that is, whether you have the capacity so suffer with the other.

This parable is a splendid gift for us all, and also a task! To each of us Jesus repeats what he said to the doctor of the Law: “Go and do likewise” (v. 37). We are all called to follow the same path of the Good Samaritan, who is the figure of Christ: Jesus bent down to us, he became our servant, and thus he has saved us, so that we too might love as he loved us, in the same way.

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## 20. Mercy and reconciliation

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Today I would like to reflect with you on an important aspect of mercy: reconciliation. God has never failed to offer his forgiveness to men and women: his mercy is felt from generation to generation. Often we believe that our sins distance the Lord from us. In reality, in sinning, we may distance ourselves from him, but, seeing us in danger, he tries all the harder to find us. God never gives in to the possibility that a person could stay estranged from his love, provided, however, that he find in him or her some sign of repentance for the evil done.

By our efforts alone, we cannot be reconciled to God. Sin truly is the expression of the rejection of his love, with the consequence of closing in on ourselves, deluding ourselves into thinking that we have found greater freedom and autonomy. Far from God we no longer have a destination, and we are transformed from pilgrims in this world to “wanderers”. To use a common expression: when we sin, we “turn away from God”. That’s just what we do; the sinner sees only himself and presumes in this way to be self-sufficient. Thus, sin continues to expand the distance between us and God, and this can become a chasm. However, Jesus comes to find us like a good shepherd who is not content until he has found the lost sheep, as we read in the Gospel (cf. Lk 15:4-6). He rebuilds the bridge that connects us to the Father and allows us to rediscover our dignity as children. By the offering of his life he has reconciled us to the Father and given us eternal life (cf. Jn 10:15).

“Be reconciled to God!” (2 Cor 5:20): the cry that the Apostle Paul addressed to the early Christians in Corinth, today applies to us all with the same vigour and conviction. Let us be reconciled to God! This Jubilee of mercy is a time of reconciliation for everyone. Many people would like to be reconciled to God but they don’t know how to do it, or they don’t feel worthy, or they don’t want to admit it, not even to themselves. The Christian community can and must foster the sincere return to God for those who feel this yearning. Especially those who carry out the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) are called to be instruments docile to the Holy Spirit, for where one has abandoned sin mercy can abound (cf. Rm 5:20). No one should be separated from God because of obstacles put there by mankind! And — I want to underline this — that also goes for confessors. It’s valid for them: please, don’t put up obstacles for people who want to be reconciled to God. The confessor must be a father! He stands in the place of God the Father! The confessor must welcome those who come to him to be reconciled to God and help them on the journey to this reconciliation that we are making. It is a very beautiful ministry: not a torture chamber or an interrogation room. No. It is the place where the Father receives, welcomes and forgives this person. Let us be



reconciled to God! All of us! May this Holy Year be a positive time to rediscover our need for the tenderness and closeness of the Father, to return to him with all our heart.

The experience of reconciliation to God allows us to discover the necessity of other forms of reconciliation: in families, in interpersonal relationships, in ecclesial communities, as well as in social international relations. Someone recently said to me that in the world there are more enemies than friends, and I believe he is right. Instead, let us build bridges of reconciliation among us, beginning in the family. How many siblings have argued and become estranged over inheritance. This shouldn't happen! This year is the year of reconciliation, with God and among us! Reconciliation is also a service to peace, solidarity and the welcome of all.

Let us accept, therefore, the invitation to be reconciled to God, in order to become new creatures and to radiate his mercy among our brothers, among the people.

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## 21. The little lost sheep (cf Lk 15:1-7)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

We are all familiar with the image of the Good Shepherd with the little lost lamb on his shoulders. This icon has always been an expression of Jesus' care for sinners and of the mercy of God who never resigns himself to the loss of anyone. The parable is told by Jesus to make us understand that his closeness to sinners should not scandalize us, but on the contrary it should call us all to serious reflection on how we live our faith. The narrative sees, on the one hand, the sinners who approach Jesus in order to listen to him and, on the other, the suspicious doctors of the law and scribes who move away from him because of his behaviour. They move away because Jesus approaches the sinners. These men were proud, arrogant, believed themselves to be just.

Our parable unfolds around three characters: the shepherd, the lost sheep and the rest of the flock. The one who acts, however, is only the shepherd not the sheep. The Shepherd, then, is the only real protagonist and everything depends on him. The parable opens with a question: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?" (Lk 15:4). It is a paradox that arouses doubt about the action of the Shepherd: is it wise to abandon the ninety-nine for one single sheep? And what's more, not in the safety of a pen but in the desert? According to biblical tradition, the desert is a place of death where it is hard to find food and water, shelterless and where one is at the mercy of wild beasts and thieves. What are the ninety-nine defenseless sheep supposed to do? The paradox continues, in any case, saying that the shepherd, having found the sheep, "lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me'" (15:5-6). It seems then that the shepherd didn't go back to the desert to recover the rest of the flock! Reaching out to that single sheep he seems to forget the other ninety-nine. But it's not like that really. The lesson that Jesus wants us to learn is, rather, that not a single one of us can be lost. The Lord cannot accept the fact that a single person can be lost. God's action is that of one who goes out seeking his lost children and then rejoices and celebrates with everyone at their recovery. It is a burning desire: not even ninety-nine sheep could stop the shepherd and keep him enclosed in the fold. He might reason like this: "Let me do the sum: If I have ninety-nine of them, I have lost one, but that's no great loss". Nevertheless, he goes looking for that one, because every one is very important to him and that one is in the most need, is the most abandoned, most discarded; and he goes to look for it. We are all warned: mercy to sinners is the style with which God acts and to this mercy he is absolutely faithful: nothing and no one can distract him from his saving will. God does not share our current throw-away culture; it

doesn't count to God. God throws no one away; God loves everyone, looks for everyone: one by one! He doesn't know what "throwing people away" means, because he is entirely love, entirely mercy.

The Lord's flock is always on the move: it does not possess the Lord, it cannot hope to imprison him in its structures and strategies. The Shepherd will be found wherever the lost sheep is. The Lord, then, should be sought precisely where he wants to find us, not where we presume to find him! There is no other way to reassemble the flock except by following the path outlined by the mercy of the shepherd. While he is looking for the lost sheep, he challenges the ninety-nine to participate in the reunification of the flock. Then, not only the lamb on his shoulders, but the whole flock will follow the shepherd to his home to celebrate with "friends and neighbours".

We should reflect on this parable often, for in the Christian community there is always someone who is missing and if that person is gone, a place is left empty. Sometimes this is daunting and leads us to believe that a loss is inevitable, like an incurable disease. That is how we run the risk of shutting ourselves in the pen, where there won't be the odour of the sheep but the stench of enclosure! And Christians? We must not be closed in or we will smell like stale things. Never! We need to go forth, not close in on ourselves, in our little communities, in the parish, holding ourselves to be "righteous". This happens when there is a lack of the missionary zeal that leads us to encounter others. In Jesus' vision there are no sheep that are definitively lost, but only sheep that must be found again. We need to understand this well: to God no one is definitively lost. Never! To the last moment, God is searching for us. Think of the good thief; only in the eyes of Jesus no one is definitively lost. For his perspective is entirely dynamic, open, challenging and creative. It urges us to go forth in search of a path to brotherhood. No distance can keep the shepherd away; and no flock can renounce a brother. To find the one who is lost is the joy of the shepherd and of God, but it is also the joy of the flock as a whole! We are all sheep who have been retrieved and brought back by the mercy of the Lord, and we are called to gather the whole flock to the Lord!

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## 22. The Merciful Father (cf. Lk 15:11-32)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Today this audience is taking place in two locations: as there was the risk of rain, the sick are in the Paul VI Hall and following us on the maxi screen; two places but one audience. Let's greet the sick in the Paul VI Hall. We will reflect today on the Parable of the Merciful Father. It tells of a father and his two sons, and it helps us understand the infinite mercy of God.

We shall begin at the end, that is, the joy in the heart of the father, who says: "let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Lk 15:23-24). With these words the father interrupted the younger son just when he was confessing his guilt: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." (v. 19). But this expression is unbearable to the heart of the father, who is quick to restore the signs of dignity to the son: the best robe, the fatted calf, shoes. Jesus does not describe a father who is offended and resentful, a father who would, for example, say to his son: "you will pay for this". On the contrary, the father embraces him, awaits him with love. The only thing that the father has on his mind is that his son stands before him healthy and safe and this makes him happy and he celebrates. The reception of the prodigal son is described in a moving way: "while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (v. 20).

What tenderness! He sees him at a distance: what does this mean? That the father had constantly gone to the balcony to look at the road to see if his son would return; that son who had misbehaved in many ways found the father there waiting for him. How beautiful is the father's tenderness! The father's mercy is overflowing, unconditional, and shows itself even before the son speaks. Certainly, the son knows he erred and acknowledges it: "I have sinned... treat me as one of your hired servants" (vv. 18-19). These words crumble before the father's forgiveness. The embrace and the kiss of his father makes him understand that he was always considered a son, in spite of everything. This teaching of Jesus is very important: our condition as children of God is the fruit of the love of the Father's heart; it does not depend on our merits or on our actions, and thus no one can take it away, not even the devil! No one can take this dignity away.

Jesus' words encourage us never to despair. I think of the worried moms and dads watching their children move away, taking dangerous paths. I think of the parish priests and catechists who wonder at times if their work is in vain. But I also think of the person in prison, who feels his life is over. I think of those who have made mistakes and cannot manage to envision the future, of those who hunger

for mercy and forgiveness and believe they don't deserve it.... In any situation of life, I must not forget that I will never cease to be a child of God, to be a son of the Father who loves me and awaits my return. Even in the worst situation of life, God waits for me, God wants to embrace me, God expects me.

In the parable there is another son, the older one; he too needs to discover the mercy of the father. He always stayed at home, but he is so different from the father! His words lack tenderness: "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command... But when this son of yours came..." (vv. 29-30). We see the contempt: he never says "father", never says "brother", he thinks only about himself. He boasts of having always remained at his father's side and of having served him; yet, he never lived this closeness with joy. And now he accuses the father of never having given him so much as a kid to feast on. The poor father! One son went away, and the other was never close to him! The suffering of the father is like the suffering of God, the suffering of Jesus when we distance ourselves from him, either because we go far away or because we are nearby without being close.

The elder son needs mercy too. The righteous, those who believe they are righteous, are also in need of mercy. This son represents us when we wonder whether it is worth all the trouble if we get nothing in return. Jesus reminds us that one does not stay in the house of the Father for a reward but because one has the dignity of being children who share responsibility. There is no "bargaining" with God, but rather following in the footsteps of Jesus who gave himself on the Cross without measure.

"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad" (vv. 31-32). The father speaks like this to the older son. His logic is that of mercy! The younger son thought he deserved punishment for his sins, the elder son was waiting for a recompense for his service. The two brothers don't speak to one another, they live in different ways, but they both reason according to a logic that is foreign to Jesus: if you do good, you get a prize; if you do evil you are punished. This is not Jesus' logic, it's not! This logic is reversed by the words of the father: "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (v. 32). The father recovered a lost son, and now he can also give him back to his brother! Without the younger, the elder son ceases to be a "brother". The greatest joy for the father is to see his children recognize one another as brothers.

The sons can decide whether to join in the joy of the father or to reject it. They must ask themselves what they really want and what their vision is for their life. The parable is left open-ended: we do not know what the older son decided to do. And this is an incentive for us. This Gospel passage teaches us that we all need to enter the House of the Father and to share in his joy, in his feast of mercy and of brotherhood. Brothers and sisters, let us open our hearts, in order to be "merciful like the Father"!

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## 23. Mercy like piety

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

It is not a very nice day, but you are brave and you came here despite the rain. Thank you! This audience is taking place in two locations: the sick are in the Paul VI Hall because of the rain. They are more comfortable there and are following us on the jumbo screen; and we are here. We are together... and I suggest that you greet them with a round of applause. It's not easy to applaud holding an umbrella in your hand!

Among the many aspects of mercy, there is one which consists in *feeling compassion* or *pity* for those who need love. *Pietas* — piety — is a concept from the Greco-Roman world where, however, it indicated a kind of submission to superiors: above all, devotion due to the gods, then filial respect for one's parents, the elderly in particular. Today, however, we must be careful not to identify piety with the fairly widespread pietism, which is only a superficial emotion and offends the dignity of others. Similarly, piety should not be confused with the compassion that we feel for the animals that live with us; indeed, it happens that at times we feel this sentiment for animals, and are indifferent to the suffering of brothers and sisters. How often we see people who are so attached to their cats or dogs that they leave their neighbour without help, a neighbour in need.... This is not right.

The piety that we wish to talk about is a manifestation of God's mercy. It is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, whom the Lord offers to his disciples to render them "docile in readily obeying divine inspirations" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1831). Many times the Gospel refers to the spontaneous cry that the sick, of those who are possessed, poor or afflicted people addressed to Jesus: "Have mercy" (cf. Mk 10:47-48; Mt 15:22, 17:15). Jesus responded to all with his gaze of mercy and the comfort of his presence. In those invocations for help or requests for mercy, each person also expressed his or her faith in Jesus, calling him 'Teacher', 'Son of David' and 'Lord'. They perceived that there was something extraordinary about Him, that could help them to emerge from their state of distress. They perceived in Him the love of God himself. Even if the people were crowding around him Jesus was aware of those cries for mercy and he was moved to compassion, especially when he saw people suffering and wounded in their dignity, as in the case of the haemorrhaging woman (cf. Mk 5:32). He called her to trust in Him and in his Word (cf. Jn 6:48-55). For Jesus, feeling compassion is the same as sharing in the distress of those he meets, but at the same time, it is also getting involved in a personal way so that it might be transformed into joy.

We too are called to cultivate within us attitudes of compassion before the many situations of life, to shake off the indifference that impedes us from recognizing the need of the brothers and sisters who surround us and to free ourselves from the slavery of material wellbeing (cf. 1 Tim 6:3-8).

Let us look to the example of the Virgin Mary, who takes care of each one of her children and is for us believers the icon of compassion. Dante Alighieri expresses it in the prayer to Our Lady in *Paradiso*: “In you compassion is, in you is pity, [...] in you is every goodness found in any creature (XXXIII, 19-21). Thank you.

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## 24. Poverty and Mercy (cf. Lk 16:19-31)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

I should like to pause with you today on the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus. The lives of these two people seem to run on parallel tracks: their life status is opposite and not at all connected. The gate of the rich man's house is always closed to the poor man, who lies outside it, seeking to eat the leftovers from the rich man's table. The rich man is dressed in fine clothes, while Lazarus is covered with sores; the rich man feasts sumptuously every day, while Lazarus starves. Only the dogs take care of him, and they come to lick his wounds. This scene recalls the harsh reprimand of the Son of Man at the Last Judgement: "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was [...] naked and you did not clothe me" (Mt 25:42-43). Lazarus is a good example of the silent cry of the poor throughout the ages and the contradictions of a world in which immense wealth and resources are in the hands of the few.

Jesus says that one day that rich man died: the poor and the rich die, they have the same destiny, like all of us, there are no exceptions to this. Thus, that man turned to Abraham, imploring him in the name of 'father' (vv. 24, 27). Thereby claiming to be his son, belonging to the People of God. Yet in life he showed no consideration toward God. Instead he made himself the centre of all things, closed inside his world of luxury and wastefulness. In excluding Lazarus, he did not take into consideration the Lord nor his law. To ignore a poor man is to scorn God! We must learn this well: to ignore the poor is to scorn God. There is a detail in the parable that is worth noting: the rich man has no name, but only an adjective: 'the rich man'; while the name of the poor man is repeated five times, and 'Lazarus' means 'God helps'. Lazarus, who is lying at the gate, is a living reminder to the rich man to remember God, but the rich man does not receive that reminder. Hence, he will be condemned not because of his wealth, but for being incapable of feeling compassion for Lazarus and for not coming to his aid.

In the second part of the parable, we again meet Lazarus and the rich man after their death (vv. 22-31). In the hereafter the situation is reversed: the poor Lazarus is carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom in heaven, while the rich man is thrown into torment. Thus the rich man "lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom". He seems to see Lazarus for the first time, but his words betray him: "Father Abraham", he calls, "have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame". Now the rich man recognizes Lazarus and asks for his help, while in life he pretended not to see him. How often do many people pretend not to see the poor! To them the poor do not exist. Before he denied him even the leftovers from his table, and now he would like him to bring him a



drink! He still believes he can assert rights through his previous social status. Declaring it impossible to grant his request, Abraham personally offers the key to the whole story: he explains that good things and evil things have been distributed so as to compensate for earthly injustices, and the door that in life separated the rich from the poor is transformed into “a great chasm”. As long as Lazarus was outside his house, the rich man had the opportunity for salvation, to thrust open the door, to help Lazarus, but now that they are both dead, the situation has become irreparable. God is never called upon directly, but the parable clearly warns: God’s mercy toward us is linked to our mercy toward our neighbour; when this is lacking, also that of not finding room in our closed heart, He cannot enter. If I do not thrust open the door of my heart to the poor, that door remains closed. Even to God. This is terrible.

At this point, the rich man thinks about his brothers, who risk suffering the same fate, and he asks that Lazarus return to the world in order to warn them. But Abraham replies: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them”. In order to convert, we must not wait for prodigious events, but open our heart to the Word of God, which calls us to love God and neighbour. The Word of God may revive a withered heart and cure it of its blindness. The rich man knew the Word of God, but did not let it enter his heart, he did not listen to it, and thus was incapable of opening his eyes and of having compassion for the poor man. No messenger and no message can take the place of the poor whom we meet on the journey, because in them Jesus himself comes to meet us: “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40), Jesus says. Thus hidden in the reversal of fate that the parable describes lies the mystery of our salvation, in which Christ links poverty with mercy.

Dear brothers and sisters, listening to this Gospel passage, all of us, together with the poor of the earth, can sing with Mary: “He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away” (Lk 1:52-53).

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## 25. Prayer as a source of mercy (cf. Lk 18:1-8)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

The Gospel parable which we have just heard (cf. Lk 18:1-8) contains an important teaching: we “ought always to pray and not lose heart” (v. 1). This means, then, pray constantly, not just when I feel like it. No, Jesus says that we ought “always to pray and not lose heart”. And he offers the example of the widow and the judge.

The judge is a powerful person, called to issue judgment on the basis of the Law of Moses. That is why the biblical tradition recommended that judges be people who fear God, who are worthy of faith, impartial and incorruptible (cf. Ex 18:21). However, this judge “neither feared God nor regarded man” (Lk 18:2). As a judge, he was unfair, unscrupulous, who did not take the Law into account but did whatever he wanted, according to his own interests. It was to him that a widow turned for justice. Widows, along with orphans and foreigners, were the most vulnerable groups of society. The rights afforded them by the Law could be easily disregarded because, being isolated and defenceless, they could hardly be assertive. A poor widow, there, alone, with no one to defend her, might be ignored, might even be denied justice. Just as the orphan, just as the foreigner, the migrant: in that time this was a very serious problem. Faced with the judge’s indifference, the widow has recourse to her only weapon: to bother him incessantly with her request for justice. And because of her insistence, she achieves her end. At a certain point, the judge grants her request, not because he is moved by mercy or because his conscience has been working on him; he simply admits: “because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming” (v. 5).

From this parable Jesus draws two conclusions: if the widow could manage to bend the dishonest judge with her incessant requests, how much more will God, who is the good and just Father, “vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night”; moreover, will not “delay long over them”, but will act “speedily” (vv. 7-8).

That is why Jesus urges us to pray and “not to lose heart”. We all go through times of tiredness and discouragement, especially when our prayers seem ineffective. But Jesus assures us: unlike the dishonest judge, God promptly answers his children, even though this doesn’t mean he will necessarily do it when and how we would like. Prayer does not work like a magic wand! It helps us keep faith in God, and to entrust ourselves to him even when we do not understand his will. In this, Jesus himself — who prayed constantly! — is our model. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him [God] who was able to save him

from death, and he was heard for his godly fear” (5:7). At first glance this statement seems far-fetched, because Jesus died on the Cross. Yet, the Letter to the Hebrews makes no mistake: God has indeed saved Jesus from death by giving him complete victory over it, but the path to that [victory] is through death itself! The supplication that God has answered referred to Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane. Assailed by looming anguish, Jesus prays to the Father to deliver him of this bitter cup of the Passion, but his prayer is pervaded by trust in the Father and he entrusts himself entirely to his will: “not as I will,” Jesus says, “but as thou wilt” (Mt 26:39). The object of prayer is of secondary importance; what matters above all is his relationship with the Father. This is what prayer does: it transforms the desire and models it according to the will of God, whatever that may be, because the one who prays aspires first of all to union with God, who is merciful Love.

The parable ends with a question: “when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (v. 8). And with this question we are all warned: we must not cease to pray, even if left unanswered. It is prayer that conserves the faith, with out it faith falters! Let us ask the Lord for a faith that is incessant prayer, persevering, like that of the widow in the parable, a faith that nourishes our desire for his coming. And in prayer let us experience that compassion of God, who like a Father comes to encounter his children, full of merciful love.

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## 26. Humble prayer obtains mercy (cf. Lk 18:9-14)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Last Wednesday we listened to the parable of the judge and the widow, on the need to pray with perseverance. Today, with another parable, Jesus wants to show us the right attitude for prayer and for invoking the mercy of the Father; how one must pray; the right attitude for prayer. It is the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector (cf. Lk 18:9-14). Both men went up into the Temple to pray, but they do so in very different ways, obtaining opposite results.

The pharisee stood and prayed using many words. His is yes, a prayer of thanksgiving to God, but it is really just a display of his own merits, with a sense of superiority over “other men”, whom he describes as “extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even,” for example, referring to the other one there, “like this tax collector” (v. 11). But this is the real problem: that pharisee prays to God, but in truth he is just self-laudatory. He is praying to himself! Instead of having the Lord before his eyes, he has a mirror. Although he is standing in the Temple, he doesn't feel the need to prostrate himself before the majesty of God; he remains standing, he feels secure, as if he were the master of the Temple! He lists all the good works he has done: he is beyond reproach, observing the Law beyond measure, he fasts “twice a week” and pays “tithes” on all he possesses. In short, rather than prayer, he is satisfied with his observance of the precepts. Yet, his attitude and his words are far from the way of God's words and actions, the God who loves all men and does not despise sinners. On the contrary, this pharisee despises sinners, even by indicating the other one there. In short, the pharisee, who holds himself to be just, neglects the most important commandment: love of God and of neighbour.

It is not enough, therefore, to ask *how much* we pray, we have to ask ourselves *how* we pray, or better, in *what state our heart is*: it is important to examine it so as to evaluate our thoughts, our feelings, and root out arrogance and hypocrisy. But, I ask myself: can one pray with arrogance? No. Can one pray with hypocrisy? No. We must only pray by placing ourselves before God just as we are. Not like the pharisee who prays with arrogance and hypocrisy. We are all taken up by the phrenetic pace of daily life, often at the mercy of feelings, dazed and confused. It is necessary to learn how to rediscover the path to our heart, to recover the value of intimacy and silence, because the God who encounters us and speaks to us is there. Only by beginning there can we in our turn encounter others and speak with them. The pharisee walked toward the Temple, sure of himself, but he was unaware of the fact that his heart had lost the way.

Instead the tax collector — the other man — presents himself in the Temple with a humble and repentant spirit: “standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to

heaven, but beat his breast” (v. 13). His prayer was very brief, not long like that of the pharisee: “God, be merciful to me a sinner”. Nothing more. A beautiful prayer! Indeed, tax collectors — then called “publicans” — were considered impure, subject to foreign rulers; they were disliked by the people and socially associated with “sinners”. The parable teaches us that a man is just or sinful not because of his social class, but because of his way of relating to God and how he relates to his brothers and sisters. Gestures of repentance and the few and brief words of the tax collector bear witness to his awareness of his own miserable condition. His prayer is essential. He acts out of humility, certain only that he is a sinner in need of mercy. If the pharisee asked for nothing because he already had everything, the tax collector can only beg for the mercy of God. And this is beautiful: to beg for the mercy of God! Presenting himself with “empty hands”, with a bare heart and acknowledging himself to be a sinner, the tax collector shows us all the condition that is necessary in order to receive the Lord’s forgiveness. In the end, he is the one, so despised, who becomes an icon of the true believer.

Jesus concludes the parable with the judgment: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14). Of these two, who is the corrupt one? The pharisee. The pharisee is the very icon of a corrupt person who pretends to pray, but only manages to strut in front of a mirror. He is corrupt and he is pretending to pray. Thus, in life whoever believes himself to be just and criticises others and despises them, is corrupt and a hypocrite. Pride compromises every good deed, empties prayer, creates distance from God and from others.

If God prefers humility it is not to dishearten us: rather, humility is the necessary condition to be raised by Him, so as to experience the mercy that comes to fill our emptiness. If the prayer of the proud does not reach God’s heart, the humility of the poor opens it wide. God has a weakness for the humble ones. Before a humble heart, God opens his heart entirely. It is this humility that the Virgin Mary expresses in the Cantic of the *Magnificat*: “he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden [...] his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation” (Lk 1:48, 50). Let her help us, our Mother, to pray with a humble heart. And we, let us repeat that beautiful prayer three times: “Oh God, be merciful to me a sinner”.

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## 27. The first sign of Mercy: Cana (Jn 2:1-11)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!*

Before beginning the catechesis, I should like to greet a group of couples who are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversaries. They really are the “good wine” of the family! Yours is a witness that newlyweds — whom I will greet afterwards — and young people must learn from. It is a beautiful testimony. Thank you for your witness.

After having commented on several parables about mercy, today we shall ponder on Jesus’ first miracle, which John the Evangelist calls “signs”, because Jesus doesn’t perform them in order to excite wonder but to reveal the love of the Father. The first of these miraculous signs is actually recounted by John (2:1-11) and takes place at Cana in Galilee. It is a kind of “gateway”, on which are engraved the words and expressions that illuminate the entire mystery of Christ and open the hearts of the disciples to the faith. Let us look at a few of them.

In the introduction we find the expression “*Jesus with his disciples*” (v. 2). Those whom Jesus called had to follow him, he bound to himself in a community and now, like a single family, they are all invited to a wedding. Thereby initiating his public ministry at the wedding at Cana, Jesus reveals himself as the spouse of the People of God, proclaimed by the prophets, and reveals to us the depth of the relationship that unites us to Him: it is the new Covenant of love. What is at the foundation of our faith? An act of mercy by which Jesus binds us to him. And the Christian life is the response to this love, it is like the history of two people in love. God and man meet, seek, find, celebrate and love one another: just like the lovers in the Song of Songs. Everything else comes as a result of this relationship. The Church is the family of Jesus into which he pours his love; it is this love that the Church safeguards and desires to give to all.

In the context of the Covenant, we are also to understand Our Lady’s observation: “*They have no wine*” (v. 3). How can one celebrate a wedding feast and make merry without what the prophets indicated as a typical element of the messianic banquet (cf. Am 9:13-14; Jl 2:24; Is 25:6)? Water is necessary for life, but wine expresses the abundance of a banquet and the joy of a feast. This wedding feast was short of wine; the newlyweds are ashamed of this. But just imagine ending a wedding feast drinking tea; it would be a shame. Wine is necessary for a feast. By transforming into wine the water of the jars used “for the Jewish rites of purification” (Jn 2:6), Jesus performs an eloquent sign: he transforms the Law of Moses into the Gospel, bearer of joy. As John states elsewhere: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

The words Mary addresses to the servants come to crown the wedding of Cana: “*Do whatever he tells you*” (v. 5). It is curious: these are her last words recounted by the Gospels: they are the legacy that she hands down to us. Today too Our Lady says to us all: “Whatever he tells you — Jesus tells you, do it”. It is the legacy that she has left us: it is beautiful! It is an expression that recalls the formula of faith used by the people of Israel at Sinai in response to the promises of the Covenant: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” (Ex 19:8). And indeed at Cana the servants obey. “Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water’. And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast’. So they took it” (Jn 2:7-8). At this wedding, the New Covenant is truly articulated and to the servants of the Lord, that is to all the Church, is entrusted a new mission: “Do whatever he tells you!”. To serve the Lord means to listen and to put into practice his Word. It is the simple but essential recommendation of the Mother of Jesus and it is the programme of life of the Christian. For each one of us, to draw from the jar is equivalent to entrusting oneself to the Word of God in order to experience its effectiveness in life. Thus, together with the steward of the banquet who had tasted the water-become-wine, we too can exclaim: “you have kept the good wine until now” (v. 10). Yes, the Lord continues to reserve the best wine for our salvation, just as it continues to flow from the pierced side of the Lord.

The conclusion of the narrative sounds like a judgment: “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (v. 11). The wedding feast at Cana is more than a simple account of Jesus’ first miracle. Like a treasure chest, He guards the secret of his Person and the purpose of his coming: the awaited Groom starts off the wedding that is fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery. At this wedding Jesus binds his disciples to himself in a new and final Covenant. At Cana Jesus’ disciples become his family and at Cana the faith of the Church is born. We are all invited to the wedding feast, because the new wine will never run short!

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## 28. Mercy is light (cf. Lk 18:35-43)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

One day Jesus, approaching the City of Jericho, performed a miracle by restoring sight to a blind man who was out begging on the street (cf. Lk 18:35-43). Today we would like to grasp the significance of this sign because it touches us directly. Luke the Evangelist says that this blind man was sitting by the roadside begging (cf. v. 35). The blind in those times — but also not so long ago — were able to live only by alms. The figure of this blind man represents the many people who, today too, are marginalized because of a disability, be it physical or of another kind. He is separated from the flock, sitting there while people pass by: busy, lost in their thoughts and in so many things.... And the road, which could be a place of encounter, for him is instead a place of solitude. Crowds pass by ... and he is alone.

It is sad to imagine a person who has been marginalized, especially against the backdrop of Jericho, a beautiful lush oasis in the desert. As we know, it was Jericho that the people of Israel reached at the end of the long exodus from Egypt: that city represents the gateway to the promised land. We remember the words that Moses proclaimed in that context: “If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of your towns within your land which the Lord your God gives you, *you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother. For the poor will never cease out of the land*; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land” (Dt 15:7, 11). The contrast between this recommendation of God’s Law and the situation described in the Gospel is striking: while the blind man cried out, calling to Jesus, the people rebuked him to silence him, as if he had no right to speak. They had no compassion for him; his shouting only annoyed them. How often do we feel annoyed when we see many people on the street — people in need, sick, hungry. How often, when we find ourselves facing the many refugees, do we feel annoyed. It is a temptation we all have. All of us; me too! That is why the Word of God admonishes us, reminding us that indifference and hostility render us blind and deaf, they impede us from seeing our brothers and do not allow us to recognize the Lord in them. Indifference and hostility. Sometimes this indifference and hostility can even grow into aggression and insult: “Just throw them all out!”; “put them somewhere else!”. When the blind man was crying out, the people voiced this aggression: “get out of here, come on, stop talking, stop crying”.

Let us take note of one interesting detail in particular. The evangelist says that someone in the crowd explained to the blind man the reason why all those people had gathered, saying: “*Jesus of Nazareth is passing by!*” (v. 37). Jesus’ passing by is



indicated with the same verb with which the Book of Exodus speaks of the passing of the Angel of Death, who saves the Israelites in the land of Egypt (cf. Exodus 12:23). It is the “passage” of Easter, the beginning of the liberation: when Jesus passes by there is always liberation, there is always salvation! Therefore, for the blind man, it was as if his Paschal Mystery was proclaimed. Without allowing himself to be intimidated, the blind man cries out repeatedly to Jesus, recognizing Him as the Son of David, the awaited Messiah who, according to the prophet Isaiah, opened the eyes of the blind (cf. Isaiah 35:5). As opposed to the crowd, this blind man sees with the eyes of faith, thanks to which his supplication has a powerful efficacy. In fact, on hearing him, “Jesus stopped, and commanded that he be brought to him” (v. 40). By doing so, Jesus *takes the blind man away from the roadside and puts him at the centre* of the attention of His disciples and of the crowd. Let us also think about when we have been in awful situations, including situations of sin, how it was in fact Jesus who took us by the hand away from the roadside and gave us salvation. In this way, a twofold passage is achieved. First: the people proclaimed good news to the blind man, but they wanted nothing to do with him; now Jesus obliges them all to be aware that the good news implies putting at the centre of one’s path the person who was excluded from it. Second: in his turn, the blind man could not see, but his faith opened the way of salvation, and he finds himself amidst all those who had stopped on the road to see Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, *the Lord’s passing by is an encounter of mercy that unites everything around him to enable us to recognize one who is in need of help and of consolation*. Jesus also passes by in your Life; and when Jesus passes by, and I realize it, it is an invitation to draw near to him, to be better, to be a better Christian, to follow Jesus.

Jesus turns to the blind man and asks him: “What do you want me to do for you?” (v. 41). These words of Jesus are striking: the Son of God is now before the blind man as a humble servant. He, Jesus, God, says: “But what do you want me to do for you? How do you want me to serve you?”. God makes himself a servant of the sinful man. And the blind man answers Jesus, no longer calling him “Son of David,” but “Lord”, the title that since the beginning the Church has applied to the Risen Jesus. The blind man asks that he might see again, and his desire is heard: “Receive your sight; your faith has made you well” (v. 42). He showed his faith by invoking Jesus and wanting by all means to meet Him, and this brought him the gift of salvation. Thanks to his faith, he can now see and, above all, he *feels that he is loved by Jesus*.

Therefore, the account ends by stating that the blind man “followed Him, glorifying God” (v. 43): *he becomes a disciple*. From a beggar to a disciple: this is also our path. We are all beggars, all of us. We are always in need of salvation. And all of us should take this step every day: from beggars to disciples. And thus, the blind man sets out behind the Lord, becoming part of his community. The one they wanted to silence now witnesses aloud to his encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, and “all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God” (v. 43). A second miracle happens: what happened to the blind man *also enables the people to finally see*. The same light illuminates them all, uniting them in a prayer of praise. So Jesus pours out his mercy upon all those he meets: He calls them, makes them come to him, gathers them, heals and enlightens them, creating a new people that celebrates the wonders of his merciful love. Let us also allow

ourselves to be called by Jesus, and let us be healed by Jesus, forgiven by Jesus, and let us follow Jesus, praising God. So be it!

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## 29. Mercy and conversion (cf. Lk 24:45-48)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

After his Resurrection, Jesus appeared several times to his disciples before ascending to the glory of the Father. The Gospel passage that we have just heard (Lk 24:45-48) recounts one of these manifestations, in which the Lord indicates the fundamental content of the preaching that they must offer the world. We can synthesize it in two words: “conversion” and “forgiveness of sins”. These are the two qualifying aspects of the mercy of God who lovingly cares for us. Today let us take into consideration *conversion*.

What is conversion? It is present throughout the Bible, and particularly in the preaching of the prophets, who continually urge the people to “return to the Lord” by asking him for forgiveness and changing their ways. Conversion, according to the prophets, means changing direction and turning to the Lord anew, relying on the certainty that He loves us and his love is ever steadfast. Returning to the Lord.

Jesus made conversion the first word of his preaching: “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15). With this proclamation he presents himself to the people, asking them to accept his Word as God’s final and definitive words to humanity (cf. Mk 12:1-11). Speaking of conversion with regard to the preaching of the prophets, Jesus insists even more on the interior dimension. In fact, it involves the whole person, heart and mind, in order to become a new creature, a new person. Change your heart and you will be renewed.

When Jesus calls one to conversion, he does not set himself up as judge of persons, but he calls from a position nearby, because he shares in the human condition, and therefore calls from the street, from the home, from the table.... Mercy towards those who needed to change their lives came about through his lovable presence so as to involve each person in his salvation history. Jesus persuaded people with his kindness, with love and with his way of being, he touched the depths of people’s hearts and they felt attracted by the love of God and urged to change their lifestyle. For example, the conversion of Matthew (cf. Mt 9:9-13) and of Zacchaeus (cf. Lk 19:1-10) happened in exactly this manner, because they felt loved by Jesus and, through Him, by the Father. True conversion happens when we accept the gift of grace, and a clear sign of its authenticity is when we become aware of the needs of our brothers and are ready to draw near to them.

Dear brothers and sisters, how many times have we also felt the need to effect a change which would involve our entire person! How often do we say to ourselves:

“I need to change, I can’t continue this way.... My life on this path will not bear fruit; it will be a useless life and I will not be happy”. How often these thoughts come, how often!... And Jesus, who is near us, extends his hand and says, “Come, come to me. I’ll do the work: I’ll change your heart, I’ll change your life, I will make you happy”. But do we believe this, yes or no? What do you think: do you believe this or not? Less applause and more voice! Do you believe or not? [‘Yes!’]. So it is. Jesus who is with us invites us to change our life. It is He, with the Holy Spirit, who sows in us this restlessness to change our life and be a little better. Let us follow, therefore, this invitation of the Lord and let us not put up resistance, because only if we open ourselves to His mercy will we find true life and true joy.

All we have to do is open the door wide, and He will do the rest. He does everything, but we must open our heart wide so that he can heal us and make us go forward. I assure you that we will be much happier. Thank you.

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## 30. Mercy purifies the heart (cf. Lk 5:12-16)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean” (Lk 5:12) is the request that we heard addressed to Jesus by a leper. This man did not ask only to be healed, but to be “made clean”, that is, wholly restored, in body and in heart. Indeed, leprosy was considered a form of a curse of God, of profound uncleanness. A leper had to stay away from everyone; he could not access the temple nor any divine service. Far from God and far from men. These people lived a sad life!

Despite this fact, that leper did not resign himself to the disease nor to the dispositions that made him an excluded man. In order to reach Jesus, he was not afraid to break the law and enter the city — something he should not have done, it was prohibited — and when he found Jesus, the man “fell on his face and besought him, ‘Lord, if you will, you can make me clean’” (v. 12). All that is done and said by this man, who was considered unclean, is an expression of his faith! He recognizes Jesus’ power: he is certain that Jesus has the power to heal him and that all depends on His will. This faith is the force that allows him to break every convention and seek the encounter with Jesus and, kneeling before Him, he calls Him “Lord”. The supplication of the leper demonstrates that when we present ourselves to Jesus it is not necessary to make long speeches. A few words are enough, provided that they are accompanied by complete trust in his omnipotence and in his goodness. Entrusting ourselves to God’s will in fact means remitting ourselves to his infinite mercy. I will even share with you a personal confidence. In the evening, before going to bed, I say this short prayer: “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean!”. And I pray five “Our Fathers”, one for each of Jesus’ wounds, because Jesus has cleansed us with his wounds. If I do this, you can do it too, in your home, and say: “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean!”, and think about Jesus’ wounds and say an “Our Father” for each of them. Jesus always hears us.

Jesus is deeply struck by this man. The Gospel of Mark emphasizes that “moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I will; be clean’” (1:41). Jesus’ gesture accompanies his words and renders the teaching more explicit. Contrary to the dispositions of the Law of Moses, which prohibited a leper from drawing near (cf. Lev 13:45-46), Jesus extends his hand and even touches him. How often do we encounter a poor person who comes to meet us! We can also be generous, we can have compassion, but usually we do not touch him. We offer him coins, we toss them there, but we avoid touching his hand. And we forget that that person is the Body of Christ! Jesus teaches us not to be afraid to touch the poor and the excluded, because He is in them. Touching the poor can cleanse us from hypocrisy and make us distressed over their condition. Touching

the excluded. Today these young people accompany me. So many people think that it would be better if they stayed in their land, but they suffer so much there. They are our refugees, but so many consider them excluded. Please, they are our brothers! A Christian excludes no one, gives a place to everyone, allows everyone to come.

After healing the leper, Jesus commands him not to speak of this to anyone, but tells him: “go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to the people” (Lk 5:14). This disposition of Jesus demonstrates at least three things. First: the grace that acts in us does not seek sensationalism. Usually it is moved with discretion and without clamour. To treat our wounds and guide us on the path of holiness it works by patiently modelling our heart on the Heart of the Lord, so as to increasingly assume his thoughts and feelings. Second: by making the priest officially verify the healing and by celebrating an expiatory sacrifice, the leper is readmitted to the community of believers and to social life. His reintegration completes the healing. As he himself had supplicated, now he is completely made clean. Lastly, by presenting himself to the priests, the leper bears witness to them regarding Jesus and his messianic authority. The power of compassion with which Jesus healed the leper led this man’s faith to open itself to the mission. He was excluded, now he is one of us.

Let us consider ourselves, our miseries.... Each has his own. Let us think sincerely. How often we cover them with the hypocrisy of “good manners”. And precisely then it is necessary to be alone, to kneel before God and pray: “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean!”. Do it, do it before going to bed, every evening. Now together let us say this beautiful prayer: “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean!”

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## 31. Works of Mercy (cf. Mt 25:31-46)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

How many times, during these first months of the Jubilee, have we heard about the *works of mercy*! Today the Lord invites us to make a serious examination of conscience. Indeed, it is good to never forget that mercy is not an abstract word, but it is a way of life: a person can either be merciful or unmerciful; it is a lifestyle. I choose to live in a way that is merciful or I choose to live in a way that is unmerciful. It is one thing to *speak* of mercy, and it is another to *live* mercy. Paraphrasing the words of St James the Apostle (cf. 2:14-17), we could say: *mercy without works is dead within itself*. That's it! What makes mercy come alive is its constant dynamism in order to go and meet those in need and the necessities of those in spiritual and material hardship. Mercy has eyes to see, ears to hear, hands to lift up again....

Daily life allows us to touch, with our hands, many demands that concern the poorest and most tested of people. We are asked for that particular attention that leads us to *notice* the state of suffering and need in which so many brothers and sisters find themselves. Sometimes we pass by situations of dramatic poverty and it seems that they do not touch us; everything continues as if it were nothing, into an indifference that eventually creates hypocrites and, without our realizing it, leads to a form of spiritual lethargy that numbs the soul and renders life barren. People who pass by, who move on in life without noticing the needs of others, without seeing many spiritual and material needs, are people who pass by without living, they are people who do not need others. Remember well: those who do not live to serve, do not serve to live.

There are so many aspects of God's mercy toward us! In the same way, there are so many faces turned to us in order to obtain mercy. Those who have experienced in their own lives the Father's mercy cannot remain indifferent before the needs of their brothers. The lesson of Jesus that we have heard does not allow escape routes: I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was naked, displaced, sick, in prison and you assisted me (Mt 25:35-36). You cannot stonewall a person who is hungry: he must be fed. Jesus tells us this! The works of mercy are not theoretical ideas, but concrete testimonies. They oblige us to roll up our sleeves to alleviate suffering.

Due to changes in our globalized world, certain material and spiritual forms of poverty have multiplied: let us give space, therefore, to the imaginings of charity so as to find new ways of working. In this way, the way of mercy will become more and more concrete. It is necessary therefore, that we remain as vigilant as watchmen, so that, when facing the poverty produced by the culture of wellbeing,

the Christian gaze does not weaken and become incapable of focusing on what is essential. Focus on the essentials. What does this mean? To focus on Jesus, to see Jesus in the hungry, in prisoners, in the sick, the naked, in those who don't have work and need to lead their family forward. To see Jesus in these people, our brothers and sisters; to see Jesus in those who are lonely, sad, in those who have made mistakes and need counsel, in those who need to walk with Him in silence so that they feel accompanied. These are the works that Jesus asks of us! To see Jesus in them, in these people. Why? Because this is the way Jesus sees me, sees all of us.

Now let us move on to another thing.

In recent days the Lord allowed me to visit Armenia, the first nation to embrace Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century. It is a nation that, over the course of its long history, has witnessed the Christian faith with martyrdom. I thank God for this journey, and I am deeply grateful to the President of the Republic of Armenia, to Catholicos Karekin ii, to the Patriarch, the Catholic bishops, and the entire Armenian people for welcoming me as a pilgrim of brotherhood and peace.

In three months, God willing, I will make another journey to Georgia and Azerbaijan, two more countries of the Caucasus region. I accepted the invitation to visit these countries for two reasons: on the one hand to highlight the ancient Christian roots present in those lands — again in a spirit of dialogue with other religions and cultures — and on the other to encourage hope and paths of peace. History teaches us that the path of peace requires great tenacity and continuous steps, starting with small steps and gradually increasing them, going to meet one another. Precisely for this reason my hope is that each and every person may give his or her own contribution to peace and reconciliation.

As Christians we are called to strengthen the fraternal communion among us, so as to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ and to be a leaven of a more just and united society. For this reason the entire visit was shared with the Supreme Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church, who fraternally hosted me for three days in his home.

I renew my embrace to the Bishops, priests, men and women religious, and to all the faithful of Armenia. May the Virgin Mary, our Mother, help them to remain steadfast in faith, open to encounter and generous in works of mercy. Thank you.

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## 32. Compassion for a mother (cf. Lk 7:11-17)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

The passage from the Gospel of Luke that we have listened to (7:11-17) presents us with a truly great miracle of Jesus: the resurrection of a young man. However, the heart of this narrative is not the miracle, but Jesus' tenderness toward the mother of this young man. Here, mercy takes the form of great compassion for a woman who had lost her husband and now is accompanying her only son to the cemetery. This deep sorrow of a mother moves Jesus and causes him to perform the miracle of resurrection.

In introducing this episode the Evangelist dwells on many details. At the gate of the small town of Nain — a village — two large groups meet. They come from opposite directions and have nothing in common. Jesus, followed by the disciples and by a large crowd, is about to enter the residential area, while coming out of it is a procession accompanying a dead man, with his widowed mother and many people. At the gate the two groups brush by each other, each going its own way, but it is then that St Luke notes Jesus' feelings: "when the Lord saw her [the woman], he had compassion on her and said to her: 'Do not weep'. And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still" (vv. 13-14). Great compassion guides Jesus' actions: he stops the procession, touches the bier and, moved by profound mercy for this mother, decides to confront the reality of death, so to speak, face to face. And he will confront it definitively, face to face, on the Cross.

During this Jubilee, it would be a good thing if, in passing through the Holy Door, the Door of Mercy, pilgrims were to remember this episode of the Gospel, which occurred at the gate of Nain. When Jesus sees this mother in tears, she enters his heart! Every one arrives at the Holy Door carrying their own life, with its joys and suffering, plans and failures, doubts and fears, in order to present it to the Lord's mercy. We are certain that, at the Holy Door, the Lord comes near to meet each one of us, to bring and offer his powerful consoling words: "Do not weep!" (v. 13). This is the Door of the encounter between the pain of humanity and the compassion of God. Crossing the threshold we fulfil our pilgrimage into the mercy of God who, as to the deceased young man, repeats to all: "I say to you, arise!" (v. 14). To each of us he says: "Arise!". God wants us to stand upright. He created us to be on our feet: for this reason, Jesus' compassion leads to that gesture of healing, to heal us, of which the key phrase is: "Arise! Stand up, as God created you!". Standing up. "But Father, we fall so often" — "Onward, arise!". This is Jesus' word, always. In passing through the Holy Door, let us try to feel this word in our heart: "Arise!".

The powerful word of Jesus can make us rise again and can bring about in us too the passage from death to life. His word revives us, gives us hope, refreshes weary hearts, opens us to a vision of the world and of life which transcends suffering and death. The inexhaustible treasure of God's mercy is inscribed for each one on the Holy Door!

Touched by the word of Jesus, "the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And he gave him to his mother" (v. 15). This phrase is so beautiful: it shows Jesus' tenderness: "he gave him to his mother". The mother recovers her son. Receiving him from Jesus' hands she becomes a mother for the second time, but the son who is now restored to her is not the one who received life from her. Mother and son thus receive their respective identities thanks to the powerful word of Jesus and to his loving gesture. Therefore, especially in the Jubilee, Mother Church receives her children, recognizing in them the life given by the grace of God. It is due to this grace, the grace of Baptism, that the Church becomes mother and that each one of us becomes her child.

Before the young man, revived and restored to his mother, "fear seized them all; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' and 'God has visited his people!'" (v. 16). What Jesus does is thus not only a saving action intended for the widow and her son, or a gesture of goodness limited to that town. In Jesus' merciful care, God meets his people, in Him all of God's grace appears and will continue to appear to mankind.

Celebrating this Jubilee, which I wished to be lived in all the particular Churches, that is in all the churches of the world, and not only in Rome, it is as if all the Church spread throughout the world were joined in one hymn of praise to the Lord. Today too the Church recognizes that she is visited by God. For this reason, by setting out for the Door of Mercy, each one is able to set out for the door of the merciful heart of Jesus: He indeed is the true Door that leads to salvation and restores us to new life. Mercy, both in Jesus and in ourselves, is a journey which starts in the heart in order to reach the hands. What does this mean? Jesus looks at you, he heals you with his mercy, he says to you: "Arise!", and your heart is new. What does it mean to make a journey from the heart to the hands? It means that with a new heart, with the heart healed by Jesus I can perform works of mercy through the hands, seeking to help, to heal the many who are in need. Mercy is a journey that starts in the heart and ends in the hands, namely in the works of mercy.

I have said that mercy is a journey that goes from the heart to the hands. In the heart, we receive the mercy of Jesus who forgives us everything, because God forgives everything and lifts us up, gives us new life and infects us with his compassion. From that forgiven heart and with the compassion of Jesus, the journey to the hands begins, namely through the works of mercy. A bishop, the other day, told me that in his cathedral and in other churches he had made entry and exit doors of mercy. "Why did you do this?" — "Because one door is to enter by, to ask forgiveness, and to receive Jesus' mercy; the other is the door of mercy to exit by, in order to take mercy to others, with our works of mercy". This bishop is intelligent! Let us also do the same with the journey that goes from the heart to the hands: let us enter the church through the door of mercy, to receive the forgiveness of Jesus, who tells us: "Arise! Go, go!"; and with this "Go!" — on foot —

let us leave through the exit door. It is the Church going forth: the journey of mercy which goes from the heart to the hands. Make this journey!

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## 33. Mercy as the instrument of communion (cf. Mt 14:13-21)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Today we wish to reflect upon the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. At the beginning of the narrative given by Matthew (cf. 14:13-21), Jesus has just received word of the death of John the Baptist, and he crosses the lake by boat in search of a “lonely place apart” (v. 13). The people understand, however, and precede him on foot and thus, “as he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick” (v. 14). That’s how Jesus is: always compassionate, always thinking of others. The determination of the people — who fear being left alone, as if abandoned — is striking. John the Baptist, the charismatic prophet, is dead; [the crowd] trusts in Jesus, about whom John had said: “he who is coming after me is mightier than I” (Mt 3:11). Thus the crowd follows him everywhere, to listen to him and to bring him the sick. And seeing this, Jesus is moved. Jesus is not cold, he does not have a cold heart. Jesus is capable of being moved. On the one hand, he feels a bond with this crowd and does not want them to leave; on the other, he needs a moment of solitude, of prayer, with the Father. Often he spends the night praying to his Father.

Thus, that day too, the Master attends to the people. His compassion is not a vague sentiment; instead he shows all the strength of his will to be close to us and to save us. Jesus loves us so much and wants to be close to us.

As evening falls, Jesus is concerned about feeding all those tired and hungry people, and looks after those who follow him. He wants his disciples to be involved in this. Indeed he says to them: “*you give them something to eat*” (Mt 14:16). He shows them that the few loaves and fish that they have, by the power of faith and of prayer, can be shared with all of those people. Jesus works a miracle, but it is the miracle of faith, of prayer, created by compassion and love. Thus, Jesus “*broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds*” (v. 19). The Lord meets the needs of mankind, but wants to render each one of us a concrete participant in his compassion.

Now let us pause on this, Jesus’ gesture of blessing: “*taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves*” (v. 19). As you see, they are the same signs that Jesus performed at the Last Supper; and they are also the same gestures that each priest performs when he celebrates the Holy Eucharist. The Christian community is born and reborn continually from this Eucharistic communion. Living communion with Christ is therefore anything but being passive and detached from daily life; on the contrary, it includes us

more and more in the relationship with the men and women of our time, in order to offer them the concrete sign of mercy and of the attention of Christ. While we are nourished by Christ, the Eucharist which we celebrate transforms us too, step by step, into the Body of Christ and spiritual food for our brothers and sisters. Jesus wants to reach everyone, in order to bring God's love to all. For this reason he makes every believer a servant of mercy. Jesus sees the crowd, feels compassion for them and multiplies the loaves; thus he does the same with the Eucharist. We believers who receive this Eucharistic bread are spurred by Jesus to take this service to others, with his same compassion. This is the way.

The narrative of the multiplication of the loaves and fish ends with the verification that everyone is satisfied and with the collection of the leftover pieces (cf. v. 20).

When Jesus, with his compassion and his love, gives us a grace, forgives us our sins, embraces us, loves us; he does nothing halfway but completely. As it happens here: all are satisfied. Jesus fills our heart and our life with his love, with his forgiveness, with his compassion. Thus, Jesus allows his disciples to carry out his command. In this way they know the path to follow: to feed the people and keep them united; that is, to be *at the service of life and of communion*. Therefore, let us invoke the Lord, that he always make his Church capable of this holy service, and that each one of us may be an instrument of communion in our own family, at work, in the parish and the groups we belong to, a visible sign of the mercy of God who does not want to leave anyone in loneliness and in need, so that communion and peace may descend among mankind and the communion of mankind with God, because this communion is life for all.

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## 34. Mercy gives dignity (cf. Mt 9:20-22)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

The Gospel passage we have heard presents us with a figure who stands out because of her faith and courage. This is the woman whom Jesus healed of a hemorrhage (cf. Mt 9:20-22). Passing through the crowd, she approaches Jesus from behind in order to touch the hem of his garment. “For she said to herself: ‘If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well’” (v. 21). What great faith! What great faith this woman had! She reasons in such a way because she is enlivened by a great deal of faith and a great deal of hope and, with a bit of cleverness, she attains what is in her heart. The desire to be saved by Jesus is so great that it moves her to go beyond the rules laid down by the law of Moses. Indeed, this poor woman for many years is not simply ill, but is considered impure because she suffers from a hemorrhage (cf. Lev 15:19-30). For this reason she is excluded from the liturgy, from married life, and from normal relationships with others. The evangelist Mark adds that she has consulted many doctors, exhausted her financial means in paying them and endured painful treatments, but she only worsened. She was a woman rejected by society. It is important to consider this condition — of being rejected — in order to understand the state of her soul: she feels that Jesus can free her from disease and from the state of marginalization and indignity in which, for years, she has had to live. In one word: she knows, she feels that Jesus can *save her*.

This example causes one to reflect on how the woman is often perceived and represented. We, even Christian communities, are all alert to views of femininity invalidated by prejudice and harmful suspicions about her intangible dignity. The Gospels themselves restore the truth and bring a liberating perspective in this regard. Jesus admired the faith of this woman whom everyone shunned, and he transformed her hope into salvation. We do not know her name, but the few lines in the Gospels describing her encounter with Jesus outline a journey of faith that is capable of restoring the truth and greatness of the dignity of every person. In the encounter with Christ, the path of liberation and salvation is opened for all men and women in every place and of every time.

The Gospel of Matthew says that when the woman touched Jesus’ cloak, he “turned” and, “seeing her” (v. 22), he spoke to her. As we said, because of her state of exclusion, the woman acted secretly, behind Jesus’ back — she was a bit fearful — so as not to be seen, because she was an outcast. Jesus, however, sees her and his gaze is not one of reproach, he does not say: “Go away, you are an outcast!”, as if to say: “You are a leper, go away!”. No, he does not reproach her, but Jesus’ gaze is one of mercy and tenderness. He knows what has happened and he seeks a personal encounter with her, which is essentially what the woman desired. This

means that Jesus not only welcomes, but considers her worthy of this encounter, to the point of giving her his word and his attention.

In the central part of the story the word *salvation* is repeated *three times*. “If I but touch his cloak, I shall be *saved*. Jesus turned, saw her and said, ‘Have courage, daughter, your faith has *saved* you’. And from that moment on the woman was *saved*” (cf. 21-22). This “courage, daughter” expresses all of God’s mercy for that person. And for every rejected person. How often do we feel inwardly rejected because of our sins, we have committed many, we have committed many.... And the Lord tells us: “Have Courage! Come! To me you are not an outcast. Have courage, daughter. You are a son, a daughter”. And this is the moment of grace, it is the moment of forgiveness, it is the moment of inclusion in the life of Jesus, in the life of the Church. It is the moment of mercy. Today, all of us, sinners, perhaps great sinners or small sinners, but we are all sinners, the Lord says to all of us: “Have courage, come! You are no longer rejected, you are no longer rejected: I forgive you, I embrace you”. God’s mercy is like this.

We must have courage and go to Him, to ask forgiveness for our sins and move forward, with courage, as this woman did. Then, “salvation” assumes multiple connotations: firstly it restores health to the woman; then it frees her from social and religious discrimination; moreover, it implements the hope that she carried in her heart, eliminating her fears and her despair; finally, it allows her to return to the community, freeing her from the necessity of acting secretly. And this last point is important: a person who is rejected always acts in secret, either sometimes or all through life: our thoughts turn to the lepers of that time, to the homeless of today...; we think of sinners, of ourselves, sinners: we always do something secretly, we need to do something in secret, because we are ashamed of what we are.... And he frees us from this, Jesus frees us and enables us to get up: “Get up, come, arise!”. The way God created us: God created us standing, not humiliated. Standing. What Jesus gives is total salvation, which reintegrates the woman’s life in the sphere of God’s love and, at the same time, restores her to her full dignity.

In short, it is not the cloak that the woman touched which gave her salvation, but *the word of Jesus, received in faith*, able to comfort her, heal her and restore her in a relationship with God and with his people. Jesus is the only source of blessing from which salvation for all men flows, and faith is the fundamental disposition for receiving it. Jesus, once again, with his action that is full of mercy, indicates to the Church the path she must take in order to meet each person, so that everyone can be healed in body and spirit and recover the dignity of children of God. Thank you.

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## 35. Mercy saves (cf. Mt 11:2-6)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

We have listened to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (11:2-6). The evangelist's intention is that of making us enter more deeply into the mystery of Jesus, in order to grasp his goodness and his mercy. The scene is as follows: while John the Baptist was in prison, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him a very clear question: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (v. 3). He was precisely in a moment of darkness ... John was anxiously awaiting the Messiah and used colourful language to describe him in his preaching as a judge who would finally inaugurate the Kingdom of God and purify his people, rewarding the good and punishing the bad. John preached in this way: "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt 3:10). Now that Jesus has begun his public mission in a different manner, John suffers because he is in a two-fold darkness: the darkness of his prison cell, and the darkness of heart. He does not understand this manner of Jesus, and he wants to know if He is really the Messiah, or if he must await someone else.

And at first Jesus' answer does not seem to correspond to John's question. In fact, Jesus says: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offence at me" (vv. 4-6). Here Jesus' intent becomes clear: He responds by saying that he is the real instrument of the Father's mercy, who goes to encounter everyone, bringing consolation and salvation, and, in doing so, he manifests God's justice. The blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, regain their dignity and are no longer excluded because of their disease, the dead return to life, while the Good News is proclaimed to the poor. And this becomes the summary of Jesus' action, who in this way makes God's own actions visible and tangible.

The message that the Church receives from this account of Christ's life is very clear. God did not send his Son into the world to punish sinners, nor to destroy the wicked. Rather, they were invited to convert, so that, seeing the signs of divine goodness, they might rediscover their way back. As the Psalm says: "If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, / Lord, who could stand? / But there is forgiveness with thee, / that thou mayest be feared" (130 [129]:3-4).

The justice that John the Baptist places at the heart of his preaching is manifested in Jesus firstly as mercy. And the Precursor's doubts merely anticipate the astonishment that Jesus' actions and words will arouse later. The conclusion of Jesus' answer, therefore, is understandable. He says: "blessed is he who takes no



offence at me” (v. 6). Offence means “obstacle”. Thus Jesus warns against a particular danger: if one’s obstacle to believing is above all Jesus’ works of mercy, it means that one has a false image of the Messiah. But blessed are those who, in view of Jesus’ works and words, render glory to the Father who is in heaven.

Jesus’ admonition is always pertinent: today too, man forms an idea of God that prevents him from enjoying His real presence. Some people carve out a “do-it-yourself” faith that reduces God to the limited space of one’s own desires and convictions. This faith is not a conversion to the Lord who reveals himself, but rather, it prevents him from enlivening our life and consciousness. Others reduce God to a false idol; they use his holy name to justify their own interests, or actual hatred and violence. For others still God is only a psychological refuge in which to be reassured in difficult moments: it is a faith turned in on itself, impervious to the power of the merciful love of Jesus which reaches out to others. Others still consider Christ only as a good instructor of ethical teachings, one among the many of history. Finally, there are those who stifle the faith in a purely intimate relationship with Jesus, nullifying his missionary thrust that is capable of transforming the world and history. We Christians believe in the God of Jesus Christ, and our desire is that of growing in the living experience of his mystery of love.

Let us therefore commit ourselves not to allow any obstacle to hinder the Father’s merciful action, and let us ask for the gift of a great faith so that we too may become signs and instruments of mercy.

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## 36. Mercy and redemption

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

The passage that we have heard speaks of God's mercy which is implemented in the Redemption, that is, in the salvation which we were given with the Blood of his Son Jesus (cf. 1 Pet 1:18-21). The word "redemption" is not often used, yet it is fundamental because it indicates the most radical liberation that God could fulfil for us, for all of humanity and for all of creation.

It seems that man today no longer likes to think he has been freed and saved through God's intervention; he deludes himself that his freedom is a force for obtaining everything. But in reality this is not the case. How many illusions are sold on the pretext of freedom, and how many new forms of slavery are created in our times in the name of a false freedom! Many, many slaves. 'I do this because I want to, I take drugs because I like to, I am free. I do otherwise'. They are slaves! They become slaves in the name of freedom. We have all seen people like this who end up on the ground. We need God to free us from every form of indifference, selfishness and self-sufficiency".

The words of the Apostle Peter clearly express the meaning of the new life to which we are called. By making Himself one of us, the Lord Jesus not only takes on the human condition, but also raises us up to the possibility of being Children of God. By His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ, the blameless Lamb, conquered death and sin to free us from their dominion. He is the Lamb that was sacrificed for us, so that we can receive a new life made up of forgiveness, love and joy. These three words are beautiful: forgiveness, love and joy. All that He assumed was also redeemed, freed and saved. Certainly, it is true that life puts us to the test, and at times we suffer for this. However, in these moments we are invited to turn our gaze to the crucified Jesus who suffers for us and with us, as sure proof that God does not abandon us. Let us never forget that in anguish and persecution, as in everyday sufferings, we are always freed by the merciful hand of God who raises us up to Him and leads us to a new life.

God's love is boundless: we can discover ever new signs that show his attention towards us and, above all, his wish to reach us and to await us. All our life, although marked by the fragility of sin, is placed under the gaze of God who loves us. How many pages of Sacred Scripture speak to us of God's presence, closeness and tenderness for every man, especially for the smallest, the poor and the troubled! God has great tenderness, great love for the small ones, for the weak, for those rejected by society. The greater our need, the more his gaze upon us is filled with mercy. He feels compassion and pity towards us because He knows our

weaknesses. He knows our sins and He forgives us. He always forgives us! He is so good, our Father is so good.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, let us open up to the Lord, and receive his grace! Because, as the Psalm says, “For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with Him is plentiful redemption” (130[129]:7).

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## 37. Learn from me (cf. Mt 11:28-30)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

During this Jubilee we have reflected many times on the fact that Jesus expresses himself with unique tenderness, a sign of God's presence and goodness. Today we shall pause on a moving Gospel passage (cf. Mt 11:28-30), in which Jesus says: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ... learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (vv. 28-29). The Lord's invitation is surprising: He calls to follow Him people who are lowly and burdened by a difficult life; He calls to follow Him people who have many needs, and He promises them that in Him they will find rest and relief. The invitation is extended in the imperative form: "*Come to me*", "*take my yoke*" and "*learn from me*". If only all the world's leaders could say this! Let us try to understand the meaning of these expressions.

The first imperative is "*Come to me*". Addressing those who are weary and oppressed, Jesus presents himself as the Servant of the Lord described in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The passage of Isaiah states: "The Lord has given me a disciple's tongue, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word" (cf. 50:4). Among those who are weary of life, the Gospel also often includes the poor (cf. Mt 11:5) and the little ones (cf. Mt 18:6). This means those who cannot rely on their own means, nor on important friendships. They can only trust in God. Conscious of their humble and wretched condition, they know that they depend on the Lord's mercy, awaiting from Him the only help possible. At last, in Jesus' invitation they find the response they have been waiting for. Becoming his disciples they receive the promise of finding rest for all their life. It is a promise that at the end of the Gospel is extended to all peoples: "Go therefore", Jesus says to the Apostles, "and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Accepting the invitation to celebrate this year of grace of the Jubilee, throughout the world pilgrims are passing through the Door of Mercy open in cathedrals and shrines, in so many churches of the world, in hospitals, in prisons. Why do they pass through this Door of Mercy? To find Jesus, to find Jesus' friendship, to find the rest that Jesus alone gives.

This journey expresses the conversion of each disciple who follows Jesus. Conversion always consists in discovering the Lord's mercy. It is infinite and inexhaustible: the Lord's mercy is immense! Thus, passing through the Holy Door, we profess "that love is present in the world and that this love is more powerful than any kind of evil in which individuals, humanity, or the world are involved" (John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, n. 7).

The second imperative states: *“Take my yoke”*. In the context of the Covenant, biblical tradition uses the image of the yoke to indicate the close bond that links the people to God and, as a result, the submission to his will expressed in the Law. Debating with the scribes and the doctors of the Law, Jesus places upon his disciples *his* yoke, in which the Law is fulfilled. He wants to teach them that they will discover God’s will through Him personally: through Jesus, not through the cold laws and prescriptions that Jesus himself condemns. Just read Chapter 23 of Matthew! He is at the centre of their relationship with God, He is at the heart of the relations among the disciples and sets himself as the fulcrum of each one’s life. Thus, receiving “Jesus’ yoke”, each disciple enters into communion with Him and participates in the mystery of his Cross and in his destiny of salvation.

The third imperative follows: *“Learn from me”*. Jesus proposes to his disciples a journey of knowledge and of imitation. Jesus is not a severe master who imposes upon others burdens which He does not bear: this was the accusation He directed at the doctors of the Law. He addresses the humble, the little ones, the poor, the needy, for He made himself little and humble. He understands the poor and the suffering because He himself is poor and tried by pain. In order to save humanity Jesus did not undertake an easy path; on the contrary, his journey was painful and difficult. As the Letter to the Philippians recalls: “he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (2:8). The yoke which the poor and the oppressed bear is the same yoke that He bore before them: for this reason the yoke is light. He took upon his shoulders the pain and the sins of the whole of humanity. For a disciple, therefore, receiving Jesus’ yoke means receiving his revelation and accepting it: in Him God’s mercy takes on mankind’s poverty, thus giving the possibility of salvation to everyone. Why is Jesus able to say these things? Because He became all things to everyone, close to all, to the poorest! He was a shepherd among the people, among the poor. He worked every day with them. Jesus was not a prince. It is bad for the Church when pastors become princes, separated from the people, far from the poorest: that is not the spirit of Jesus. Jesus rebuked these pastors, and Jesus spoke about them to the people: “do as they say, not as they do”.

Dear brothers and sisters, for us too there are moments of weariness and disillusion. Thus let us remember these words of the Lord, which give us so much consolation and allow us to understand whether we are placing our energy at the service of the good. Indeed, at times our weariness is caused by placing trust in things that are not essential, because we have distanced ourselves from what really matters in life. The Lord teaches us not to be afraid to follow Him, because the hope that we place in Him will never disappoint. Thus, we are called to learn from Him what it means to live on mercy so as to be instruments of mercy. Live on mercy so as to be instruments of mercy: live on mercy and feel needful of Jesus’ mercy, and when we feel in need of forgiveness, of consolation, let us learn to be merciful to others. Keeping our gaze fixed on the Son of God allows us to understand how far we still have to go; but at the same time it instills us with the joy of knowing that we are walking with Him and we are never alone. Have courage, therefore, have courage! Let us not be robbed of the joy of being the Lord’s disciples. “But, Father, I am a sinner, what can I do?” — “Let yourself be gazed upon by the Lord, open your heart, feel his gaze upon you, his mercy, and your heart will be filled with joy, with the joy of forgiveness, if you draw near to ask for forgiveness”. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the hope of living this life together with Him and with the strength of his consolation. Thank you.

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## 38. Merciful like the Father (cf. Lk 6:36-38)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

We have heard the passage from the Gospel of Luke (6:36-38) that inspired the motto of this extraordinary Holy Year: *Merciful like the Father*. The complete phrase reads: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (v. 36). It is not a catchphrase, but a life commitment. To understand this expression well, we can compare it with the parallel text from the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus says: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48).

In the well-known Sermon on the Mount, which opens with the Beatitudes, the Lord teaches that perfection lies in love, the fulfillment of all the precepts of the Law. In this same perspective, St Luke specifies that perfection is merciful love: to be *perfect* means to be *merciful*. Is a person who is not merciful perfect? No! Is a person who is not merciful good? No! Goodness and perfection are rooted in mercy. Certainly, God is perfect. However, if we consider Him in this way, it becomes impossible for men to aim towards that absolute perfection. Instead, having Him before our eyes as merciful, allows us to better understand what constitutes his perfection, and this spurs us to be, as He is, full of love, compassion, mercy.

I ask myself: are Jesus’ words realistic? Is it really possible to love like God loves and to be merciful like He is?

If we look at the history of salvation, we see that the whole of God’s revelation is an unceasing and untiring love for mankind: God is like a father or mother who loves with an unfathomable love and pours it out abundantly on every creature. Jesus’ death on the Cross is the culmination of the love story between God and man. A love so great that God alone can understand it. It is clear that, compared to this immeasurable love, our love will always be lacking. But when Jesus calls us to be merciful *like* the Father, he does not mean in quantity! He asks his disciples to become *signs, channels, witnesses* of his mercy.

The Church can be nothing other than a sacrament of God’s mercy in the world, at every time and for all of mankind. Every Christian, therefore, is called to be a witness of mercy, and this happens along the path of holiness. Let us think of the many saints who became merciful because they allowed their hearts to be filled with divine mercy. They embodied the Lord’s love, pouring it into the multiple needs of a suffering humanity. Within the flourishing of many forms of charity you can see the reflection of Christ’s merciful face.

We ask ourselves: What does it mean for disciples to be merciful? Jesus explains this with two verbs: “forgive” (Lk 6:37) and “give” (v. 38).

Mercy is expressed, first of all, in *forgiveness*: “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven” (v. 37). Jesus does not intend to undermine the course of human justice, he does, however, remind his disciples that in order to have fraternal relationships they must suspend judgment and condemnation. Forgiveness, in fact, is the pillar that holds up the life of the Christian community, because it shows the gratuitousness with which God has loved us first.

The Christian must forgive! Why? Because he has been forgiven. All of us who are here today, in the Square, we have been forgiven. There is not one of us who, in our own life, has had no need of God’s forgiveness. And because we have been forgiven, we must forgive. We recite this every day in the *Our Father*: “Forgive us our sins; forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”. That is, to forgive offenses, to forgive many things, because we have been forgiven of many offenses, of many sins. In this way it is easy to forgive: if God has forgiven me, why do I not forgive others? Am I greater than God? This pillar of forgiveness shows us the gratuitousness of the love of God, who loved us first. Judging and condemning a brother who sins is wrong. Not because we do not want to recognize sin, but because condemning the sinner breaks the bond of fraternity with him and spurns the mercy of God, who does not want to renounce any of his children. We do not have the power to condemn our erring brother, we are not above him: rather, we have a duty to recover the dignity of a child of the Father and to accompany him on his journey of conversion.

Jesus also indicates a second pillar to us who are his Church: “to give”. Forgiveness is the first pillar; giving is the second pillar. “Give, and it will be given to you.... For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (v. 38). God gives far beyond our merits, but He will be even more generous with those who have been generous on earth. Jesus does not say what will happen to those who do not give, but the image of the “measure” is a warning: with the measure that we give, it is we who determine how we will be judged, how we will be loved. If we look closely, there is a coherent logic: the extent to which you receive from God, you give to your brother, and the extent to which you give to your brother, you will receive from God!

Merciful love is therefore the only way forward. We all have a great need to be a bit more merciful, to not speak ill of others, to not judge, to not “sting” others with criticism, with envy and jealousy. We must forgive, be merciful, and live our lives with love.

This love enables Jesus’ disciples to never lose the identity they received from Him, and to recognize themselves as children of the same Father. In the love that they practice in life we see reflected that Mercy that will never end (cf. 1 Cor 13:1-12). Do not forget this: mercy is a gift; forgiveness and giving. In this way, the heart expands, it grows with love. While selfishness and anger make the heart small, they make it harden like a stone. Which do you prefer? A heart of stone or a heart full of love? If you prefer a heart full of love, be merciful!



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## 39. Forgiveness on the Cross (cf. Lk 23:39-43)

*Dear Brother and Sisters, Good morning!*

The words that Jesus pronounces during his Passion find their peak in forgiveness. Jesus forgives: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). These are not only words, they become a concrete act of forgiveness offered to the “good thief” who was beside Him. Saint Luke writes of the *two criminals* who were crucified with Jesus, who turn to Him with contradictory attitudes.

*The first* criminal insults Him as all the people had insulted Him, as the rulers of the people had done, but this poor man, driven by despair says: “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (Lk 23:39). This cry testifies to the anguish of man before the mystery of death and the tragic awareness that only God can be the liberating answer: it is therefore unthinkable that the Messiah, the One sent by God, can be on the cross and yet doing nothing to save himself. And they did not understand this. They did not understand the mystery of Jesus’ *sacrifice*. However, Jesus saved us by *remaining* on the Cross. We all know that it is not easy “to remain on the cross”, on our little everyday crosses. He remained this way, on this great cross, in this great suffering, and there he saved us; there, he showed us his omnipotence and there he has forgiven us. There, he carries out his gift of love, and gave rise to our salvation springs. By dying on the Cross, innocent between two criminals, He certifies that the salvation of God can reach any man in any condition, even in the most negative and painful condition. God’s salvation is for everyone, without exception. It is offered to everyone. This is why the Jubilee is a time of grace and of mercy for everyone, the good and the bad, those who are healthy and those who suffer. Remember the parable in which Jesus speaks of the marriage feast of the son of a powerful man of the land: when the guests did not want to come, he said to his servants:

“Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find” (Mt 22:9). We are all called: *the good and the bad*. The Church is not only for those who are good or those who seem good or believe they are good; The Church is for everyone, and even preferably for those who are bad, because the Church is mercy. And this time of grace and mercy reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ! (cf. Rom 8:39). To the one who is nailed to a hospital bed, to one who lives locked in a prison, to those who are trapped by war, I say: look at the Crucifix; God is with you all, he remains with you on the cross and offers himself as Saviour to all of us. To those of you who are in great suffering I say, Jesus is crucified for you, for us, for everyone. Allow the power of the Gospel to penetrate your heart and console you, to give you hope and the intimate certainty that *no one* is excluded from his forgiveness. You might ask me:

“Tell me, Father, does a man who has done the worst things in his life, have the chance of being forgiven?” — “Yes! Yes: no one is excluded from the forgiveness of God. One need only draw near to Jesus, penitently, with the desire to be embraced by Him”.

This was the first criminal. *The other is the one known as the “good thief”*. His words are a wonderful example of repentance, a catechesis centred on learning to ask Jesus for forgiveness. First, he turns to his companion: “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” (Lk 23:40). In this way he highlights the starting point of repentance: the fear of God. Not the *dread* of God, no: the filial fear of God. It is not dread, but that respect that is due to God because He is God. It is a filial respect because He is Father. The good thief recalls the fundamental attitude that opens the way for trusting in God: the awareness of his omnipotence and of his infinite goodness. It is this trusting respect that helps to make room for God and for trust in his mercy. Then the good thief declares Jesus’ innocence and openly confesses his own guilt: “And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Lk 23:41).

Therefore, Jesus is there on the cross to be with those who are guilty: through this closeness, He offers them salvation. That which was a scandal to the leaders and the first thief, to those who were there and those who mocked Jesus, is, on the other hand, the foundation of the good thief’s faith. Thus he becomes a witness of Grace; the unthinkable happened: God loved me so much that he died on the Cross for me. This man’s very faith is a fruit of Christ’s grace: his eyes contemplate, on the Crucifix, the love God has for him, a poor sinner. It is true, he was a thief, he was a crook, he had stolen things throughout his life. But in the end, he regretted what he had done, and, seeing Jesus, so good and merciful, he managed to *steal* Heaven: he is a great thief, this man!

The good thief finally addresses Jesus directly, invoking his help: “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power” (Lk 23:42). He calls him by name, “Jesus”, with confidence, and thus confesses what that name means: “the Lord saves”: this is what the name “Jesus” means. That man asks Jesus to remember him. There is so much tenderness in this expression, so much humanity! It is the need of the human being not to be forsaken; that God may be always near. In this way a man condemned to death becomes an example, a model for a man, for a Christian who trusts in Jesus; and also a model of the Church who invokes the Lord so often in the liturgy, saying: “Remember... Remember your love...”.

While the good thief speaks of the future, saying: “when you *come in* your kingly power”, Jesus’ answer does not leave him waiting; he speaks of the present: he says “*today* you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43). In the hour of the cross, the salvation of Christ reaches its *height*; and his promise to the good thief reveals the fulfillment of his mission: that is, to save sinners. At the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus had proclaimed “release to the captives” (Lk 4:18); in Jericho, in the house of Zacchaeus, a public sinner, Jesus declared that “the Son of man”, that is, He Himself, has come “to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10).

On the Cross, his last act confirms the fulfillment of this plan of salvation. From beginning to end, He revealed Himself as Mercy, He revealed Himself as the definitive and unrepeatable Incarnation of the Father's love. Jesus is truly the face of the Father's mercy. And the good thief called him by name: "Jesus". It is a short invocation, and we can all make it several times during the day: "Jesus". Simply, "Jesus". Let us do so throughout the day.

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## 40. Corporal and spiritual works of mercy

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

In the preceding catechesis, we delved a little deeper into the great mystery of God's mercy.

We reflected on the Father's action in the Old Testament and then, in the Gospel account, we saw how Jesus, in his words and actions, is the Incarnation of Mercy.

He, in return, taught his disciples: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). It is a responsibility that challenges the conscience and actions of every Christian. In fact, it is not enough to experience God's mercy in one's life; whoever receives it must also become a sign and instrument for others. Mercy, therefore, is not only reserved for particular moments, but it embraces our entire daily existence.

How can we, therefore, be witnesses of mercy? We do not think that it is done with great efforts or superhuman actions. No, it is not so. The Lord shows us a very simple path, made by small actions which, nonetheless, have great value in his eyes, to the extent to which he has told us that it is by these actions we will be judged. In fact, one of the most beautiful pages from Matthew's Gospel brings us the lesson which we can, in every way, hold to be true as the "testament of Jesus" by the Evangelist, who had experienced the action of Mercy directly on himself. Jesus says that every time we give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, cloth the naked and welcome the foreigner, visit the sick or imprisoned, we do the same to him (cf. Mt 25:31-46). The Church calls these actions "*corporal works of mercy*", because they assist people with their material necessities.

There are also, however, seven other *works of mercy* called "*spiritual*", which pertain to other equally important needs, especially today, because they touch the person's soul, and often create the greatest suffering. We certainly remember a phrase which has entered into the common language: "Bear wrongs patiently". And there are; there are troublesome people! It might seem like a minor thing which makes us smile, but instead contains a feeling of profound charity; it is the same for the other six [spiritual works of mercy], which are good to remember: counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, console the afflicted, pardon offences, pray to God for the living and the dead. These are daily things! "But I am afflicted..." — "But God will help you, I don't have time...". No! I stop myself, I listen, I give my time and console him; that is an act of mercy, and it is done not only to him, it is done to Jesus!

In the following Catecheses, we will reflect on these works which the Church presents to us as the concrete way of living out mercy. Over the course of centuries, many simple people have put this into practice, giving their sincere witness of faith. The Church, after all, faithful to her Lord, nourishes a preferential love for the weakest. Often it is the people closest to us who need our help. We should not go out in search of some unknown business to accomplish. It is better to begin with the simplest, which the Lord tells us is the most urgent. In a world which, unfortunately, has been damaged by the virus of indifference, the works of mercy are the best antidote. In fact, they educate us to be attentive to the most basic needs of “the least of these my brethren” (Mt 25:40), in whom Jesus is present. Jesus is always present there. Where there is need, there is someone who has need, be it material or spiritual. Jesus is there. Recognizing his face in those who are in need is one way to really confront indifference. He allows us to be always vigilant, and avoid having Christ pass by without us recognizing him. It recalls to mind the words of St Augustine: “*Timeo Iesum ranseuntem*” (Serm., 88, 14, 13): “I fear the Lord passing by”, and I do not notice him; I fear that the Lord may pass before me in one of these little people in need, and I do not realize that it is Jesus. I fear that the Lord may pass by without my recognizing him! I wondered why St Augustine said he *feared* the passing by of Jesus. The answer, unfortunately, is in our behaviour: because we are often distracted, indifferent, and when the Lord closely passes us by, we lose the opportunity to encounter him. The works of mercy reawaken in us the need, and the ability, to make the faith alive and active with charity.

I am convinced that, through these simple, daily actions, we can achieve a true cultural revolution, like there was in the past. If every one of us, every day, does one of these, this will be a revolution in the world! Everyone, each and every one of us. How many Saints are remembered even today, not for the great works which they accomplished, but for the charity which they knew how to impart! We think of the recently canonized Mother Teresa: we do not remember her because of the many houses she opened in the world, but because she stooped down to every person she found in the middle of the street in order to restore their dignity. How many abandoned children did she embrace in her arms; how many moribund people has she accompanied to eternity, holding their hands! These works of mercy are the features of the face of Jesus Christ, who takes care of his littlest brethren in order to bring the tenderness and closeness of God to each of them. May the Holy Spirit help us; may the Holy Spirit kindle within us the desire to live this way of life: at least once a day, at least! Let us again learn the corporal and spiritual works of mercy by heart, and ask the Lord to help us put them into practice every day, and in those moments where we see Jesus in a person who is in need.

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# 41. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty

*Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

One of the consequences of what we call “well-being” is that it leads people to close in on themselves, and become insensitive to the needs of others. It does everything to deceive them by presenting ideals of ephemeral life, which later vanish after a few years, as though our life were a fashion to follow and change at every season. It is not so. The reality must be accepted and dealt with for what it is, and often we are made to encounter situations of urgent need. It is for this reason that, among the works of mercy, there is the reminder of hunger and thirst: to give food to the hungry — there are many today — and drink to the thirsty. How often the *media* tells us about populations who are suffering from the lack of food and water, with serious consequences, especially for children.

Faced with certain items of news, and especially certain images, public opinion is touched, and from time to time solidarity campaigns are started. Generous donations are made, and in this way one can contribute to alleviate the suffering of many. This form of charity is important, but perhaps it does not directly get us involved. When, as we walk along the street, we cross the path of a person in need, or a poor person who is begging at the entrance to our home, it is very different, because they are no longer an image; we are involved personally. There is no longer any distance between me and him or her, and I feel engaged. The call of poverty in the abstract does not reach us, but it makes us think, and makes us denounce it; however, when we see poverty in the flesh of a man, of a woman, of a child, this plea reaches us!

And therefore, we get into the habit of avoiding those in need, of not approaching them, somewhat masking the reality of the needy, following the current trend of keeping away from them. There is no longer any distance between me and the poor person when I come across him. In these cases, what is my reaction? Do I look elsewhere and walk by? Or do I stop to speak to him and take an interest in his situation? And if I do this, it will not be without someone saying: “This is crazy, why speak to a poor person!”. Do I see if I can welcome this person in some way, or do I try to get away from him as soon as possible? But perhaps he is only asking for what is needed: something to eat and drink. Let us think for a moment: how often do we recite the “Our Father”, yet do not pay close attention to those words: “Give us this day our daily bread”?

In the Bible, a Psalm says that God is “he who gives food to all flesh” (136[135]:25). The experience of hunger is hard. Those who have endured war or famine know about it. However, this experience is repeated every day, and coexists alongside abundance and waste. The words of the Apostle James are ever timely: “What

does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:14-17) because it is incapable of doing works, of doing charity, of love. There is always someone who is hungry or thirsty and who needs me. I cannot delegate this to another. This poor person needs me, *my* help, *my* word, *my* commitment. We are all involved in this.

There is also the teaching from that page in the Gospel in which Jesus, seeing the many people who by now were following him, asked his disciples: "How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" (Jn 6:5). His disciples responded: "It is impossible. It would be better for you to send them away...". Instead, Jesus says to them: "No. You give them something to eat" (cf. Mt 14:16). He took the few loaves and fish that they had with them, and he blessed them, broke them, and distributed them to everyone. This is a very important lesson for us. It tells us that the little we have, if we entrust it to God's hands and share it with him in faith, becomes an overabundant wealth.

In his Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI affirms: "Feed the hungry is an ethical imperative for the universal Church.... The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights.... It is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination" (n. 27). Let us not forget the words of Jesus: "I am the bread of life" (Jn 6:35), and "If any one thirst, let him come to me" (Jn 7:37).

These words are a provocation for all of us believers, a provocation to recognize that, through giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, our relationship with God passes. A God who has been revealed in Jesus, his merciful face.

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## 42. Mercy and dialogue

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

The passage of John's Gospel that we heard (cf. 4:6-15) recounts Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. What is striking about this encounter is the very succinct *dialogue* between the woman and Jesus. This allows us today to underline a very important aspect of mercy, which is *dialogue*.

Dialogue allows people to know and understand one another's needs. Above all, it is a sign of great respect, because it puts the person into a stance of listening, and into a condition of being receptive to the speaker's best viewpoints. Secondly, dialogue is an expression of charity because, while not ignoring differences, it can help us investigate and share the common good. Moreover, dialogue invites us to place ourselves before the other, seeing him or her as a gift of God, and as someone who calls upon us and asks to be acknowledged.

Many times, we do not encounter our brothers and sisters, even when living beside them, especially when we give precedence to our position over that of the other. We do not dialogue when we do not listen well enough, or when we tend to interrupt the other person in order to show that we are right. However, how many times, how many times as we are listening to a person, do we stop them and say: "No! No! It isn't so!", and we do not allow the person to finish explaining what they want to say. And this hinders dialogue: this is aggression. True dialogue, instead, requires moments of silence in which to understand the extraordinary gift of God's presence in a brother or sister.

Dear brothers and sisters, dialogue helps people to humanize relationships and to overcome misunderstandings. There is great need for dialogue in our families, and how much more easily issues would be resolved if we learned to listen to each other! This is how it is in the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children. How much help can also come through dialogue between teachers and their pupils; or between managers and workers, in order to identify the most important demands of the work.

The Church, too, lives by dialoguing with men and women of every era, in order to understand the needs that are in the heart of every person, and to contribute to the fulfillment of the common good. Let us think of the great gift of creation, and the responsibility we all have of safeguarding our common home: dialogue on such a central theme is an unavoidable necessity. Let us think of dialogue among religions in order to discover the profound truth of their mission in the midst of men and women, and to contribute to the building of peace and of a network of respect and fraternity (cf. Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, n. 201).

To conclude, all forms of dialogue are expressions of our great need for the love of God, who reaches out to everyone, and places in everyone a seed of his goodness, so that it may cooperate in his creative work. Dialogue breaks down the walls of division and misunderstandings: it builds bridges of communication, and it does not allow anyone to isolate themselves, or withdraw into their own little world. Do not forget: dialogue means listening to what the other tells me, and saying what I think, with kindness. If things proceed in this way, the family, the neighbourhood, the workplace will be better. However, if I do not allow the other to say everything that is in his heart, and I begin to shout — today we shout a lot — this relationship between us will not thrive; the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children, will not thrive. Listen, explain, with kindness; do not bark at the other, do not shout, but have an open heart.

Jesus understood well what was in the heart of the Samaritan woman, who was a great sinner: nonetheless, he did not deny her the opportunity to explain herself; he allowed her to speak to the end, and entered little by little into the mystery of her life. This lesson also applies to us. Through dialogue, we can make the signs of God's mercy grow, and make them an instrument of welcome and respect.

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## 43. Welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Let us continue to reflect on the corporal works of mercy, which the Lord Jesus gave us in order to keep our faith ever alive and dynamic. These works, indeed, show that Christians are not weary and idle as they await the final encounter with the Lord, but each day go to meet him, recognizing his face in those of the many people who ask for help. Today let us concentrate on these words of Jesus: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me” (Mt 25:35-36). In our time, charitable action regarding foreigners is more relevant than ever. The economic crisis, armed conflicts and climate change force many people to emigrate. However, migration is not a new phenomenon, it is part of the history of humanity. It is a lack of historical memory to think that this phenomenon has only arisen in recent years.

The Bible offers us many concrete examples of migration. Suffice it to think of Abraham. God’s call spurred him to leave his country in order to go to another: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). It was so also for the people of Israel, who from Egypt, where they were slaves, went marching in the desert for 40 years until they reached the land promised by God. The Holy Family itself — Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus — were forced to emigrate in order to escape Herod’s threat: Joseph “rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod” (Mt 2:14-15). The history of mankind is a history of migrations: on every latitude, there is no people that has not known the migratory phenomenon.

Over the course of the centuries we have witnessed, in this regard, great expressions of solidarity, although there has been no lack of social tension. Today, the context of the economic crisis unfortunately fosters the emergence of attitudes of closure and not of welcome. In some parts of the world walls and barriers are going up. At times it seems that the silent work of so many men and women who, in various ways, do all they can to help and assist the refugees and migrants, is obscured by the clamour of others who give voice to an instinctive selfishness. However, closure is not a solution, but instead it ends up fostering criminal trafficking. The only way to a solution is that of solidarity. Solidarity with the migrant, solidarity with the foreigner....

The commitment of Christians in this field is as urgent today as it was in the past. Looking only at the last century, we recall the splendid figure of Saint Frances

Cabrini, who dedicated her life, along with her companions, to immigrants to the United States of America. Today too we need these witnesses so that mercy may reach the many who are in need. It is a commitment that involves everyone, without exception. We all, dioceses, parishes, institutes of consecrated life, associations and movements, as individual Christians, are called to welcome our brothers and sisters who are fleeing from war, from hunger, from violence and from inhuman living conditions. All together we are a great supportive force for those who have lost their homeland, family, work and dignity.

Several days ago, a little story took place in the city. There was a refugee who was looking for a street and a lady approached him and said: “Are you looking for something?”. That refugee had no shoes, and he said: “I would like to go to Saint Peter’s to enter the Holy Door”. And the lady thought: “But he has no shoes, how will he manage to walk there?”. And she called a taxi. But the migrant, that refugee had a disagreeable odour and the taxi driver almost didn’t want him to get in, but in the end he let him board the taxi. And the lady, sitting next to him during the ride, asked him a little about his history as a refugee and migrant: it took 10 minutes to get here. This man told his story of suffering, of war, of hunger because he had fled from his homeland in order to migrate here. When they arrived, the lady opened her purse to pay the taxi driver — who at first had not wanted this immigrant to board because he smelled — told her: “No, ma’am, I should be paying you because you made me listen to a story that has changed my heart”. This lady knew what a migrant’s pain is, because she was of Armenian descent and knew the suffering of her people. When we do something like this, at first we refuse because it causes us a little inconvenience, “but... he smells...”. In the end, the episode gives fragrance to our soul and changes us. Consider this story and let us think about what we can do for refugees.

And the other thing is to clothe the naked: what does it mean if not to restore dignity to one who has lost it? Certainly giving clothing to one who has none; but let us also think about the women victims of trafficking, cast onto the streets, or of other many ways of using the human body as a commodity, even that of minors. Likewise, not having a job, a house, a fair wage are forms of nakedness; being discriminated against on account of race, of faith, are all forms of “nakedness”, to which as Christians we are called to be attentive, vigilant and ready to act.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us not fall into the trap of closing in on ourselves, indifferent to the needs of brothers and sisters and concerned only with our own interests. It is precisely in the measure to which we open ourselves to others that life becomes fruitful, society regains peace and people recover their full dignity. Do not forget that lady, do not forget that migrant who had a disagreeable odour and do not forget that driver whose spirit was changed by the immigrant.

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## 44. Visit the sick and the imprisoned

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Jesus' life, especially during the three years of his public ministry, was a continual encounter with people. Among them, the sick had a special place. How many pages of the Gospel tell of these encounters! The paralytic, the blind man, the leper, the possessed man, the epileptic, and the countless people suffering from illnesses of every kind.... Jesus made himself close to each of them, and cured them with his presence and his healing power. Therefore, among the works of mercy, we cannot fail to visit and assist those who are sick.

Together with this, we can also include being close to those who are in prison. Indeed, both the sick and the imprisoned live in conditions which limit their freedom. It is precisely when we lack [freedom] that we realize how precious it is! Jesus has given us the possibility of being free regardless of the limitations of illness and of restrictions. And he offers us the freedom which comes from an encounter with him, and the new sense which this brings to our personal conditions.

With this work of mercy, the Lord invites us to make an act of great humanity: *sharing*. Let us remember this word: sharing. Those who are sick often feel alone. We cannot hide the fact that, especially in our days, in sickness one experiences greater loneliness than at other times in life. A visit can make a person who is sick feel less alone, and a little companionship is great medicine! A smile, a caress, a handshake are simple gestures, but they are very important for those who feel abandoned. How many people dedicate themselves to visiting the sick in hospitals or in their homes! It is a priceless voluntary work. When it is done in the Lord's name, moreover, it also becomes an *eloquent and effective expression of mercy*. Let us not leave the sick alone! Let us not prevent them from finding consolation, or ourselves from being enriched by our closeness to those who suffer. Hospitals are true "cathedrals of suffering" where, however, the power of supportive and compassionate charity is also made evident.

In the same way, I think of those who are locked up in prison. Jesus has not forgotten them either. By including the act of visiting of those in prison among the works of mercy, he wanted first and foremost to invite us to judge no one. Of course, if someone is in prison it is because he has done wrong, and did not respect the law or civil harmony. Therefore, in prison, he is serving his sentence. However, whatever a detainee may have done, he remains always beloved by God. Who is able to enter the depths of [an inmate's] conscience to understand what he is experiencing? Who can understand his suffering and remorse? It is too easy to wash our hands, declaring that he has done wrong. A Christian is called,

above all, to assume responsibility, so that whoever has done wrong understands the evil he has carried out, and returns to his senses. The absence of freedom is, without a doubt, one of the hardest pills for a human being to swallow. Add this to degradation arising from the conditions which are often devoid of humanity in which these persons live, it is then truly the case in which a Christian is motivated to do everything to restore his dignity.

Visiting people in prison is a work of mercy which, especially today, takes on a particular value due to the various forms of “justicialism” to which we are exposed. Therefore, let no one point a finger at another. Instead, let us all be instruments of mercy, and have attitudes of sharing and respect. I often think about detainees... I think of them often, I carry them in my heart. I wonder what led them to delinquency, and how they managed to succumb to various forms of evil. Yet, along with these thoughts, I feel that they all need closeness and tenderness, because God’s mercy works wonders. How many tears I have seen shed on the cheeks of prisoners who had perhaps never wept before in their lives; and this is only because they feel welcomed and loved.

And let us not forget that even Jesus and his Apostles experienced imprisonment. In the account of the Passion, we know of the suffering which the Lord endured: captured, dragged about like a criminal, derided, scourged, crowned with thorns.... He, the sole Innocent! And even Saint Peter and Saint Paul were in prison (cf. Acts 12:5; Phil 1:12-17). Last Sunday afternoon — which was the Sunday of the Jubilee for Prisoners — a group of detainees from Padua came to visit me. I asked them what they were going to do the following day, before returning to Padua. They told me: “We will go to the Mamertine prison to share the experience of Saint Paul”. It was beautiful; hearing this did me good. These detainees wanted to find the imprisoned Paul. It was a beautiful thing, and it did me good. And even there, in prison, [Saints Peter and Paul] prayed and evangelized. The page from the Acts of the Apostles, which recounts Paul’s imprisonment, is moving: he felt alone, and wished that some of his friends would pay him a visit (cf. 2 Tim 4:9-15). He felt alone because the vast majority had left him alone... the great Paul.

These works of mercy, as you can see, are age-old, yet ever timely. Jesus left what he was doing to go and visit Peter’s mother-in-law; an age-old work of charity. Jesus did it.

Let us not fall into indifference, but become instruments of God’s mercy. All of us can be instruments of God’s mercy, and this will do more good to us than to others because mercy passes through a gesture, a word, a visit, and this mercy is an act of restoring the joy and dignity which has been lost.

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## 45. Mercy and inclusion

*Dear brothers and sisters, Good morning!*

In this last Saturday Jubilee Audience, I would like to present an important aspect of mercy: *inclusion*. Indeed, God, in his design of love, does not want to *exclude* anyone, but wants to *include* everyone. For example, through Baptism, he makes us his children in Christ, members of his Body which is the Church. And we Christians are invited to use the same criteria: mercy is the way one acts, that style, with which we try to *include* others in our lives, and avoid closing in on ourselves and our selfish securities.

In the passage from the Gospel of Matthew that we have just heard, Jesus addresses a truly universal invitation: “Come to me, *all* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (11:28). No one is excluded from this call, because Jesus’ mission is to reveal the Father’s love to everyone. Our task is to open our hearts, to trust in Jesus and accept this message of love, which makes us enter into the mystery of salvation.

This aspect of mercy, inclusion, is manifested in opening one’s arms wide to welcome, without excluding; without labeling others according to their social status, language, race, culture or religion: there is, before us, only a *person to be loved as God loves them*. The person whom I find at my work, in my neighbourhood, is a person to love, as God loves. “But he is from that country, or that other country, or of this religion, or another... He is a person whom God loves and I have to love him”. This is to *include*, and this is *inclusion*.

We encounter so many weary and oppressed people today! In the street, in public offices, in medical practices... Jesus’ gaze rests on each one of those faces, even through our eyes. And how is our heart? Is it merciful? And our way of thinking and acting, is it *inclusive*? The Gospel calls us to recognize, in the history of humanity, the design of a *great work of inclusion*, which fully respects the freedom of every person, every community, every nation, and calls everyone to form a family of brothers and sisters, in justice, solidarity and peace, and to be part of the Church, which is the Body of Christ.

How true are Jesus’ words, which invite those who are tired and weary to come to Him to find rest! His arms outstretched on the cross show that no one is excluded from his love and his mercy, not even the greatest sinner: no one! We are all included in his love and in his mercy. The most immediate expression with which we feel welcomed and included in him is that of forgiveness. We all need to be forgiven by God. And we all need to encounter brothers and sisters who help us to go to Jesus, to open ourselves to the gift he has given us on the cross. Let us not

hinder each other! Let us not exclude anyone! Rather, with humility and simplicity let us become instruments of the Father's inclusive mercy. The inclusive mercy of the Father: it is like this. The Holy Mother Church prolongs in the world the great embrace of Christ who died and rose. Also this Square, with its colonnade, expresses this embrace. Let us engage in this movement of including others, to be witnesses of the mercy with which God has accepted and welcomed each one of us.

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## 46. Bearing wrongs patiently

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

We dedicate today's catechesis to a work of mercy that we all know very well, but that perhaps we do not put into practice as we should: *bearing wrongs patiently*. We are all very good at identifying something that can be bothersome: it happens when we encounter someone on the street, or when we receive a phone call.... We immediately think: "How long will I have to listen to this person's complaints, gossip, requests or boastings? It also happens, at times, that the bothersome people are those who are closest to us. There is always someone among our relatives; the workplace is not without them; not even in our free time are we spared. What are we supposed to do with people who annoy us? But often we also annoy others. Why was this also added among the works of mercy? *Bear wrongs patiently*.

In the Bible we see that God himself must employ mercy in order to bear the lamentings of his people. For example, in the Book of Exodus the people become truly unbearable: first they cry because they are slaves in Egypt, and God frees them; then, in the desert, they complain because there is nothing to eat (cf. 16:3), and God sends them quails and manna (cf. 16:13-16), but nevertheless the complaints do not cease. Moses served as mediator between God and the people, and several times he too would have annoyed the Lord. But God had patience and thus he taught Moses and also the people this essential dimension of faith.

Therefore a first question arises spontaneously: do we ever conduct an examination of conscience in order to see if we too, at times, might be annoying to others? It's easy to point a finger against the faults and shortcomings of others, but we must learn to put ourselves in their shoes.

Above all let us look to Jesus: how much patience he had to have in the three years of his public life! Once, while he was walking with his disciples, he was stopped by James and John's mother, who said to him: "Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom" (Mt 20:21). The mother was lobbying for her sons, but she was their mother.... Even from that situation Jesus is inspired to give a fundamental lesson: his is not a kingdom of power, it is not a kingdom of glory like those on earth, but of service and charitable giving to others. Jesus teaches to always go to the essential and to look further in order to accept our mission responsibly. Here we can see the reference to two other spiritual works of mercy: that of *admonishing sinners* and that of *instructing the ignorant*. Let us think about the great effort that can be made when we help people to grow in faith and in life. I think, for example, of catechists — among whom are many mothers and many women

religious — who devote time to teaching young people the basic elements of the faith. How much effort, especially when the kids would prefer to play rather than listen to the catechism!

To accompany in the search for the essential is beautiful and important, because it makes us share the joy of savouring the meaning of life. It often happens that we encounter people who linger on superficial, ephemeral and banal things; at times because they have never met anyone who spurs them to seek something else, to appreciate the true treasures. Teaching to look to the essential is a crucial help, especially in a time such as ours which seems to have lost its bearings and pursues short-lived satisfaction. Teaching to discover what the Lord wants from us and how we can correspond means setting out on the path to grow in our own vocation, the path of true joy. This is how Jesus' words to James and John's mother, and then to the whole group of disciples, points the way to avoid falling into envy, ambition and adulation, temptations which are always lurking even among us Christians. The need for counseling, admonition and teaching must not make us feel superior to others, but obligates us first and foremost to return to ourselves to verify whether we are coherent with what we ask of others. Let us not forget Jesus' words: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Lk 6:41). May the Holy Spirit help us to be patient in bearing [wrongs], and humble and simple in giving counsel.

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## 47. Give council and instruct

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Now that the Jubilee is over we shall return to usual, but there are still some reflections on the works of mercy, and so we shall continue with this. Today's reflection on the spiritual works of mercy concerns two works which are firmly linked: *council the doubtful* and *instruct the ignorant*. That is, those who are unformed. The word ignorant is too strong, but it means teaching those who do not know something. They are works which can live either in a dimension that is simple, familial, available to everyone, or — especially the second, that of teaching — on the most organized, institutional level. For instance, let us consider how many children still suffer from illiteracy, the lack of education. This is incomprehensible: in a world where technological-scientific progress has come so far, there are illiterate children! It is an injustice. How many children suffer from a lack of education. It is a condition of grave injustice which undermines the very dignity of the person. Without education, one easily falls prey to exploitation and various social disadvantages.

The Church, over the course of centuries, has felt the need to be committed to the area of education, since her mission of evangelization carries with it the responsibility of restoring dignity to the poorest. From the first instance of a “school” founded here in Rome in the second century by Saint Justin — so that Christians might better know Sacred Scripture —, to Saint Joseph Calasanctius — who opened the first public schools in Europe that offered free education —, we have a long list of saints who, in various eras, brought education to the most disadvantaged, knowing that through this path they would be able to overcome poverty and discrimination. How many Christians, lay people, consecrated brothers and sisters, priests have given their own lives to teaching, to the education of children and young people. This is great: I invite you to give them a big round of applause! [The faithful applaud.] These pioneers in education fully understood this work of mercy, and created a way of life in order to transform society itself. With ordinary work and few facilities, they were able to restore dignity to many people! And the education that they gave was often also work-oriented. Let us think about Saint John Bosco, who prepared young boys from the street to work, with the oratory and then with schools, offices. From this arose many different professional schools, which enabled them to work while being educated in human and Christian values. Education, therefore, is truly a unique form of evangelization.

The more education increases, the more people gain assurance and knowledge, which we all need in life. A good education teaches us the critical method, which also includes a certain kind of doubt, the kind used for asking questions and

verifying the results achieved, with a view to greater knowledge. However, the work of mercy of counselling the doubtful is not about this kind of doubt. Rather, it is about expressing mercy towards those who doubt, alleviating that pain and suffering which comes from the fear and anguish caused by doubt. It is therefore an act of true love, whereby support is given to someone in their weakness which has been provoked by uncertainty.

I think that some of you might ask me: “Father, but I have many doubts about the faith; what should I do? Don’t you ever have doubts?”. I have many.... Of course, everyone has doubts at times! Doubts which touch the faith, in a positive way, are a sign that we want to know better and more fully God, Jesus, and the mystery of his love for us. “Still, I have this doubt: I seek, I study, I consult or ask advice about what to do”. These are doubts which bring about growth! It is good, therefore, that we ask questions about our faith, because in this way we are pushed to deepen it. Doubts, however, must also be overcome. For this, it is necessary to listen to the Word of God, and to understand what he teaches us. An important path that really helps with this is *catechesis*, in which the proclamation of the faith is encountered in the concreteness of individual and community life. And there is, at the same time, another equally important path, that of *living* the faith as much as possible. Let us not make of faith an abstract theory where doubts multiply. Rather, let us make of faith our life. Let us seek to practise it in service to our brothers and sisters, especially those who are most in need. And thus, many doubts disappear, because we feel the presence of God and the truth of the Gospel in love, which — without our deserving it — lives in us, and we share it with others.

As you can see, dear brothers and sisters, even these two works of mercy are not far from our lives. We can each commit ourselves to living them, to put into practise the Word of the Lord when he says that the mystery of God’s love is not revealed to the wise and the intelligent, but to the little ones (cf. Lk 10:21; Mt 11:25-26). Therefore, the most profound lesson which we are called to transmit, and the most certain way to get out of doubt, is the love of God with which we have been loved (cf. 1 Jn 4:10). A great love, free and given to us forever. God never goes back on his love! He always moves forward and waits: he forever gives us love, from which we must feel the steadfast responsibility to be witnesses, offering mercy to our brothers and sisters. Thank you.

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## 48. Pray to God for the living and the dead

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

With today's catechesis we shall conclude the cycle dedicated to mercy. Although the catecheses are finished, mercy must continue! Let us thank the Lord for all of this and let us keep it in our heart for consolation and comfort.

The final spiritual work of mercy requires us to *pray for the living and the dead*. We can also place this alongside the last corporal work of mercy, which calls us to *bury the dead*. The latter may seem a curious request; and although, in certain regions of the world which are living under the scourge of war, with bombings day and night which sow fear and claim innocent victims, sadly this work is timely. The Bible gives a fine example in this regard: that of the elderly Tobit, who, risking his life, would bury the dead in spite of the king's prohibition (cf. Tob 1:17-19, 2:2-4). Today too, there are those who risk their lives to bury unfortunate victims of war. Thus, this corporal work of mercy is not far from our daily existence. It makes us ponder what happened on Good Friday, when the Virgin Mary, along with John and several women were near Jesus' Cross. After his death, Joseph of Arimathea — a rich member of the Sanhedrin, who had become a follower of Jesus — came and offered his tomb, newly hewn out of the rock, for Him. He personally went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body: a true work of mercy performed with great courage (cf. Mt 27:57-60)! For Christians, burial is an act of compassion, but also an act of great faith. We bury the bodies of our loved ones, in the hope of their resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15:1-34). This is a rite that firmly endures and is heartfelt in our people, and which has a special resonance in this month of November which is dedicated in particular to prayer for the departed.

*Praying for the dead* is, first and foremost, a sign of appreciation for the witness they have left us and the good that they have done. It is giving thanks to the Lord for having given them to us and for their love and their friendship. The Church prays for the deceased in a particular way during Holy Mass. The priest states: "Be mindful, O Lord, of thy servants who are gone before us with the sign of faith, and rest in sleep of peace. To these, O Lord, and to all that sleep in Christ, grant we beseech thee a place of refreshment, light and peace" (Roman Canon). It is a simple, effective, meaningful remembrance, because it entrusts our loved ones to God's mercy. We pray with Christian hope that they may be with him in Paradise, as we wait to be together again in that mystery of love which we do not comprehend, but which we know to be true because it is a promise that Jesus made. We will all rise again and we will all be forever with Jesus, with Him.

Remembering the faithful departed must not cause us to forget to also *pray for the living*, who together with us face the trials of life each day. The need for this

prayer is even more evident if we place it in the light of the profession of faith which states: "I believe in the Communion of Saints". It is the mystery which expresses the beauty of the mercy that Jesus revealed to us. The Communion of Saints, indeed, indicates that we are all immersed in God's life and live in his love. All of us, living and dead, are in communion, that is, as a union; united in the community of those who have received Baptism, and of those who are nourished by the Body of Christ and form part of the great family of God. We are all the same family, united. For this reason we pray for each other.

How many different ways there are to pray for our neighbour! They are all valid and accepted by God if done from the heart. I am thinking in a particular way of the mothers and fathers who bless their children in the morning and in the evening. There is still this practice in some families: blessing a child is a prayer. I think of praying for sick people, when we go to visit them and pray for them; of silent intercession, at times tearful, in the many difficult situations which require prayer.

Yesterday a good man, an entrepreneur, came to Mass at Santa Marta. That young man must close his factory because he cannot manage, and he wept, saying: "I don't want to leave more than 50 families without work. I could declare the company bankrupt: I could go home with my money, but my heart would weep for for these 50 families the rest of my life". This is a good Christian who prays through his works: he came to Mass to pray that the Lord give him a way out, not only for him but for the 50 families. This is a man who knows how to pray, with his heart and through his deeds, he knows how to pray for his neighbour. He is in a difficult situation, and he is not seeking the easiest way out: "let them manage on their own". This man is a Christian. It did me good to listen to him! Perhaps there are many like him today, at this time in which so many people are in difficulty because of a lack of work. However, I also think of giving thanks for the good news about a friend, a relative, a co-worker: "Thank you Lord, for this wonderful thing!". This too is praying for others! Thanking the Lord when things go well. At times, as Saint Paul says, "we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). It is the Spirit who prays in us. Therefore, let us open our heart, to enable the Holy Spirit, scrutinizing our deepest aspirations, to purify them and lead them to fulfillment. However, for us and for others, let us always ask that God's will be done, as in the *Our Father*, because his will is surely the greatest good, the goodness of a Father who never abandons us: pray and let the Holy Spirit pray in us. This is beautiful in life: to pray, thanking and praising the Lord, asking for something, weeping when there are difficulties, like that man. But let the heart always be open to the Spirit, that he may pray in us, with us and for us.

Concluding these catecheses on mercy, let us commit ourselves to pray for each other so that the corporal and spiritual works of mercy may become ever more the style of our life. The catecheses, as I said at the beginning, end here. We have covered the 14 works of mercy, but mercy continues and we must exercise it in these 14 ways. Thank you.

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