



The Holy See

***VIDEO MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION
OF THE EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE OF MERCY IN THE AMERICAS***

[BOGOTÁ, 27-30 AUGUST 2016]

I welcome the initiative of CELAM and CAL, in association with the bishops of the United States and Canada – this makes me think of the Synod of America – to make possible this continent-wide opportunity to celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy. I am pleased to know that all the countries of America have been able to take part. Given the many attempts to fragment, divide and set our peoples at odds, such events help us to broaden our horizons and to continue our handshake; a great sign that encourages us in hope.

I would like to begin with the words of the apostle Paul to his beloved disciple: “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience” (*1 Tim 1:12-16a*).

So Paul tells Timothy in his First Letter, chapter 1, verses 12 to 16. In speaking to him, he wants to speak to each of us. His words are an invitation, I would even say, a provocation. Words meant to motivate Timothy and all those who would hear them throughout history. They are words that cannot leave us indifferent; rather, they profoundly affect our lives.

Paul minces no words: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom Paul considers

himself the worst. He is clearly aware of who he is, he does not conceal his past or even his present. But he describes himself in this way neither to excuse or justify himself, much less to boast of his condition. We are at the very beginning of the letter, and he has already warned Timothy about “myths and endless genealogies” and “meaningless talk”, and warned him that all these end up in “disputes”, arguments. At first, we might think that he is dwelling on his own sinfulness, but he does this so that Timothy, and each of us with him, can identify with him. To use football terms we could say: he kicks the ball to the center so that another can head the ball. He “passes us the ball” to enable us to share his own experience: despite all my sins, “I received mercy”.

We have the opportunity to be here because, with Paul, we can say: “We received mercy”. For all our sins, our limitations, our failings, for all the many times we have fallen, Jesus has looked upon us and drawn near to us. He has given us his hand and showed us mercy. To whom? To me, to you, to everyone. All of us can think back and remember the many times the Lord looked upon us, drew near and showed us mercy. All those times that the Lord kept trusting, kept betting on us (cf. *Ez 16*). For my part, I think of the sixteenth chapter of Ezekiel, and the Lord’s constant betting on each one of us. That is what Paul calls “sound teaching” – think about it! – sound teaching is this: that we received mercy. That is the heart of Paul’s letter to Timothy. During this time of the Jubilee, how good it is for us to reflect on this truth, to think back on how throughout our lives the Lord has always been near us and showed us mercy. To concentrate on remembering our sin and not our alleged merits, to grow in a humble and guilt-free awareness of all those times we turned away from God – we, not someone else, not the person next to us, much less that of our people – and to be once more amazed by God’s mercy. That is a sure message, sound teaching, and never empty talk.

There is one particular thing about Paul’s letter that I would like to share with you. Paul does not say: “The Lord spoke and told me” or “The Lord showed me or taught me”. He says: “He treated me with mercy”. For Paul, his relationship with Jesus was sealed by the way he treated him. Far from being an idea, a desire, a theory – much less an ideology –, mercy is a concrete way of “touching” weakness, of bonding with others, of drawing closer to others. It is a concrete way of meeting people where they are at. It is a way of acting that makes us give the best of ourselves so that others can feel “treated” in such a way that they feel that in their lives the last word has not yet been spoken. Treated in such a way that those who feel crushed by the burden of their sins can feel relieved at being given another chance. Far from a mere beautiful word, mercy is the concrete act by which God seeks to relate to his children. Paul uses the passive voice – pardon me for being a bit pedantic here – and the past tense. To put it loosely, he could well have said: “I was ‘shown mercy’”. The passive makes Paul the receiver of the action of another; he does nothing more than allow himself to be shown mercy. The past tense of the original reminds us that in him the experience took place at a precise moment in time, one that he remembers, gives thanks for, and celebrates.

Paul's God starts a movement from heart to hands, the movement of one who is unafraid to draw near, to touch, to caress, without being scandalized, without condemning, without dismissing anyone. A way of acting that becomes incarnate in people's lives.

To understand and accept what God does for us – a God who does not think, love or act out of fear, but because he trusts us and expects us to change – must perhaps be our hermeneutical criterion, our mode of operation: "Go and do likewise" (*Lk 10:37*). Our way of treating others, in consequence, must never be based on fear but on the hope God has in our ability to change. Which will it be: hope for change, or fear? The only thing acting out of fear accomplishes is to separate, to divide, to attempt to distinguish with surgical precision one side from the other, to create false security and thus to build walls. Acting on the basis of hope for change, for conversion, encourages and incites, it looks to the future, it makes room for opportunity, and it keeps us moving forward. Acting on the basis of fear bespeaks guilt, punishment, "you were wrong". Acting on the basis of hope of transformation bespeaks trusting, learning, getting up, constantly trying to generate new opportunities. How many times? Seventy times seven. For that reason, treating people with mercy always awakens creativity. It is concerned with the face of the person, with his or her life, history and daily existence. It is not married to one model or recipe, but enjoys a healthy freedom of spirit, and can thus seek what is the best for the other person, in a way they can understand. This engages all our abilities and gifts; it makes us step out from behind our walls. It is never empty talk – as Paul tells us – that entangles us in endless disputes. Acting on the basis of hope for change is a restless way of thinking that sets our heart pounding and readies our hands for action. The journey from heart to hands.

Seeing how God acts in this way, we might be scandalized, like the older son in the parable of the Merciful Father, by how the father treats his younger son upon seeing him return. We might be scandalized that he embraced him, treated him with love, called for him to be dressed in the best robes even though he was so filthy. We might be scandalized that upon seeing him return, he kissed him and threw a party. We might be scandalized that he did not upbraid him but instead treated him for what he was: a son.

We start being scandalized – and this happens to us all, it's almost automatic, no? – we start being scandalized when spiritual Alzheimer's sets in: when we forget how the Lord has treated us, when we begin to judge and divide people up. We take on a separatist mindset that, without our realizing it, leads us to fragment our social and communal reality all the more. We fragment the present by creating "groups". Groups of good and bad, saints and sinners. This memory loss gradually makes us forget the richest reality we possess and the clearest teaching we have to defend. The richest reality and the clearest teaching. Though we are all sinners, the Lord has unfailingly treated us with mercy. Paul never forgot that he was on the other side, that he was chosen last, as one born out of time. Mercy is not a "theory to brandish": "Ah! Now it is fashionable to talk about mercy for this Jubilee, so let's follow the fashion". No, it is not a theory to brandish so that our condescension can be applauded, but rather a history of sin to be remembered. Which sin? Ours,

mine and yours. And a love to be praised. Which love? The love of God, who has shown me mercy.

We are part of a fragmented culture, a throwaway culture. A culture tainted by the exclusion of everything that might threaten the interests of a few. A culture that is leaving by the roadside the faces of the elderly, children, ethnic minorities seen as a threat. A culture that little by little promotes the comfort of a few and increases the suffering of many others. A culture that is incapable of accompanying the young in their dreams but sedates them with promises of ethereal happiness and hides the living memory of their elders. A culture that has squandered the wisdom of the indigenous peoples and has shown itself incapable of caring for the richness of their lands.

All of us are aware, all of us know that we live in a society that is hurting; no one doubts this. We live in a society that is bleeding, and the price of its wounds normally ends up being paid by the most vulnerable. But it is precisely to this society, to this culture, that the Lord sends us. He sends us and urges us to bring the balm of “his” presence. He sends us with one program alone: to treat one another with mercy. To become neighbors to those thousands of defenseless people who walk in our beloved American land by proposing a different way of treating them. A renewed way, trying to let our form of bonding be inspired by God’s dream, by what he has done. A way of treating others based on remembering that all of us came from afar, like Abraham, and all of us were brought out of places of slavery, like the people of Israel.

All of us still vividly recall our experience in Aparecida and its invitation once more to become missionary disciples. We spoke at length about discipleship, and wondered how best to promote the catechesis of discipleship and mission. Paul gives us an interesting key to this: showing mercy. He reminds us that what made him an apostle was how he was treated, how God drew near to his life: “I received mercy”. What made him a disciple was the trust God showed in him despite his many sins. And that reminds us that we may have the best plans, projects and theories about what to do, but if we lack that “show of mercy”, our pastoral work will be cut off midway.

All this has to do with our catechesis, our seminaries – do we teach our seminarians this path of showing mercy? – our parish structures and pastoral plans. All this has to do with our missionary activity, our pastoral plans, our clergy meetings and even our way of doing theology. It is about learning to show mercy, a form of bonding that we daily have to ask for – because it is a grace – and need to learn. Showing mercy among ourselves as bishops, priests and laity. In theory we are “missionaries of mercy”, yet often we are better at “mistreating” than at treating well. How many times have we failed in our seminaries to inspire, accompany and encourage a pedagogy of mercy, and to teach that the heart of pastoral work is showing mercy. Being pastors who treat and not mistreat. Please, I ask you: be pastors who know how to treat and not mistreat.

Today we are asked especially to show mercy to God’s holy and faithful people – they know a lot about being merciful because they have a good memory –, to the people who come to our

communities with their sufferings, sorrows and hurts. But also to the people who do not come to our communities, yet are wounded by the paths of history and hope to receive mercy. Mercy is learned from experience – in our own lives first – as in the case of Paul, to whom God revealed all his mercy, all his merciful patience. It is learned from sensing that God continues to trust in us and to call us to be his missionaries, that he constantly sends us forth to treat our brothers and sisters in the same way that he has treated us. Each of us knows his or her own story and can draw from it. Mercy is learned, because our Father continues to forgive us. Our peoples already have enough suffering in their lives; they do not need us to add to it. To learn to show mercy is to learn from the Master how to become neighbors, unafraid of the outcast and those “tainted” and marked by sin. To learn to hold out our hand to those who have fallen, without being afraid of what people will say. Any treatment lacking mercy, however just it may seem, ends up turning into mistreatment. The challenge will be to empower paths of hope, paths that encourage good treatment and make mercy shine forth.

Dear brothers and sisters, this gathering is not a congress or a meeting, a seminary or a conference. This gathering is above all a celebration: we have been asked to celebrate the way God has treated each of us and all his people. For this reason, I believe that it is good time for us to say together: “Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord; take me once more into your redeeming embrace” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 3).

Let us be grateful, as Paul told Timothy, that God trusts us to repeat with his people the immense acts of mercy he has shown us, and that this encounter will help us to go forth with renewed conviction as we seek to pass on the sweet and comforting joy of the Gospel of mercy.