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“Becoming Ambassadors of Mercy Incarnate and Ministers of Mercy Above All”
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Continuing Jesus’ Five-Fold Mercy in the Life of the Priest and in the Church

Introduction

- There are many ways to live out the Year of Mercy, but I think perhaps the most fruitful is to ponder and imitate Jesus’ own merciful example. The theme of this Year of Mercy is “Merciful like the Father,” and no one has shown us how to emulate the Father’s Mercy better than the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) himself, the one who identified himself to St. Faustina Kowalska as “Mercy Incarnate.”
- All of Jesus’ life is a manifestation of God’s loving mercy, but when we look at the demonstrations of that merciful love in the Gospel, we see that they fall into five general categories. In Greek, the synoptic evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke) introduce them all by the same verb, *splanchnizomai*, which in English is normally translated as Jesus’ “heart was moved with pity,” but since *splanchna* means “viscera” or “guts” or “womb,” a more literal translation would be that Jesus was “sick to his stomach” with compassion as he people in need. Jesus did five different things in response to these intense cramps of compassion, and I think clearly grasping these five things, opening ourselves up to allowing Jesus to continue to give us his mercy in this ways, imitating his mercy in these five ways and helping our people to understand and live out this five-fold mercy, is a straightforward, doable way to live out this Year of Mercy.
- With regard to the importance of entering into Jesus’ *splanchnizomai* to grasp Jesus’ compassion, Pope Francis generally agrees, as we see in his recent book-length interview with Andrea Tornielli, *The Name of God is Mercy*. The Holy Father takes up the subject with regard to Jesus’ compassion for the widow of Nain, saying “When the Lord saw her he was moved with pity for her” (7:13). Pope Francis comments, “The Greek verb that indicates this compassion is *splanchnizomai*, which derives from the word that indicates internal organs or the mother’s womb. It is similar to the love of a father and mother who are profoundly moved by their own son; it is a visceral love. God loves us in this way, with compassion and mercy. Jesus does not look at reality from the outside, without letting himself be moved, as if he were taking a picture. He lets himself get involved.” And Pope Francis makes a moral exhortation based on it: “This kind of compassion is needed today to conquer the globalization of indifference. This kind of regard is needed when we find ourselves in front of a poor person, an outcast, or a sinner. This is the compassion that nourishes the awareness that we, too, are sinners.”
 - But we can nourish it further by understanding the two Hebrew expressions both of which are generally translated by *splanchnizomai*. The clearest description of them was given by St. John Paul II in footnote 52 of his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*. I think it’s worthwhile for us to revisit these thoughts if we’re going to understand God’s mercy, receive it, and share it. St. John Paul II writes:
 - In describing mercy, the books of the Old Testament use two expressions in particular, each having a different semantic nuance. First there is the term *hesed*, which indicates a profound attitude of “goodness.” When this is established between two individuals, they do not just wish each other well; they are also faithful to each other by virtue of an interior commitment, and therefore also by virtue of a faithfulness to themselves. Since *hesed* also means “grace” or “love,” this occurs precisely on the basis of this fidelity. The fact that the commitment in question has not only a moral character but almost a juridical one makes no difference. When in the Old Testament the word *hesed* is used of the Lord, this always occurs in connection with the covenant that God established with Israel. This covenant was, on God’s part, a gift and a grace for Israel. Nevertheless, since, in harmony with the covenant entered into, God had made a commitment to respect it, *hesed* also acquired in a certain sense a legal content. The juridical commitment on God’s part ceased to oblige whenever Israel broke the covenant and did not respect its conditions. But precisely at this point, *hesed*, in ceasing to

be a juridical obligation, revealed its deeper aspect: it showed itself as what it was at the beginning, that is, as love that gives, love more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin.

- This fidelity vis-a-vis the unfaithful "daughter of my people"(cf. Lam. 4:3, 6) is, in brief, on God's part, fidelity to Himself. This becomes obvious in the frequent recurrence together of the two terms *hesed we'e met* (= grace and fidelity), which could be considered a case of *bendiady's* (cf. e.g. Ex. 34:6; 2 Sm. 2:6; 15:20; Ps. 25[24]:10; 40[39]:11-12; 85[84]:11; 138[137]:2; Mi. 7:20). "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name" (Ez. 36:22). Therefore Israel, although burdened with guilt for having broken the covenant, cannot lay claim to God's hesed on the basis of (legal) justice; yet it can and must go on hoping and trusting to obtain it, since the God of the covenant is really "responsible for his love." The fruits of this love are forgiveness and restoration to grace, the reestablishment of the interior covenant.
 - The second word which in the terminology of the Old Testament serves to define mercy is *rahamim*. This has a different nuance from that of *hesed*. While hesed highlights the marks of fidelity to self and of "responsibility for one's own love" (which are in a certain sense masculine characteristics), rahamim, in its very root, denotes the love of a mother (rehem = mother's womb). From the deep and original bond-indeed the unity-that links a mother to her child there springs a particular relationship to the child, a particular love. Of this love one can say that it is completely gratuitous, not merited, and that in this aspect it constitutes an interior necessity: an exigency of the heart. It is, as it were, a "feminine" variation of the masculine fidelity to self expressed by *hesed*. Against this psychological background, *rahamim* generates a whole range of feelings, including goodness and tenderness, patience and understanding, that is, readiness to forgive. The Old Testament attributes to the Lord precisely these characteristics when it uses the term *rahamim* in speaking of Him. We read in Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Is. 49:15). This love, faithful and invincible thanks to the mysterious power of motherhood, is expressed in the Old Testament texts in various ways: as salvation from dangers, especially from enemies; also as forgiveness of sins-of individuals and also of the whole of Israel; and finally in readiness to fulfill the (eschatological) promise and hope, in spite of human infidelity, as we read in Hosea: "I will heal their faithlessness, I will love them freely" (Hos. 14:5).
 - In the terminology of the Old Testament we also find other expressions, referring in different ways to the same basic content. But the two terms mentioned above deserve special attention. They clearly show their original anthropomorphic aspect: in describing God's mercy, the biblical authors use terms that correspond to the consciousness and experience of their contemporaries. The Greek terminology in the Septuagint translation does not show as great a wealth as the Hebrew: therefore it does not offer all the semantic nuances proper to the original text. At any rate, the New Testament builds upon the wealth and depth that already marked the Old.
 - In this way, we have inherited from the Old Testament-as it were in a special synthesis-not only the wealth of expressions used by those books in order to define God's mercy, but also a specific and obviously anthropomorphic "psychology" of God: the image of His anxious love, which in contact with evil, and in particular with the sin of the individual and of the people, is manifested as mercy.
- What I'd like to do in this conference is ponder in turn the five expressions of Jesus' visceral compassion, which expresses his fidelity to himself in creating us in his image such that he seeks always to try to restore us to that image, as well as the care for us that exceeds a mother's love for a child.

Teaching

- St. Mark tells us, "When he saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (Mk 6:34).

- Jesus was constantly preaching and teaching. He was teaching in synagogues, in the Temple precincts, on mountainsides, in plains, from Peter's boat slightly off shore, in various homes, along the paths of his journeys and even as a boy among the masters. He taught by means of Parables, antinomies, homespun images, current events, straight-forward rabbinical techniques using Sacred Scripture, by writing on the ground, and ultimately by example.
- He identified himself as one who had come to “proclaim the Gospel to the poor,” as someone who had come to “give witness to the truth.” So important was teaching that when “everyone was looking for him” after he had spent so many hours healing people one-by-one that he had to escape early before dawn to pray, he responded, “To the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent.” He was the personal answer to the prayer of Psalms, “Teach us your way, O Lord,” we pray in the Psalms, “so that I may walk in your truth” (Ps 86). Jesus came to say, “I am the Truth, I am the Way. . . . Follow me.” He actualized the Word of God, as we saw on Sunday, saying, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” He taught with an authority that amazed and astonished his contemporaries — “no one has ever spoken like this man” — and infuriated his adversaries.
- Our approach to Jesus' teaching
 - Do we allow Jesus to continue to teach us?
 - Are we good disciples of the Master? Do we listen attentively to what he says and follow him? Do we do so zealously?
 - Jesus reveals his teaching to little ones (Lk 10:21-22)
 - Do we pay attention to the sources with which he teaches us?
 - Prayer
 - Sacred Scripture — Story of Fr. Don from Cleveland
 - Magisterial Documents — Do we read them?
- Do we seek to expose our people to Jesus' teaching?
 - Do we pass on our amazement in the way that we preach?
 - Do we have opportunities for people to continue to learn? For young people after they've been confirmed? Young Adults? Adults? Seniors?
 - Would they know the Catechism? Are they literate?
 - Do we help them to take advantage of the incredible opportunities presented to us in information age (books, websites, videos, audio CDs and more)?
 - Do we train them to pass on, as of the first importance, what they themselves have received, “drilling” the faith into children?
 - Is our goal to form evangelized evangelizers?
- The Church as a whole has continued Jesus' merciful teaching
 - Spiritual works of mercy, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, admonishing those who are wayward.
 - Magisterium
 - Schools
 - Universities
 - catechetical programs.
 - Great teacher saints who invited people to share in that mission. St. Elizabeth Seton. St. Francis Xavier Cabrini. St. John Bosco. St. Angela Merici (tomorrow), St. John Baptiste de la Salle.
- This ministry of the truth is not adequately appreciated in a relativistic age, but Jesus wants us to receive the mercy of his authoritative teaching and learn it well enough so that we can mercifully pass in on. We need the truth!

Healing

- Jesus' healing
 - The second thing was to heal. The evangelists tell us often that Jesus' heart was moved with pity for the multitudes and he responded with healing:
 - **Matt. 14:14** When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with **pity** for them, and he cured their sick.

- **Matt. 20:34** Moved with **pity**, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight, and followed him.
 - **Mark 1:41** Moved with **pity**, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, “I do will it. Be made clean.”
- Jesus healed lepers, cripples, the blind, the paralyzed, those with fevers, the deaf-mute (ephpatha), hemorrhaging women.
- He did exorcisms, like the Gadarene Demoniac, the exorcisms in the Synagogue, the boy possessed after the Transfiguration.
- He even raised three people we know of from the dead, the daughter of Jairus, the son of the Widow of Nain, and his friend Lazarus.
- In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the term *splanchnizomai* is used to describe why the Samaritan drew near the dying man. Jesus is the Good Samaritan and the Church is the inn.
- The crowds came to him in great number:
 - Whole town was gathered at the door (Mk 2)
 - “Because he had cured man, all who had afflictions kept pushing toward him to touch him.” (Mk 3:10)
- Jesus didn’t do “mass healings” but one-by-one to the point of exhaustion. Always leading to something more important, faith, as with Samaritan leper.
- St. Matthew would say of him that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “He took away our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Mt 8:17).
- Jesus’ healing on the Sabbaths basically got himself murdered.
- There was in all of this healing mercy a requirement of faith to receive it.
 - “He didn’t work many miracles there because of their lack of faith.”
 - Faith of woman with the hemorrhage. Faith of centurion. Faith of Syro-Phoenician woman.
- Are we touched by Jesus’ healing power?
 - Do we go to Jesus with our own infirmities?
 - Do we bring others to him in our prayers?
 - There are still many miracles. Just look at the causes for the canonization of saints. Do we have the faith to ask for them?
 - But at a more basic level, are we Simons of Cyrene caring for those carrying Crosses?
 - True compassion, so that others don’t suffer alone.
 - Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.
 - Caring for others, visits to hospitals and nursing homes.
 - Caring for sick family members, especially as they age.
 - JP II in Salvifici Doloris: Suffering unleashes love.
- The Church
 - The Church continues this work of mercy, caring for the sick, founding hospitals, clinics and nursing homes. This is one of the ordinary ways in which God heals people, by allowing us to cooperate in that healing.
 - The Church also does so ministering to the infirm within parishes.
 - Pastoral care to the sick, homebound, hospitalized.
 - Caring for the grieving.
 - Caring for the psychologically ill, the addicted.
 - Great health care saints who invited people to share in that mission. St. Camillus. St. John of God. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. St. John of God.
 - In this Year of Mercy, we’re all called to a similar compassion, recognizing that in every ill man or woman, Jesus is saying, “I was sick and you cared for me.”

Feeding

- Jesus
 - The third manifestation of mercy was to feed.
 - **Matt. 15:32** Jesus summoned his disciples and said, “My heart is moved with pity for the

crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way.” Then he multiplied the loaves and fish.

- God always responds to our prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread.”
- He cared for the poor, seeking to make sure they had enough to eat.
 - “Whenever you give a lunch or a dinner...” invite the beggars, crippled, lame and blind” (Lk 14)
 - The Parable of Dives et Lazarus (Lk 16).
 - He told the Rich Young Man to give his money to the poor.
- Jesus identified with those who were hungry and thirsty and said whatever we do to them, we do to him.
- He not only fed our material hungers and poverty, but our spiritual hungers and poverty.
 - He told us not to labor for the food that perishes but for the food that endures to eternal life that he would give us.
 - He had us pray for our “supersubstantial bread,” the daily manna he himself gives us.
- Our response
 - Are we grateful to God for giving us our daily bread?
 - Do we have a special concern for those who have no food, or no adequate drinking water, or who are in other circumstances of poverty? Are we aware of where the Lazaruses are and do we sacrifice for them? Do we draw near or figure they’re someone else’s concern?
 - The power of the story of Les Miserables of the bishop’s kindness to Jean Valjean.
 - A few examples
 - St. Anthony’s Food Pantry
 - Fr. Paul O’Brien and the Cor Unum Center
 - The need for wells for clean drinking water in Africa.
 - Are we capable of fasting to identify more with the poor and hungry?
 - During this Year of Mercy, Jesus is hoping that we will be sick to our stomachs that so many go to bed without their stomachs fed.
 - At a spiritual level, do we hunger for God? Do we live a truly Eucharistic life? Can we go without the Eucharist? The martyrs of Abitene — *Sine Dominico non possumus* — and living a Eucharistic life. Is Jesus, the supersubstantial bread come down from heaven, truly the “source and summit” of our life. Do we make him available to our people?
- The Church
 - The Church continues that mission of mercy of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming strangers, and caring for the poor and needy in soup kitchens, pantries, St. Vincent de Paul Conference work, Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services and more.
 - So many great saints of charity who invited others to share in that mission. St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. St. John Vianney and his shuttle pocket.
 - The Church also seeks to fill the even greater spiritual hungers. The greatest poverty, Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium*, is spiritual poverty. We do so foremost in the Eucharist, allowing Christ to continue to feed people and getting them ready, “properly dressed,” for the banquet.

Forgiving

- Jesus
 - Fourth, Jesus forgave. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the verb *splanchnizomai* is used to describe how the Father, “filled with compassion,” forgave his returning, imperfectly contrite boy.
 - Everything Jesus did, as we heard Pope Francis tell us yesterday, was an application of the forgiveness of sins.
 - We know that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, not to condemn the world, but so that the world may be saved.
 - Jesus came precisely as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. He was labeled a

“Friend of tax collectors and sinners”

- We can ponder so many of the ways Jesus exercised this mercy par excellence.
 - Healing of the Paralyzed Man — Forgiveness of Sins even more important than a physical healing
 - Simon the Pharisee’s House. We love as much as we recognize we’ve been forgiven. Receiving mercy is essential for us to love God. To recognize we’re sinners in need of a savior.
 - How many times must I forgive?
 - Parable of the Ten Thousand Talents and 100 denarii
 - The three parables of Lk 15
 - The Samaritan Woman.
 - Zacchaeus
 - Peter
 - He called us to forgive even our enemies
 - First two words from the Cross: “Father, forgive them” and the forgiveness of the Good Thief.
- But as we’ve been talking about mercy isn’t cheap. It precedes our conversion but whether we receive it is dependent on our repentance. That’s why Jesus, sometimes forcefully, calls us to conversion.
 - Woman caught in adultery. Jesus doesn’t condemn, but he calls us to a change of life.
 - Cutting off hands, plucking out eyes
 - Plank and speck
 - Comparing Capernaum and Bethsaida to Sodom and Gomorrah. Wants us to convert.
 - Nineveh and Queen of Sheba will condemn
 - Urgency: Falling tower in Siloam (Lk 13)
 - His jeremiads against the Scribes and the Pharisees
 - His focus on the weightier things of the law — judgment, mercy and faithfulness (Mt 23:23)
 - “When he got home away from the crowd his disciples questioned him about the parable. He said to them, “Are even you likewise without understanding? Do you not realize that everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and passes out into the latrine?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) “But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.” (Mk 7)
- Ourselves
 - Do we recognize our need for God’s mercy? Do we come to receive it?
 - Do we convert? Do we cut out of our lives what is incompatible?
 - Do we forgive those who have hurt us or do we nurse those grudges?
 - “Be compassionate as your heavenly father is compassionate” (Lk 6:27)
 - “Forgive and you will be forgiven” (Lk 6:37)
 - Are we peacemakers or just peacewishers? Are we actually rabble-rousers and troublemakers? Do we try to help people reconcile.
 - Do we make it possible, and even easy, for people to come to receive God’s mercy? Are we very available for extending this mercy, since we’re the only creatures in the universe capable of doing so?
 - Do we make fraternal correction when needed?
 - “If you brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault...” (Mt 18). Leave gift at altar and go reconcile.
- The Church
 - We exist to continue Jesus’ mission of reconciling the world to the Father, to continue giving the grace of his forgiveness.
 - We also exist to make peace, to go out of our way as mediators, and to teach people how to receive

God's forgiveness and give forgiveness to others.

Praying and Calling

- Jesus
 - The last act of mercy is not as conspicuous as the others. When Jesus' heart was moved with pity for the crowds because they were "mangled and abandoned like sheep without a shepherd," he told his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few, so pray the Master of the Harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (Mt 9:36).
 - One of his acts of visceral compassion was to pray for harvesters.
 - And then he immediately did something else. Jesus called from among the praying disciples 12 to be apostles. So his calling of laborers to continue his work is similarly an act of mercy.
 - God wants, and the suffering world needs, "laborers" of mercy, hard-workers who, sick to their stomach over the needs of others, will carry out together with Jesus his continued work of teaching, healing, feeding, forgiving, praying and calling.
- Our response
 - During this Holy Year, Jesus is calling us to see that we're the response to centuries of prayer.
 - He wants us to be "laborers" in his vineyard, not "bodies."
 - He also wants us praying that everyone become a laborer continuing Christ's mission of mercy. *Miserando atque eligendo.*
 - We're often asked why there is a "vocations shortage." There are various reasons, but one of them is because there's not enough prayer for vocations. And that goes throughout the Church. We're not praying for laborers and because we're not praying, many people aren't likewise in a position to hear the call of the Lord, summoning them if not at 6 am, at 9, 12, 3 or 5, to his vineyard.
 - And that begins with us. Do we pray for laborers in the prayers of the faithful? Do we look at the work of the Church as a work of mercy for which we need all hands on deck?
 - Are we clericalized, and have we allowed our people to become clericalized, thinking the main work of the Church happens in the sanctuary on Sundays rather than in the transformation of the world?
- The Church
 - The Church exists to continue the prayer of Jesus, the prayer of the Upper Room, the prayer of the decenarium leading to Pentecost.
 - The Church exists to be a vocational school, teaching people to become holy Christians and laborers of mercy just as much as vocational schools train people to be plumbers, electricians, HVAC installers and more.
 - Jesus sends out not just the 12 but the 72 and then sends out the 500 disciples to the whole world.
 - "Just as the Father sent me, so I send you!"
 - He calls the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness to them.
- Conclusion
 - This Jubilee Year is a time when Jesus wants us, with him, to observe how many are lost and instruct them how to follow Him who is the Way; to see how many are suffering physically, psychologically and spiritually and become nurses of the Divine Physician; to notice the multitudes starving physically or spiritually and give them the nourishment he provides; to spot the multitudes carrying the wounds of unexpiated guilt or severed relationships and bring them to receive and extend God's mercy; and in all of this, to become laborers of mercy and, praying insistently for others to join us in becoming the compassionate "upset stomach" of the Mystical Body of Christ.
- Prayer
 - It would be worthwhile for us to pray anew today — to pray without ceasing — the prayer for the Jubilee of Mercy given to us by Pope Francis. In it, he prays that each of us will hear the Lord's words as if addressed to us, and for God to consecrate each Christian so that with renewed enthusiasm the Church may bring God's mercy to others.
*Lord Jesus Christ,
You have taught us to be merciful like the heavenly Father,
and have told us that whoever sees you sees Him.*

Show us your face and we will be saved.

Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew from being enslaved by money;

the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things;

made Peter weep after his betrayal, and assured Paradise to the repentant thief.

Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us, the words that you spoke to the Samaritan woman:

“If you knew the gift of God!”

You are the visible face of the invisible Father,

of the God who manifests his power above all by forgiveness and mercy:

let the Church be your visible face in the world, its Lord risen and glorified.

You willed that your ministers would also be clothed in weakness

in order that they may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error:

let everyone who approaches them feel sought after, loved, and forgiven by God.

Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us with its anointing,

so that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace from the Lord,

and your Church, with renewed enthusiasm, may bring good news to the poor,

proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed, and restore sight to the blind.

We ask this through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy,

you who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen