LIVING IN GOD'S MERCIFUL JUSTICE

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The best theological synthesis of conceptions of mercy is Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (November 30, 1980), according to which mercy is the divine attribute that best expresses the meaning of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. In the Papal Bull *Misericordiae Vultus* (April 11, 2015), Pope Francis mentions two passages of Saint John Paul II's encyclical that highlight the situation of modern humans to whom the very idea of mercy seems foreign. Saint John Paul II and Pope Francis acknowledge that contemporary man is faced with a grave danger: an absence of heart.

In a society based on profit, efficiency, and performance, man is reduced to being a machine, a production force. As a consequence, the greatest danger facing the man of today is the loss of his heart. The fact that the concept of mercy seems foreign to his ears is a symptom of the crisis he has brought on himself as a participant in the collapse of humanity. Etymologically, you see, *misericordia* has its roots in "heart," that is to say, in the capacity to be open and attentive to those who are miserable and even contemptible. Mercy is thus akin to compassion, that is to the capacity to suffer with another. In a meditation on the Prodigal Son, Father Caffarel proposes an interpretation of mercy and compassion in which they are almost synonymous: "This is compassion: I experience another's ill as my own." Compassion and mercy can thus be seen as connected concepts which are expressions of a sympathetic and attentive attitude toward the suffering of others. Mercy and compassion entail the consolation given to another when we keep someone who feels alone company. 'Feeling alone' is surely one of the greatest woes affecting contemporary man.

Appealing to mercy isn't a sufficient answer, however, because mercy by itself neither solves the problem facing man today nor removes him from the dehumanizing path he is on, if he no longer has a heart. Mercy has to be offset by justice.

The most basic understanding of justice is "to give to each person what is rightfully his." This is one way of rendering The Golden Rule: don't do to another what you would not want done to you. A society's equilibrium depends on the connection between mercy and justice, because mercy without justice leads to

ruin, and justice without mercy gives rise to cruelty. I would like to focus your attention on this equilibrium in my talk by reflecting on two parables and two encounters that we find in the Gospel. These passages should offer a foundation for a theoretical and practical understanding of merciful justice.

1. Two parables and two encounters

1.1 The Parable of the Prodigal Son

We are all familiar with the parable of the prodigal son, which provides the spiritual structure for understanding all four passages. The parable's focal point is a demonstration of the *compassion* of the Father when he receives the son who comes home: "While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him" (Lk. 15:20). I am going to consider the following two ideas closely: the notion of *inheritance* and the notion of *home*, to which the son returns.

The *inheritance* which the son demands and which he squanders is his *ousia* in the original Greek text; in Latin, *substantia*. These words can mean *inheritance* in a materialistic sense, but they also mean *essence*: what we are ontologically, in our being. In the parable as a whole, the *inheritance* pertains to the *filial* condition that the youngest son wants to live in his own way, far from his father's house. But in the end he entirely fritters away his *fortune*. All that he can do finally is to live among the pigs, impure animals *par excellence*. Here we have an illustration of an understanding of *sin* that includes loss and the degradation of his status as a man to the extent that he is dehumanized, separated from and no longer aware of who he is, and submerged in the degradation of having lost his life, of having died. The estrangement experienced by the son, who wants to live his *inheritance* in his own way, reminds us of Adam, created in the image and likeness of God, who desires *to be like God*, but in his own way, like the prodigal son, and the result is pretty much the same: he finds himself naked! Both Adam and the prodigal son represent man in every time, including today, claiming his liberty for himself in his own way! Adam and the prodigal son are the figures who help us understand what is going on today: the crisis of values, which is a crisis of man's very own essence, reduced as it has been to a condition inferior to that of the animals who are better protected than humans are. Contemporary man has lost his sense of dignity, he has forgotten himself.

Sin reaches even to the *essence*, to the *substantia*, of man: his dignity as a son. To the extent that he separates himself from the house of his father, the son

separates himself from himself: he becomes a stranger to himself. The return of the son to his father's home signifies, in this parable, that the son remembers his dignity as a son and that it is the compassion of the father that returns his dignity to him. This is the meaning of forgiveness, which is mercy and justice together: mercy because it is a movement of the heart receiving the son with love; justice because a merciful forgiveness offers to the child what is rightfully his, which he squandered when he left, but which is now freely given back to him. The parable of the prodigal son offers us the best illustration of the merciful justice of forgiveness.

The *father's home* is an archetype of the Church. Saint Cyprian of Carthage expressed this idea beautifully in what has become an important theological axiom: "No one can have God as his Father if he does not have the Church as his mother."[1] The Church is truly the home of the Father where we can celebrate forgiveness and divine compassion and so recover our dignity as beloved children of God. Here also is the meaning of the sacrament of penance, the sacrament of forgiveness, by means of which we can truly experience merciful justice, an efficacious sign of God's love awaiting us.

1.2 The Parable of the Good Samaritan: Moved with Compassion

The parable of the good Samaritan also shows us mercy and justice as attributes of God. The entire parable is, in fact, Christological, because the good Samaritan is Christ himself. The man who is abandoned at the side of the road represents fallen man—Adam and also each of us. The inn represents the Church, and the people who take care of the man are its ministers. The Church cares for fallen man through its priestly ministry, through the sacraments, especially those that celebrate mercy, namely, Baptism and Reconciliation. These are efficacious signs of divine mercy and compassion.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, we are again reminded of the risk of freedom and the audacity of the man who wants to travel a dangerous path alone. Sin can also be understood as the presumption of a self-sufficient freedom, as if it were possible for man to travel the path of life alone, possessed of enough strength to stand up to his enemies who have the power to deprive him of his most precious possession: the grace of divine sonship. The parable answers this presumption by delivering the man to the care of the Church, thus telling us that we need the community to travel our path safely. The good

[1] "Habere iam non potest Deum patrem, qui Ecclesiam non habet matrem" (*De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate*, 6).

Samaritan cares for the man alone, at the beginning, in order to hand him over to the care of the community. When the Lord at the end says "Go and do likewise" (Lk. 10:37), this means that we too need to care for our neighbor, for people on the margins, and thus that we must overcome the culture of indifference. We must imitate God, the good Samaritan, who is indifferent to no one.

1.3 Two Encounters: Zacchaeus and the Adulterous Woman

For Zacchaeus, divine compassion and mercy manifest themselves in the desire of Jesus to come to his home: "today I must stay at your house" (Lk. 19:5). The result of this visit is Zacchaeus's conversion—his decision to give half of his goods to the poor and to repay four times over anyone from whom he extorted anything. Zacchaeus has essentially left everything behind, in accordance with the Lord's words "If you wish to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mt. 19:21). A true encounter with the Lord radically changes man's life. Zacchaeus has become a disciple of Jesus. The gospel story gives us the testimonial of Zacchaeus: I was a great robber, but the moment the Lord entered my home, my life was radically transformed.

The case of the woman taken in adultery is also noteworthy. She stood accused of adultery, condemned by Mosaic Law. The sentence was already prescribed. She was presented to Jesus to confront him with the law and thus to have a reason to condemn him. "Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger" (Jn. 8:6). Jesus' gesture has two meanings. Jesus writes on the sand the new law of love and forgiveness, because God does not desire the sinner's death; on the contrary, he wants him to live. That is the first meaning. But Jesus bends toward the ground, turning his gaze away from the woman, in contrast with her accusers who look at her with disdain. Jesus thereby shows us that the sinner always deserves the respect due his dignity, even if he has lost it, and it is this merciful respect which touches him and offers him a new opportunity: "Has no one condemned you?" . . . "Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more" (Jn. 8:11).

The encounter with Jesus changes the life of this woman, because the forgiveness that she receives, which saves her from stoning, means that she can return to her true husband and remain faithful to him. The new law, written by Jesus in the sand, is the law of the Holy Spirit, which overcomes any hardness of heart and transforms hearts of stone into hearts of flesh and blood. Jesus's lack

of condemnation means that she should not be stoned, because the law which would punish her is a response to the hardness of heart that Moses did not succeed in overcoming (Mt. 19:8). The new law of the Holy Spirit can accomplish this. "Go and from now on do not sin any more" has as its consequence that she has to ask her husband's forgiveness and live reconciled and in peace with him. The testimonial of the woman would be something like this: I was a great sinner, unfaithful to my husband, but the Lord forgave me. Now I can be faithful to my husband, who welcomed me back, and now we live together as disciples of the Lord, because we learned from him what the Lord's forgiveness and mercy are.

2. Merciful justice

In the encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, a theological and biblical synthesis of conceptions of mercy, Saint John Paul II draws inspiration from the passages we have just examined, as well as from many others. What he shows us is that mercy finds expression as a capacity for compassion, in an attitude that differs from judgment, as we have seen in the texts. Etymologically, mercy is related to the heart and its ability to be attentive to the sufferer and to the person who considers himself contemptible and even unworthy of attention and love. The application of our meditation on these parables and these encounters can be found in the occasions where compassion and mercy are put into practice. Their relation to justice is what is at issue, once we read about people who have lost, through sin or an excess of ambition, their sense of dignity—Zacchaeus, for example, who was considered despicable, worthy of contempt. For both Zacchaeus and the woman taken in adultery, the encounter with Christ makes them change their lives and become disciples and also allows them to be included in the community of Jesus' disciples. They are renewed beings, witnesses, who demonstrate that the Gospel is destined for all, including us. Here mercy and justice meet charity and Christian love. Love alone is capable of healing man and giving him back his lost dignity. Through their encounter with Jesus, they have discovered that they are lovable again and worthy of being loved, and they are able to overcome the persistent feeling of being contemptible to which they thought themselves condemned.

Dives in Misericordia has a theoretical aim, which is to demonstrate that affection and compassion are among the essential attributes of God who became man in Jesus Christ to give us back our human dignity through the means of grace. This is in accord with God's intentions and the plan he has for man in Creation and in the Redemption. The encyclical was the second of a trio,

between *Redemptor Hominis* on Jesus Christ the Redeemer (March 4, 1979) and *Dominum et Vivificantem* (May 18, 1986). According to St. John Paul II, the contemplation of divine mercy—God has a merciful and compassionate heart—invites us to praise this mercy in our celebration of the sacraments, especially that of Confession, which signifies the proclamation of God's love for the sinner, even when the sinner considers himself unworthy of love. What ought to ensue as a consequence are works of mercy and feelings of compassion for our neighbor.

It is thus that mercy gives rise to justice, not merely as equity, but also as benevolence: desiring the good of the other for who he is and not for what he is capable of giving us. But also because the other is always worthy of being loved, and love must find expression in pardon, the most perfect form of love.

Pope Francis reiterates St. John Paul II's teaching on the theoretical level and places great emphasis on the practice of mercy. Accordingly, he promulgated the Holy Year of Mercy, moved by the sense that he had of the urgent need for the practice—especially sacramental—of mercy in the period of history in which we find ourselves.

The message of our Lady of Fatima summons us to reparation and to the consolation of God—console your God, the Angel ordered—as well as to prayer and to reparative sacrifice for the poor sinners, because many are lost when no one prays for them. What is sin, after all, if not removing ourselves from God, as if we were leaving Him alone? And what is *consolation* if it is not keeping someone who feels alone company? Is it not solitude that is the greatest evil of our time? And so what do we do? This spirituality provides us amply not only with material for theological reflection, but with incentives for active intervention, for intercession, as Fr. Caffarel asked of us. That is the challenge!

Conclusion

As couples and spiritual counselors we must take the steps to allow the Lord to touch us in a liberating encounter such as Zacchaeus and the woman taken in adultery experienced. We must entrust ourselves to the Church and its ministers so that they can heal us of our wounds, material, and above all spiritual. When we dare to travel the paths of life alone, we expose ourselves to numerous dangers that plague us every step of the way. But when we are healed and strengthened by the grace of our encounter with the Lord in the community of our brothers and sisters, we can truly be heralds of hope, the human and

theological virtue that is born when we feel that we are welcomed and loved even if we still consider ourselves to be unworthy. It is good also to remember Fr. Caffarel's conversion experience: the moment that he knew himself to be both loved and loving. That was it, from that moment on, he said!

May our teams truly be places of welcome and encounter, where couples can find the strength to be sentinels of hope for the world of our time.