



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE MISSIONARIES OF MERCY

*Sala Regia
Tuesday, 10 April 2018*

[Multimedia]

Dear Missionaries,

Welcome, thank you, and I hope that those who have been appointed bishops have not lost their ability to “bestow mercy”. This is important.

It is a joy for me to meet you after the beautiful experience of the [Jubilee of Mercy](#). As you well know, at the conclusion of that Extraordinary Jubilee, your ministry should have concluded. Yet, reflecting on the great service that you rendered to the Church, and on how much good you did and offered to so many believers with your preaching and above all with the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I found it opportune that your mandate should be extended for a little longer. I have received many testimonies about conversions that came about through your service. And you are witnesses to this. We truly must remember that God’s mercy knows no bounds, and with your ministry you are tangible signs that the Church cannot, must not and does not want to create any barriers or difficulties that obstruct access to the Father’s forgiveness. The “prodigal son” did not have to pass through customs; he was welcomed by the Father, without obstacles.

I thank Archbishop Fisichella for his introductory words, and the staff of the [Pontifical Council for New Evangelization](#) for having organized these days of prayer and reflection. I extend my thoughts to those who were unable to come, so they may nonetheless feel they are taking part and, despite the distance, that they may feel included in my appreciation and thanks.

I would like to share some reflections with you aimed at giving more support to the responsibility

that I have placed in your hands, and so that the ministry of mercy that you are called to live in a wholly particular way may be better expressed, according to the will of the Father whom Jesus revealed to us and that, in the light of Easter, it may acquire its most complete meaning. And with these words — the discourse might be rather long — I would like to highlight the doctrine that underpins your ministry, which is not an idea — “let’s have this pastoral experience and then we’ll see how it goes” — no. It is a pastoral experience backed by a true and proper doctrine.

A first reflection is suggested to me by the text of the Prophet Isaiah where we read: “In a time of favour I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you; ... the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted. But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ ‘Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?’ Even if these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Is 49:8, 13-15). It is a text steeped in the theme of mercy. Benevolence, consolation, closeness, the promise of eternal love..., are all expressions intended to express the richness of divine mercy, without being able to exhaust it in any single aspect.

Saint Paul, in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, returning to this text of Isaiah, updates it and seems to wish to apply it precisely to us. Thus he writes: “Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain”. He says in fact: “At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation” (6:1-2). The first indication offered by the Apostle is that we cooperate with God. It is easy to verify how intense this call is. A few verses before, Paul had expressed the same concept, saying: “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you” — it seems he is on his knees — “on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (5:20). The message that we convey as ambassadors on behalf of Christ is that of making peace with God. Our apostolate is an appeal to seek and receive the Father’s forgiveness. As seen, God needs men who can bring his forgiveness and his mercy into the world. It is the same mission that the Risen Lord gave to the disciples on the day after his Easter: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (Jn 20:21-23). This responsibility placed in your hands — we are responsible for it! — calls for a style of life consistent with the mission we have received. It is again the Apostle who recalls it: we give no one reason for scandal, “so that no fault may be found with our ministry (2 Cor 6:3). Being co-workers of mercy, therefore, presumes that we share the merciful love that we were the first to receive. It could not be otherwise.

In this context Paul’s words come to mind; those which, at the end of his life, then in old age, he wrote to Timothy, his faithful co-worker whom he would leave as his successor in the community of Ephesus. The Apostle thanks the Lord Jesus for having called him to the ministry (cf. 1 Tim 1:12); he confesses that he had “blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him”; yet, he says, “I received mercy” (1:13). I confide to you that many times, many times I have paused on this verse:

“I was treated with mercy”. And this does me good; it gives me courage. I feel, as it were, the Father’s embrace, the Father’s caress. To repeat this, it gives me, personally, a great deal of strength, because it is the truth: I too can say “I have been treated with mercy”. The Lord’s grace was overabundant in Paul; it acted in such a way as to enable him to understand how grievous a sinner he was and, starting from there, enabled him to discover the core of the Gospel. For this reason he writes: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience” (1:15-16). The Apostle, at the end of his life, does not deny who he was; he does not hide his past. He could make a list of many successes, name the many communities he had established.... Instead, he prefers to emphasize the experience that most impressed him and marked his life. He indicates to Timothy the path to be taken: to acknowledge God’s mercy first and foremost in one’s own personal existence. It is certainly not a matter of dwelling on the fact that we are sinners, almost seeking each time to be justified, thus nullifying the strength of the conversion. But it is important to always set out from this firm point: God has treated me with mercy. This is the key to becoming God’s co-workers. We experience mercy and are transformed into ministers of mercy. Therefore, ministers do not place themselves above others as though they were judges with regard to their brother and sister sinners. A true missionary of mercy mirrors the Apostle’s experience: God has chosen me; God trusts me; God has placed his trust in me by calling me, though I be a sinner, to work with him in order to make his mercy real, effective and palpable.

This is the point of departure, so to speak. Let us move on.

Saint Paul, however, adds something extremely important to the words of the Prophet Isaiah. Those who are God’s co-workers and administrators of mercy must be careful not to foil God’s grace. He writes: “we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor 6:1). This is the first admonition that is given to us: to recognize the action of grace and its primacy in our life and that of others.

You know that I really love the neologism “*primerear*”. Like the almond blossom, as the Lord defines himself: “I am like the almond blossom”. *Primerear*. Springtime, *primerear*. And I like this neologism to express the very dynamic of the first act by which God comes to encounter us. God’s *primerear* can never be forgotten nor taken as obvious, otherwise one cannot fully understand the mystery of salvation achieved with the act of reconciliation that God fulfils through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is not, as is often thought, our private initiative nor the result of our diligence. If that were so, we would fall into that form of neo-pelagianism that tends to overestimate man and his projects, forgetting that the Saviour is God and not us. We must always emphasize, but especially with regard to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, that the first initiative is the Lord’s; it is he who precedes us in love, but not in a universal form: case by case. He precedes in every case, with every person. For this reason, the Church “can move forward” — she must do so — she can “boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand

at the crossroads and welcome the outcast". The Gospel tells us that the banquet was made with them (cf. Lk 14:21). "Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 24).

When a penitent approaches us, it is important and comforting to recognize that we have before us the first fruit of the encounter that has already occurred with the love of God, who with his grace has opened his heart and made it available for conversion. Our priestly heart should perceive the miracle of a person who has encountered God and who has already experienced the power of His grace. There could be no true reconciliation if this did not begin with an encounter with God, which precedes the one with us confessors. This gaze of faith allows the experience of reconciliation to be established as an event whose origin is in God, the Shepherd who, as soon as he becomes aware that a sheep is lost, goes and searches until he has found it (cf. Lk 15:4-5).

Our task — and this is a second step — consists in not rendering vain God's action of grace, but supporting it and enabling it to reach fulfilment. At times, unfortunately, it can happen that a priest's conduct, instead of drawing the penitent near, distances him or her. For example, in order to defend the integrity of the Gospel ideal he fails to see the steps that a person is taking day after day. This is not the way to nurture God's grace. Recognizing a sinner's repentance is tantamount to welcoming him or her with arms wide open, after the example of the father in the parable who welcomes his son when he returns home (cf. Lk 15:20); it means not even letting him finish speaking. This has always struck me: the father did not need to hear his son's excuses; he embraced him. The son had a speech at the ready, but [the father] embraced him. It means the father did not need to hear the apology the son had prepared (cf. v. 22), because the confessor already understood everything, strong from his own experience of being a sinner. There is no need to shame someone who has already recognized his sin and knows he has done wrong; an inquisition is not necessary — those confessors who ask and ask, 10, 20, 30, 40 minutes.... "And why was it done? And how?..." — it is not necessary to question where the Father's grace has already intervened; it is not permissible to violate a person's sacred space in his relationship with God. An example from the Roman Curia: we criticize the Roman Curia, but there are saints in here. One cardinal, the Prefect of a Congregation, goes regularly to hear confession at Santo Spirito in Sassia two or three times a week — he has a set schedule — and one day, explaining, he said: "When I realize that a person is beginning to have difficulty speaking, and I have understood what it is about, I say: "I understand. Go on". And that person "breathes". It is good advice: when you know what it's about, "I understand, go on".

Here the Prophet Isaiah's beautiful expression acquires all its significance: "In a time of favour I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you" (49:8). Indeed, the Lord always answers the voice of those who cry out to him with a sincere heart. Those who feel abandoned and lonely can feel that God comes to encounter them. The Parable of the Prodigal Son recounts that "while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and

embraced him” (Lk 15:20). And he threw his arms around his neck. God does not stand idle, awaiting the sinner: He runs to him, because the joy of seeing him return is too great, and God loves to rejoice, rejoice when He sees the sinner coming. It almost seems that God himself has a “restless heart” until he finds the son that was lost. When we welcome the penitent we need to look him in the eye and listen to him in order to allow him to perceive the love of God who forgives despite all; He dresses him in the best robe and ring, a sign of belonging to His family (cf. v. 22).

The text of the Prophet Isaiah helps us to take another step in the mystery of reconciliation, where he says: “he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them” (49:10). Mercy, which calls for listening, permits one then to guide the steps of the reconciled sinner. God frees him from fear, from anguish, from shame, from duress. Forgiveness is really a form of liberation in order to restore joy and meaning to life. To the cry of the poor who implore help corresponds the cry of the Lord who promised freedom to prisoners, and to those in darkness he says: “Come forth” (cf. 49:9). An invitation to emerge from the sinful condition to don once again the vestments of the Children of God. Hence, in pardon, mercy restores dignity. The penitent does not hesitate to repent of the sin committed; and the priest does not blame him for the wrong for which he feels remorse, but rather, encourages him to look to the future with new eyes, guiding him to “springs of water” (cf. 49:10). This means that forgiveness and mercy allow one to look at life anew with trust and commitment. It is as if to say that mercy opens one to hope, creates hope and nurtures hope. Hope is also realistic; it is concrete. The confessor is also merciful when he says: “Go ahead, go on, go on”. He gives the penitent hope. “And if something happens?” — Come back, there is no problem. The Lord always awaits you. Do not be ashamed to return, because the journey is full of stones and banana peels that cause you to slip.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola — allow me to do a little family advertizing — has a rich teaching in this regard, because it speaks about the capacity to make one feel God’s consolation. There is not just forgiveness, peace, but also consolation. He writes: “interior consolation [...] evaporates all perturbation, and brings a soul to complete love of the Lord; and to such as He enlightens with this consolation He reveals many secrets, both at the time and still more later on. Indeed, thanks to that divine consolation all labours are a pleasure and all fatigue is rest. To him that walks with the fervour and warmth of this interior consolation, there is no burden however great that does not seem light, and no penance nor other trial so great but it appears to be sweet. It points out and lays open to us the way that we must follow, and it teaches us to flee from the opposite” — I repeat — “this consolation points out and lays open to us the way that we must follow, and it teaches us to flee from the opposite”. We must learn to live in consolation. “It” — Ignatius continues — “does not remain always with us; it ever follows certain periods according to appointment. And this is for our good” (*Letter to Sr Teresa Rejadell*, 18 June 1536; *Epistolario* 99-107). It is good to think that the very sacrament of Reconciliation can become a favourable moment for the perception and growth of interior consolation, which animates the journey of the Christian. And I have to say this: we, with the “spirituality of complaining”, run the risk of losing the sense of consolation. Also of losing that oxygen that consists in living in consolation. At times it is

strong, but there is always a minimum consolation that is given to everyone: peace. Peace is the first degree of consolation. We must not lose it. Because it is precisely the pure, smog-free oxygen of our relationship with God. Consolation. From the highest to the lowest, which is peace.

I return to the words of Isaiah. It is there, then, that we find the sentiments of Jerusalem, which feels abandoned and forgotten by God: "Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me'. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even if these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (49:14-15). On the one hand, this reproach addressed to the Lord for having abandoned Jerusalem and his people seems curious. Much more frequently, one reads in the prophets that it is the people who abandon the Lord. Jeremiah is very clear about this when he says: "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (2:13). Sin is abandoning God, turning one's back on him to gaze only at oneself; a tragic self-confidence, which is full of cracks and is not able to bring stability and consistency to life. We know that we experience this daily in the first person. Still, there are times when one really feels the silence and abandonment of God; not only in the great dark hours of humanity in every age, which raise in many the question of God's abandonment. I am now thinking of Syria today, for example. It happens that even in personal affairs, even in those of the saints, one can experience abandonment.

What a sad experience, that of abandonment! It has different degrees, up to the definitive separation with the arrival of death. Feeling abandoned leads to disappointment, sadness, sometimes despair, and the different forms of depression from which so many suffer today. Yet every form of abandonment, paradoxical as it may seem, is part of the experience of love. When one loves and experiences abandonment, then the ordeal becomes dramatic and the suffering possesses traits of inhuman violence. If it is not part of the realm of love, abandonment becomes meaningless and tragic, because it does not find hope. It is necessary, therefore, that the prophet's expressions concerning God's abandonment of Jerusalem be placed in the light of Golgotha. Jesus' cry on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34), gives voice to the abyss of abandonment. But the Father does not answer him. The words of the Crucified One seem to resonate in the void, because this silence of the Father for the Son is the price to pay so that no longer may anyone feel abandoned by God. The God who loved the world to the point of giving his Son (cf. Jn 3:16), to the point of abandoning him on the cross, can never abandon anyone: his love will always be there, close, greater and more faithful than any abandonment.

Isaiah, after repeating that God would not forget his people, concludes by saying: "Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands" (49:16). Incredible: God has "tattooed" my name on his hand. It is like a seal that gives me certainty, through which he promises that he will never distance himself from me. I am always before him; every time God looks at his hand, he remembers me, because my name is engraved upon it! And let us not forget that as the prophet

writes, Jerusalem is actually destroyed; the Temple no longer exists; the people are slaves in exile. Yet the Lord says, “Your walls are continually before me” (*ibid.*). In the palm of God’s hand the walls of Jerusalem are as solid as an impregnable fortress. The image is also valid for us: while life is destroyed under the illusion of sin, God keeps his salvation alive and comes to meet us with his help. Upon his fatherly hand I find my life renewed and projected toward the future, full of the love that only He can bring about. The book of love, the *Song of Songs*, also comes to mind, where we find an expression similar to that recalled by the prophet: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm” (8:6). As we know, the seal’s function was to prevent something intimate from being violated; in the ancient culture it was taken as an image to indicate that the love between two people was so solid and stable that it continued beyond death. Continuity and perpetuity are the basis of the image of the seal that God has placed upon himself to prevent anyone from thinking that he has abandoned them: “I will not forget you” (Is 49:15). A seal. A tattoo.

And I will conclude. It is this certainty typical of love that we are called to support in those who approach the confessional, to give them the strength to believe and hope. The ability to know how to start afresh, despite everything, because, each time, God takes us by the hand and encourages us to look ahead. Mercy takes us by the hand, and instils the certainty that the love God loves with defeats all forms of solitude and abandonment. The Missionaries of Mercy are called to be interpreters of and witnesses to this experience that is imbued in a community which welcomes all and always without distinction, which supports anyone in need and in difficulty, which experiences communion as a fountain of life.

In recent weeks, I was particularly struck by a Collect of the Lenten Season (*Wednesday of the Fourth Week*), which somehow seems to summarize these reflections. I shall share it with you so that we can make it our prayer and way of life:

“O God, who reward the merits of the just
and offer pardon to sinners who do penance,
have mercy, we pray, on those who call upon you,
that the admission of our guilt may serve to obtain your pardon for our sins”.

Amen.

And I would like to end with two anecdotes of two great confessors, both in Buenos Aires. One, a Sacramentine Father who had had important duties in his congregation; he served as Provincial, but he always found time to go to the confessional. I do not know how many, but the majority of the priests of Buenos Aires went to confession with him. Even when Saint John Paul ii was in Buenos Aires and asked for a confessor, they called him from the Nunciature. He was a man who gave one the courage to go on. I experienced this because I confessed to him when I was Provincial, in order not to do so with my Jesuit director.... When he began: “good, fine, that’s

good”; and he encouraged you: “Go on, go ahead!”. How kind he was. He died at the age of 94 and served as confessor up to a year earlier, and when he wasn’t in the confessional, you rang the bell and he would come down. And one day, I was vicar general and I left my room, to where there was a fax machine — I did this early every morning to see the urgent news —, it was Easter Sunday and there was a fax: “Yesterday, half an hour before the Easter Vigil, Father Aristi” — as he was called — “passed away...”. I went to the priests’ retirement home to have Easter lunch with them and on the way back I went to the church that was in the city centre, where the funeral vigil was. There was a casket and two elderly ladies praying the rosary. I approached, and there was not one flower, nothing. I thought: but this is the confessor of all of us! This struck me. I have heard how bad death is. I went out and went 200 meters, where there was a flower stand, those that are in the streets; I bought some flowers and I went back. And, while I was putting the flowers by the casket, I saw that in his hands he held a rosary.... The seventh Commandment says, “Do not steal. The rosary stayed there, but as I pretended to fix the flowers I did ‘like so’, and took the cross. And the elderly women were watching, those elderly women. I have carried that cross here with me ever since that moment and I ask him for the grace to be merciful. I carry it with me always. This would have been in the year 1996, more or less. I ask him for this grace. The witness of these men is great.

Then the other case. This man is alive, 92 years old. He is a Capuchin who has a queue of penitents, of all colours, poor, rich, lay people, priests, some bishops, nuns ... everyone, it never ends. He is a great forgiver, but not “indulgent”, a great forgiver, a greatly merciful man. And I knew this; I knew him. Twice, I went to the Sanctuary of Pompeii in Buenos Aires where he heard confession and I greeted him. He is now 92 years old. When he came to me at that time he would have been 85. And he said to me: “I want to talk to you because I have a problem. I have great misgivings: sometimes I think I forgive too much”. And he explained to me: “I must not forgive a person who comes to ask for forgiveness and says that he would like to change, that he will do everything, but he doesn’t know if he will be able to.... Yet I forgive him! And sometimes I feel anxious; I have misgivings...”. And I told him, “What do you do when you feel this misgiving”? And he replied thus: “I go to the chapel, to the chapel inside the convent, in front of the tabernacle, and I sincerely apologize to the Lord: ‘Lord, forgive me, today I have forgiven too much. Forgive me.... But mind you, it was you who set a bad example for me’”. This is how that man prayed.