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God's Open Heart: Mercy and Apostolate

"We need to let God, who lives in us, love through the heart of each one of us: loving with God's love." An article written for the Jubilee of Mercy in the Church.

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My kingship is not of this world, Jesus replies when Pilate questions him about the Sanhedrin's accusations. He is a King, but not over a worldly

kingdom: *If my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.*

[1] A few hours earlier in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus spoke to Peter in similar terms to convince him to sheathe his sword. *Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*[2]

God does not enter the world with the weapons of mankind: *the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit . . . and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*[3] Jesus “does not fight to build power. If he breaks down walls and challenges our sense of security, he does this to open the floodgates of that mercy which, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he wants to pour out upon our world. A mercy which expands; it proclaims

and brings newness; it heals, liberates and proclaims the year of the Lord's favor.”[4]

God looks at the heart

In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world – ego vici mundum.[5] Jesus' priestly prayer in the Cenacle brings consolation to his disciples down through the ages. Our Lord conquers, even when the preaching of the Gospel encounters great difficulties, and it seems that God's cause may fail. *Christus vincit*, Christ conquers; but he conquers according to a plan that does not match human ideas of power: *My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.*[6]

To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.[7] When the devil showed Jesus all the nations of the earth, he

did not offer him mere wealth and possessions but rather the subjection of mankind to his will by worldly control. The devil distorts the promise of the Father to the Son that we find in Psalm 2: *Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage.* [8] He offers Christ a worldly vision, a redemption without suffering. But “Jesus is very clear that it is not worldly power that saves the world, but the power of the Cross, of humility and of love.”[9]

By rejecting this temptation, Christ traces out the path that all Christians should follow. He gives us a glimpse of how his dominion will be carried out in history, even though it may appear foolish to human eyes: God will reign with his mercy. If his kingdom is not of this world, then neither is his mercy. But precisely because of this, because it is born *from on high*, [10] it can embrace the world and save it.

Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.[11] God has no use for the kind of formal, external submission that is hollow inside. He seeks out each person; he knocks at the door of each heart.[12] *My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.*[13] This is the way God rules: he conquers because he manages to disarm us. He conquers not by suppressing our desires for happiness, but by showing us that without him, they lead to a dead end.

The more I called them, the more they went from me, the Lord laments through the words of the prophet Hosea.[14] But although men may resist God's call, we Christians know that, in the end, if we open the door of our soul even slightly, God enters into our life and we are captured by his overwhelming love. His is "a Mercy in motion, a Mercy that each day seeks to make progress, taking

small steps forward and advancing in that wasteland where indifference and violence have predominated.”[15] Therefore our apostolate, born of faith, is imbued with serenity: “It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being ‘anti anything.’ On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy and peace.”[16]

Loving with God’s Love

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.[17] God looks at souls with compassion. He wants to reach out to every human being through his children. *God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*[18] He introduces us into divine Love, the warm and welcoming climate in which he wants us to be immersed here and now on this

earth, and afterwards for all eternity. “Our love,” says Saint Josemaria, “is not to be confused with sentimentality or mere good fellowship, nor with that somewhat questionable zeal to help others in order to convince ourselves of our superiority. Rather, it means living in peace with our neighbor, venerating the image of God that is found in each and every human being and doing all we can to get them to contemplate that image, so that they may learn how to turn to Christ.”[19] We need to let God, who lives in us, love through the heart of each one of us: loving with God’s love.

“God’s Love is well worth any love!”[20] These ardent words of Saint Josemaria show us the infinite Heart of God alongside our human heart, that is so small, but capable of expanding to accomplish great deeds. God’s Love is well worth the love we show by dedicating our lives

to being filled with him and spreading his mercy generously to other people. This is a calling for big-hearted people, an invitation to soar high while often leading a prosaic and ordinary life. “A merciful heart does not mean a weak heart. Anyone who wishes to be merciful must have a strong and steadfast heart, closed to the tempter but open to God. A heart which lets itself be pierced by the Spirit so as to bring love along the roads that lead to our brothers and sisters. And, ultimately, a poor heart, one which realizes its own poverty and gives itself freely for others.”[21]

“Removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other”

A heart that “realizes its own poverty” is capable of being filled with the riches of God’s love. “The God who shares our sufferings, the God who became man in order to

bear our cross, wants to transform our hearts of stone. He invites us to share in the sufferings of others. He wants to give us a ‘heart of flesh’ . . . filled with compassion, leading us to the love that heals and restores.”[22]

Then we will be able to accompany each person, not only as having a lot to teach others, but also as having a lot to learn. The more capable we are of receiving from others, the more the gifts we have received from God will shine and be perfected. Our heart needs to speak to another heart: *cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaks to heart, as Blessed John Henry Newman perceived so well. [23] If we “remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other,”[24] if we let ourselves be surprised by others, then we can truly help them.

“And if you see a friend who has slipped up in life and fallen, go and

offer him or her your hand, but do so with dignity. Put yourself on their level, listen to them . . . Let them speak, let them share their experience, and then little by little, they will offer you their hand, and, in the name of Jesus Christ, you can help them. But if you go in suddenly and begin to give them a sermon, going on about the same thing, well then, he or she will be worse off than before.”[25]

Nowadays Christians encounter people in all sorts of situations. If we truly reach out to each person with an open heart, we can leave in that person’s soul *the peace of God which passes all understanding*,[26] and each in our own way can leave a mark on that soul. Sometimes these are baptized people who have never practiced their faith, or who abandoned it after their First Holy Communion; or perhaps people who, after a number of years of practicing

the faith, sometimes fervently, have given in to the temptations of comfort-seeking, relativism, or lukewarmness. Other times we will meet people who have never spoken with anyone about God in a personal conversation.

Some may be a bit reticent at first to speak about this topic because they feel it is an invasion of their freedom. Our serenity as children of God is always the best weapon then. *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand.*^[27] The mercy of God will move us to reach out to everyone, as Jesus did;^[28] and also like Jesus, to let ourselves be reached by others, ^[29] to spend time with people. We can help them confront their worries and problems, and open up new horizons for them, starting from where they find themselves right now. We can make clear yet gentle

demands on them, while always helping them to fulfill them.

“The Church, united to Christ, is born of a wounded Heart. From this Heart, opened wide, life is transmitted to us.”[30] All authentic apostolate is also an apostolate of Confession. We have to help others experience the overwhelming mercy of God, who waits for us as the father of the prodigal son, eager to give us his fatherly embrace that purifies us and enables us to once again look at him and at others face to face. “If you should stray from him for any reason, react with the humility that will lead you to begin again and again; to play the role of the prodigal son every day, and even repeatedly during the twenty-four hours of the same day; to correct your contrite heart in Confession, which is a real miracle of God’s Love. In this wonderful Sacrament our Lord cleanses your soul and fills you with

joy and strength to prevent you from giving up the fight, and to help you keep returning to God unwearied, even when everything seems black. In addition, the Mother of God, who is also our Mother, watches over you with motherly care, guiding your every step.”[31]

It could seem superfluous to say this, but we know that it is not: the first to receive God’s mercy should be our brothers and sisters in the faith. *For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*[32] Our first apostolate has to be with those in our own home, and with those who are part of the house of God, the Church. Our zeal for souls would be false if our heart were not sensitive to other Catholics. God wants them to receive a lot of love so they can share it with others in their turn. Therefore we have to be on our guard against “getting used” to those we live with,

creating barriers by following only our natural affinities, or letting friction arise out of small daily occurrences. “It was said of the first followers of Christ: ‘See how they love one another.’ Can this be said of you, and of me, at all times?”^[33] God wants the fraternal love of Christians to be the channel for the torrent of his Mercy,^[34] so that it may find a path into the hearts of all men and women. Then, with the force of the Holy Spirit, the world will come to know that the Father loves all men and women as he loves the Son he sent to us.^[35]

[1] *Jn* 18:36.

[2] *Mt* 26:53.

[3] *Heb* 4:12.

[4] Pope Francis, Homily, March 24, 2016.

[5] *Jn* 16:33.

[6] *Is* 55:8.

[7] *Lk* 4:6.

[8] *Ps* 2:8.

[9] Benedict XVI, General Audience, February 13, 2013.

[10] *Lk* 1:78.

[11] *1 Sam* 16:7.

[12] Cf. *Rev* 3:20.

[13] *Prov* 23:26.

[14] *Hos* 11:2.

[15] Pope Francis, *Homily*, March 24, 2016.

[16] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, 864.

[17] *Mt 9:36.*

[18] *Rom 5:5.*

[19] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 230.

[20] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 171.

[21] Pope Francis, Lenten Message, October 4, 2014.

[22] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Presentation of the Way of the Cross, March 25, 2005.

[23] This is the motto Blessed John Henry Newman chose when made a cardinal.

[24] Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, 169.

[25] Pope Francis, Address, February 16, 2016.

[26] *Phil 4:7.*

[27] *Phil* 4:4-5

[28] Cf. *Mt* 9:10-11; *Jn* 4:7ff.

[29] Cf. *Lk* 7:36; 19:6-7.

[30] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 169

[31] *Friends of God*, 214.

[32] *1 Jn* 4:20.

[33] *Furrow*, 921.

[34] Cf. Pope Francis, *Homily*, March 24, 2016.

[35] Cf. *Jn* 17:23.