

Mercy [71]

Usual Preparation Prayer.

First Prelude: The composition of Place: Here it will be to see the story of the Prodigal Son, as his father lovingly welcomes him back into his arms (Lk 15:11-32).

Second Prelude: The petition: I should ask for what I desire, and that is grace to correct and repair whatever was worldly, inordinate, or sinful in my past life; and to regulate my remaining years in such a manner as will insure a happy Death, full of confidence in God's mercy.

Saint Ignatius doesn't give a meditation on mercy, *per se*, but it's a good follow-up to the considerations of sins, hell, and death.

A good priest friend of mine once insisted that "Mercy means womb, and what do you do in the womb? You grow." "Mercy means womb, and what do you do in the womb? You grow." That phrase might strike us as rather odd, because most of the time we hear about mercy either in its Latin or Greek etymology, or in another, different, Hebrew word (*hesed*). However, in the Old Testament one of the words used for mercy has this meaning, and, in fact, Pope Saint John Paul the Second points this out in a massive footnote in *Dives in Misericordia*. In footnote 52, the saint notes that "in describing mercy, the books of the Old Testament use two expressions in particular, each having a different semantic nuance. . . . 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 (from *rehem*, meaning mother's womb—[hence Father's comment]). 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 [we'll come back to this]. 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, [as if to summarize] 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 mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. [See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name]' (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 apostasy, I will love them freely; for my anger is turned away from them' (Ho 14:5)."¹ Thus far JPIL.

We can examine more in depth three characteristics that the Pope has pointed out. First, God's mercy is a particular love, meaning it's something for me personally: "God the Father loves *me*, knowing who I am, how I am, where I'm coming from, what I can do, and what limitations I have. He knows me by name. He has loved me with those characteristics; He hasn't loved me 'in bulk,' *en masse*,' or generically."² A mother doesn't love just any child; she loves *her* child. If you don't believe it, try swapping a child on a mom and trying to convince her that it's all just the same. "Look, one kid for another, no big deal. This one's quieter and better behaved. He doesn't eat as much!" Any mother will want and far, far prefer her own child, no matter how loud and obnoxious her child is, no matter how much he eats, and no matter how quiet and well-behaved the other one is.

Secondly, God's mercy is gratuitous: in other words, quoting the Pope, it's "not merited, and that in this aspect it constitutes an interior necessity: an exigency of the heart." A mother loves her child, and if we tried to come up with a reason why, probably the best we could say is that she just *has* to: it just follows from the nature of being a mother. If we think about this from just a purely logical or empirical standpoint, there's really no reason for this: the child doesn't *do anything* to deserve the mother's love. Especially in the beginning, as a newborn, the child does things that, objectively, are annoying, like crying in the middle of the night. It's just who the child is, and the place that he or she occupies in the heart of their mother.

This unconditional love of God is the foundation of our joy and, indeed of our entire lives. The brilliant German theologian, Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI, said the following in an audience (remember, he's German; we're not known for our overwhelmingly loving, sentimental, and affectionate natures. What he says is just the cold, hard, truth): he said, "[Where does joy come from? There are many factors.] But in my view, the crucial one is this certainty, based on faith: I am wanted; I have a task in history; I am accepted, I am loved. . . . Those who are unloved cannot even love themselves. This sense of being accepted comes in the first instance from other human beings. But all human acceptance is fragile. Ultimately we need a sense of being accepted unconditionally. Only if God accepts me, and I become convinced of this, do I know definitively: it is good that I exist. It is good to be a human being. If ever man's sense of being accepted and loved by God is lost, then there is no longer any answer to the question whether to be a human being is good at all. Doubt concerning human existence becomes more and more insurmountable. Where doubt over God becomes prevalent, then doubt over humanity follows inevitably. We see today how widely this doubt is spreading. We see it in the joylessness, in the inner sadness, that can be read on so many human faces today. Only faith gives me the conviction: it is good that I exist. It is good to be a human being, even in hard times. Faith makes one happy from deep within."³ So much hinges on this: God loves and accepts us unconditionally, not just when we're good people doing good things, but at all times and all moments, even at the worst parts of our lives.

We know this from Scripture and from first-hand experience: God's merciful love is "a prior love: *He loved us [first]* (1 Jn 4:10). I wasn't anything but rather nothing, and He loved

¹ *Dives in Misericordia*, n. 52.

² Miguel A. Fuentes, *Meditations on God the Father* (Chillum, MD: IVEPress, 2017), 34.

³ Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia, Clementine Hall, Thursday, 22 December 2011.

me before I existed. He gave His Son to save me, even before I was called into existence. [Think about this for a moment; God paid a debt for me before I had even racked it up. To think, too, that He called us into existence *fully knowing* how sinful we would be *before* we were that sinful. He didn't have to, but He did, fully knowing the ugly thing that I would become through my sins. That says something about our dignity as children of God, and what great hopes He has for us]. He gave me His life in baptism, before my mind had been opened to knowledge. He has always taken the initiative in my life."⁴

This shows itself in a very particular way in those of us who have been chosen as members of the Church. We can count on one hand the number of people in this room who are worthy of the call that they've received. . . . It would look like this: none. Zero. None of us can say that we earned this vocation or that we deserved it. None of us. And yet, here we are, with the graces that we need to get through life, and advance on the way to holiness.

Thirdly, this sort of merciful love is shown in a particular way through the forgiveness of sins: it emphasizes God's readiness to forgive. The Pope mentions this characteristic twice, and almost places it as a sort of summary of what *rahamim* means. Sometimes, though, this is perhaps the most difficult thing for us to grasp. I mean, we talk about God's love and mercy and forgiveness, but oftentimes there's this lingering sort of doubt that maybe God will spring something on me at the end of time, a sort of bad surprise, like "Oh, you forgot about this one thing you did wrong once. Sorry: off to the fiery abyss."

"The one who thinks that God holds grudges or keeps a book with sins and good deeds, [a ledger with good deeds and bad ones hoping they balance out], doesn't understand God's fatherhood, God's mercy, or God's love." "The one who thinks that God holds grudges or keeps a book with sins and good deeds, [a ledger with good works and bad ones hoping they balance out], doesn't understand God's fatherhood, God's mercy, or God's love." To doubt God's mercy is "greatest falsification that can be made of God," because it says that there is a sin that's greater than He is, that there's something He can't forgive. God *wants* to save us; He *wants* us to get to heaven. Even if I didn't want to go to heaven, He still *wants* me to get there. So . . . how much more will He help me since I really *do* want to get to heaven?

This affects the way we live our lives: we could say that this is the point of transition between servile fear and filial fear. Do I obey the commandments so I don't get punished, or do I love God, and so obey the commandments because I love Him? It makes the difference between living in what I like to call survival mode, where I'm just getting by day by day, and living it fully, ready for anything and everything, because "I know him in whom I have believed and am confident that he is able to guard what has been entrusted to me until that day" (2 Tm 1:12) when I see Him again, face to face. We can think of some words of Jesus to Saint Faustina: "The graces of My mercy are drawn by means of one vessel only, and that is — trust. The more a soul trusts, the more it will receive" (1578). "I never reject a contrite heart" (1485) — note the categorical nature: "never." No exceptions, no little lines at the end of the contract. Never. "Sooner would heaven and earth turn into nothingness than would My mercy not embrace a trusting soul" (1777). To be in the womb of God's mercy, as it were, is to be entirely dependent on God, but also entirely protected. To be in the womb of God's mercy, as it were, is to be entirely dependent on God, but also entirely protected.

⁴ Ibid., 34.

This, of course, leads us to consider some Scriptural passages that can help us shed some light on this. There are many parables and sayings of Jesus that reveal God the Father's mercy, but often we can just let them pass unnoticed.

For instance, we can consider the parable in Matthew's Gospel of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-35): "That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan."

The first thing to consider here is the unforgiving servant who owes his master "a huge amount." That translation doesn't do justice to the original, which reads *μυρίων ταλάντων*, or literally, 10,000 talents; records tell us that the all of the annual taxes paid to the Romans by all the citizens of the regions of Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Galilee, and Perea, all together, came to 800 talents per year, and, more pertinent to the steward, a talent would've been the wages of 16 years of work. In order to pay the debt, then, he would have needed to work 170 thousand years, provided he doesn't spend anything on food and clothing for himself or his wife and kids.

There's a lot of things we could ask: how on earth did he rack up such a debt? Any reason we can find doesn't look good for the steward: maybe he was an addict to something, or built an amazing house . . . but, ultimately, there's really no reason except his stupidity and probably his sinfulness.

The steward throws the best plea he has at the master: "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full." Yeah . . . patient, like . . . two hundred thousand years. Yet, what is the master's response? "Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan." The word for "moved with compassion" is *σπλαγχνίζομαι* *splagchnizomai*, which derives from the Greek *splanxna*, meaning, the deep interior organs; it's related to this idea of mercy as a womb. Notice that the master simply forgives the debt; he doesn't take the steward up on his offer, or even negotiate. Instead he goes far beyond what the steward had dared to ask or even hope for. This calls to mind some quotes of Saint Therese of Lisieux: "O God, you have surpassed all my expectations." "O God, you have surpassed all my expectations." Or, "We can never have too much confidence in the Good God, He is so mighty, so merciful. As we hope in Him so shall we receive" "We can never have too much confidence in the Good God, He is so mighty, so merciful. As we hope in Him so shall we receive."

We also have the parable of God's mercy in Luke 15, which contains the images of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Cardinal Van Thuan, in the Spiritual Exercises he preached to Pope Saint John Paul the Second, mentioned this incident when he spoke of Christ's "five defects," which aren't really defects, *per se*, but comments on

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Jesus' way of doing things. We'll consider three. Van Thuan wrote: "[One defect is that] Jesus didn't know math. If Jesus would have had to take a mathematics exam, he might have failed. He indicates this in the parable of the lost sheep. . . . For Jesus, one is equal to ninety-

nine – and perhaps more! Who could ever accept this? But his mercy reaches from generation to generation.” Some church fathers have also noticed that the shepherd “sets the sheep on his shoulders,” a very affectionate gesture. In the same way, Christ will carry the cross on His shoulders out of love for all of His wayward sheep.

Likewise, “Jesus doesn’t know logic [citing the story of the woman who has a celebration over finding her missing coin]. This is truly illogical—to disturb your friends over one silver piece and then to plan a feast to celebrate the find! Even more, by inviting her friends, she is bound to spend more than the one silver piece. . . . Here we can truly say, with the words of the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, “The heart has its reasons that the reason doesn’t know.”

Finally, Jesus has a terrible memory. Citing as evidence Jesus’ promise to the thief crucified with Him that he will be in paradise, he writes: “If I had been Jesus, I would have told Him, ‘I certainly will not forget you, but your crimes have to be expiated with at least twenty years in purgatory.’ Instead Jesus tells him, ‘Today you will be with me in paradise.’ He forgets *all* the man’s sins. . . . Jesus does not have a memory like mine. He not only pardons, and pardons every person; he even forgets that he has pardoned.”⁵ I would add that this “Divine forgetfulness” is also verified in stories that are told of lives of Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, among many others. For instance, the story is told that once Teresa was upset about something she had done. She confessed it, but, still upset, she was berating herself for it. Christ appeared to her, and she apologized for her failing. Christ looked at her and said, “My Child, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She replied, “Well, you know, the thing I did.” “I don’t know what you’re talking.” It went back and forth, again and again, with Teresa apologizing, and Jesus denying. Finally Christ said, “Oh, that! You mean that thing . . . My Child, that’s been forgiven. It’s so far from my mind that it’s forgotten.” Likewise, the story is told that once Saint Bernard had an apparition of Jesus, and Christ asked him, “Bernard, I want you to give me a gift.” Bernard replied, “Ask, but I’ve given you everything.” Christ replied, “No, you haven’t. There’s still one thing you hold on to. Your sins. Give them to me Bernard; you don’t need to hold on to them.”

Such is the greatness of the mercy of our God.

Colloquy: We can end this meditation with a three-fold colloquy: first, by speaking with our Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered and died, not to condemn us, but to save us. Second, we can talk with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Mercy, who has interceded for us time and time again. Lastly, we can talk with God the Father, who loves us so much that He sent His Son to pay the price for our redemption. We can ask ourselves:

What have we done for Christ? What are we doing for Christ? What will we do for Christ?

⁵ Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimony of Hope* (Boston: Pauline, 2000), 14-16.