

Commentary on Misericordiae Vultus (Part 1)
Excerpts from the Centre talk given May 12, 2016



at Our Lady of Fatima Shrine
Fr Dominic Borg, ocd

The Pope mentions Psalm 136 in paragraph 7, and he speaks about it at length by quoting *“For his mercy endures forever”*. As you see here, the Pope uses the word *“mercy”* instead of using *“steadfast love”*. The word is *“hesed”* in Hebrew. This word is untranslatable and that is why sometimes it is translated *“steadfast love”* ... sometimes it is translated *“compassion”* *“the Lord, the Lord, full of compassion, forgiving sins from one generation to the next”* and sometimes it is also expressed as *“forgiveness”*. It is so rich that one can also translate it as *“mercy”*. As you can see here the Pope took the opportunity to translate it as *“mercy”* and to continue to build on the virtue of mercy.

The Pope says in paragraph 7 *“For his mercy endures forever”*. This is the refrain that is repeated after each verse in Psalm 136 as it narrates the history of God’s revelation; God revealing Himself. Don’t forget that biblical revelation is not God who speaks, but God who acts and we who react. How do we react? By giving Him thanks and becoming conscious of His mercy around us ... becoming conscious as St Paul says *“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the abundance of love with which He loved us when we were enemies, He gave us the gift of His Son.”* And these are the mercies that St Paul, in Romans chapter 9, 10 and 11 speaks about, and then in chapter 12 he groups all these mercies and begins chapter 12 in his letter to the Romans by saying *“I appeal to you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may choose what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

Then the Pope continues by saying *“by virtue of mercy all the events of the Old Testament are revealed with profound specific impact”*... here you notice that he speaks of *“all the events”* because *“davar”* in Hebrew does not only mean a word spoken, but it also means an event – it is a fact. When God speaks, it becomes a fact. So it’s an event – God who works in our history.

Mercy renders God’s history with a history of salvation to repeat continually *“for his mercy endures forever”*, as the psalm does seems to break through the limitation of space and time ... it is a very beautiful expression that *“God’s mercy breaks through the limitation of space and time”* – it goes through beyond our imagination, as St Therese says *“We can never have overconfidence in God’s mercy”*, it goes beyond our capacity, and as St Paul says: *“no eye has seen, no ear has heard, what God has ready for those who love him.”* They will experience His mercy.

Going back, now to verse one; *“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy.”* These words might well sum up the meaning of the mystery of the Christian faith. Then he continues on, speaking about mercy - as I told you some time ago, the word *“mercy”* is mentioned 150 times in the document.

One sentence says “The Father rich in mercy, after having revealed His name to Moses, as a God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”. Here again, the Lord passed by and the translation usually is that when the Lord passed by He said “*The Lord, the Lord, full of compassion.*” He is not God ... He is Lord. So Lord is the merciful aspect of God. It is the attribute, incarnate. The Lord. Sometimes we don’t draw a distinction. We speak about God and Lord as being interchangeable. They are ... and they are not ... because God is the symbol for justice, majesty, the Creator. Lord is more the symbol of mercy.

“*Lord, if you want, you can make me clean.*” “I do want” ... and He touched the leper ... He touched him ... He didn’t need to touch him ... He could have said “don’t approach me”. He could have said, “I will cure you, just stay where you are” ... but no. He touched him. The leper was staying far away from Him because he knew the law so he did not want to approach Him. The law says that the leper has to shout “a leper, a leper” so that people will move away from him. But Jesus Christ told him “I do wish ... be clean.” and He touched him. It is the same touch of mercy that you and I constantly experience in our lives.

Then again, the second time that mercy is used here “Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God.” So when we contemplate Jesus Christ, we are contemplating what the Pope has already mentioned in paragraph 4. We said here that the Pope said “May the Holy Spirit who guides the steps of believers” ... not the leaps or jumps, “the steps” of believers— “in cooperating with the work of Salvation brought by Christ lead the way and support the people of God so that they may contemplate the face of mercy”... so when we contemplate the face of mercy we are contemplating the face of Jesus Christ ... but here the Pope says “Jesus of Nazareth, by His words, His actions and His entire person, reveals the mercy of God. We read in the Gospel of John, that Philip says “*Lord, show us the Father and it will be enough for us.*” “*Philip, I have been with you for so long, and yet you do not know me. Do you not know that if you have seen me, you have seen the Father also?*”

So, the more we know Jesus Christ, the more we are able, as the Pope says here, to “enter into the well-spring of joy, peace and serenity.” This is what he says in paragraph 2. “We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a well-spring of joy serenity and peace.” There is a difference between serenity and peace. In order to experience serenity, you have to be at the centre of the tornado. You have to be in the centre of the whirlwind ... only there does serenity exist. And this is why God spoke to Job from the centre of the whirlwind. He is surrounded with suffering, pain, sickness ... all these disasters, one after the other ... but God spoke to him from a situation of serenity. It is different from peace or tranquility. Serenity has to be surrounded with a turmoil ... with a tsunami, with a tornado ... there is an expression in the English language ... I think they call it the “eye of the storm”. There is a certain stillness in it. That is the stillness that comes to you and to me “*Be still and know that I am God.*”

Then in the same paragraph the Pope says “Mercy, the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us.” It is no wonder that, before, he said that “mercy is the words, the actions and the person of Jesus Christ.” God comes to meet us through Jesus Christ. That is why John, in his letter yesterday said “What we have seen with our eyes, what we have heard with our ears, what we have touched with our hands, this is what we announce to you ... the word of life, so

that you will have fellowship with us.” And here the Pope says “Mercy, the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us.”

Then he speaks again “Mercy, the fundamental law that works in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy, the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever, despite our sinfulness.” What St Paul will say “*where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more*” and “*Who can separate us from the love of God, sin, persecution, the sword, Jesus Christ himself? ... no one and nothing can separate us from God’s love.*” And this is what the Pope means here when he says that His Mercy is opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

Then in paragraph 3, he speaks about why he came up with this idea of the Year of Mercy for this jubilee, and how it started on the 8th of December ... we are exactly nearly half way through.

In this paragraph, the Pope says “When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.” This is what we mentioned before, where St Thérèse says that we can never have over confidence in God’s mercy.

Then he gives us different notions of mercy. It says that just passing through this door, we ought to experience joy. It is a moment that we experience consolation, pardon and this moment also instils hope inside each one of us. St Paul in his letter to the Romans says “*Hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*”

Later on, towards the end of paragraph 4, the Pope quotes St Pope John XXIII, where he says “Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of Mercy rather than taking arms of severity.” Already, Pope John XXIII when he was opening Vatican II, said that Vatican II and the Spirituality of Church should be a manifestation of the medicine of Mercy because mercy is God’s steadfast love, and mercy is the medicine for the sickness of mankind. So here Pope John XXIII, says “The Church, the Bride of Christ, wishes to use the medicine of Mercy rather than taking the arms of severity.” “The Church, as she holds high the torch of catholic truth at this ecumenical council wants to show herself a loving mother to all, patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness towards her separate children.”

So here, you see quite a good number of actions and behaviour that the Pope is taking, and among the last actions that he took is that he made up a commission to analyze properly whether women can be allowed to receive the diaconate. Who knows. What I can say is that there is a woman deaconess in the New Testament. Paul mentions a woman who was a deaconess. So there was some tradition in the Church where there were deacons who were women. It was a tradition for sure. It is mentioned in the letter of St Paul to the Romans. But, the Pope himself said that the case of the priesthood is closed. He continues to confirm what the previous Pope has said that it was the wish of Jesus Christ that He only chose men to be with Him as Priests and so that means that if, in the future, the Pope decides yes, women can be ordained deacons. It

doesn't mean that, as some newspapers have said that in that case women can say Mass. That is a different kind of ordination. No, they cannot say Mass. A deacon cannot even give anointing of the sick because in the anointing of the sick, there is the forgiveness of sins included, and the deacon has no power to give the forgiveness of sins. That is reserved for the priesthood.

Here it talks about separated children, the Church has to be patient, kind, moved with compassion and goodness ... yes, the Pope has said this, and he is doing it, and he is not the first one. Already Pope John XXIII before Vatican II is opening the doors ... after him, Pope Paul the VI, and then Pope John Paul II also continued to open the doors so that the Spirit will enter into the life of the Church.

Then paragraph 4 ends with the beautiful sentence that we mentioned, that "we need to contemplate the face of Mercy" because Mercy, as the Pope has told us is also the person of Jesus Christ, so we need to contemplate the face of Jesus Christ. And the more we look at His face, you know what will happen, the way that "*Zaccheus looked at the face of Jesus Christ*". There was this beautiful movie ... It was called "The Robe", and in it, Miriam and Marcellus, a brother and sister, are discussing 'what did Jesus Christ say to Zaccheus to make him change his life drastically just during the meal'. One was saying one thing, the other was saying another thing, and then Miriam stopped, and she said to her brother "I know. I know what Jesus Christ said to him." And Marcellus said "what did He say?" ... She told him "nothing". "What do you mean nothing?" She said "Nothing. Jesus Christ said nothing to Zaccheus. What happened is, Jesus looked squarely into the eyes of Zaccheus, and Zaccheus saw in the eyes of Jesus the image of the man he was meant to be and that made him change his life." If any one has a serious encounter with Jesus Christ he is a new creation. St Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*" "*The son of man came to seek out and save the lost.*" Zaccheus manifested his faith through his actions: giving half of his property to the poor, and if he stole, he would repay four times as much back.

So there is this contemplation of the face. I look at Him, He looks at me ... motionless, hypnotized.

The Bible says "*People were spellbound by his words.*" Or, when he spoke in the synaguge, "*the eyes of all were fixed on him*". They could see something in His eyes, on His face, even in His words. The book of Exodus says "*The people saw the word.*" Sometimes you hear people say "We will believe you when we see what you are saying put into action." But the word of God is incarnate straight away. "*And the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory.*"

Then, paragraph 5 speaks about mercy in this way. It says that "We will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ, asking him to pour out his mercy upon us like the morning dew, so that everyone may work together to build a better future."

This is beautiful because when I read it, it reminds me of the Eucharist, in the second Eucharistic Prayer it says that "The Holy Spirit is like the morning dew", and here, it speaks those words

“May God’s mercy be poured out like the morning dew.” It is something concrete that you can see.

Then again, toward the end of Paragraph 5, the Pope speaks about the balm of mercy. “May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst!” So when we encounter mercy, mercy becomes for us a sign that God’s kingdom is in our midst. So go and learn that “*I desire mercy and not sacrifice*” ... so mercy received: mercy given.

The Pope himself quotes the Acts of the Apostles later on where it is one of the oral traditions that we find that Jesus Christ said, but it is not written in the Gospel ... that it is better to give than to receive. So, having received God’s mercy, it is better for us that we give it away in our relationships with each other. So here he speaks about this balm of mercy. It is this oil, this soothing cream that everyone needs for healing.

Then in paragraph 6, he quotes St Thomas Aquinas and later on he quotes St John of the Cross when he speaks about love ... that “at the end of our life, we will be judged on love in our lives.”

The quote says “O God, who reveal your power above all in your mercy and forgiveness...” So God’s power is revealed above all in mercy and forgiveness. We have received both, and we are challenged to communicate both mercy and forgiveness to others.

“*Patient and merciful*”. These words often go together in the Old Testament to describe God’s nature, that God is patient, and He is merciful. “His being merciful is concretely demonstrated in his many actions throughout the history of salvation where his goodness prevails over punishment and destruction.” In a special way the Psalms bring to the fore the grandeur of his merciful action: “*He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.*” A beautiful verse. (Psalm 103.3-4).

When we speak about these different kinds of mercy, there is a very good way of explaining them in the message that the Pope uses for the World Youth Day. In section 2, which is entitled “Merciful Like The Father”, the Pope says “The motto for this Extraordinary Jubilee is “Merciful like the Father.”” (cf. *Misericordiae Vultus*, 13).

So “these are the two words for mercy that dominate the Old Testament. The first (*hesed*), when applied to God, expresses God’s unfailing fidelity to the Covenant with his people whom he loves and forgives for ever”. Isaiah says “*though the mountains may be removed, and the hills turned to dust, my steadfast love for you will always remain, says the Lord who has compassion upon you.*” So this is the kind of mercy that is attributed to the behaviour of God.

“The second, *rahamim*, which literally means “entrails”, can be translated as “heartfelt mercy”. This particularly brings to mind the maternal womb and helps us understand that God’s love for his people is like that of a mother for her child.”

Here again, St Thérèse, when she looks at Mary and looks at God, she says about Mary, that for her, she is more of a mother than a Queen. She benefits more by looking at her as being her

mother than as being her queen. And the same when she speaks about God's mercy she speaks in a feminine way ... motherly love ... *"can a mother forget the child in her womb – even if this happens, I will never forget you"*

This particularly brings to mind the maternal womb and helps us understand that God's love for His people is like that of a mother for her child. That is how it is presented by the prophet Isaiah: *"Can a mother forget her infant, (be without tenderness) for the child of her womb? Even if she should forget, I will never forget you"* (Is 49:15). Love of this kind involves making space for others within ourselves and being able to sympathize, suffer and rejoice with our neighbours.

So as you see here, in these two concepts, the Pope says "The biblical concept of mercy also includes the tangible presence of love that is faithful." This one, one can see it clearly, especially in chapter 1 in the Letter of Paul to the Philippians. *"He who called you is faithful, and he will do it. He who began this good work within you, he himself will bring it to completion."* *"We can be unfaithful, but God has always to stand faithful."*, because it is in His nature, that He is a God who is faithful, so He always has to be faithful with us.

Then, when he speaks about the New Testament, the Pope says "The New Testament speaks to us of divine mercy (eleos) as a synthesis of the work that Jesus came to accomplish in the world in the name of the Father (cf. Mt 9:13)." So "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." We know that Jesus Christ was sent *"As the Father has me, so I am sending you. As the Father loves me, so I am loving you. Love one another as I have loved you."*

"Our Lord's mercy can be seen especially when he bends down to human misery and shows his compassion for those in need of understanding, healing and forgiveness. Everything in Jesus speaks of mercy. Indeed, he himself is mercy." The same teaching that he brings out in *Misericordiae Vultus* is the same teaching that he has communicated to the youth, and then he quotes Luke, chapter 15 where we have the three parables of mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the parable of the prodigal son to communicate this notion of mercy very clearly.

Then paragraph 8 the Pope says: "With our eyes fixed on Jesus and his merciful gaze". Jesus Christ is looking at us with a merciful gaze. The look on His face is what the Old Testament will say *"And may God smile upon you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you."*

In the same paragraph he says: "What moved Jesus in all of these situations was nothing other than mercy, with which he read the hearts of those he encountered and responded to their deepest need. When he came upon the widow of Nain taking her son out for burial, he felt great compassion for the immense suffering of this grieving mother, and he gave back her son by raising him from the dead." (cf. Lk 7:15).

In paragraph 9 the Pope says "In the parables devoted to mercy, Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy." So here we understand that it is in the nature of God, and it is in God's mercy that He will never give up on us. "In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon." through compassion.

Later on in paragraph 12, he speaks about mercy being at the core of the Gospel and also at the heart of Jesus, where he says in paragraph 12, first sentence: “The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel,” a very beautiful expression, the mercy of God is the beating heart of the Gospel, “which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person.” What comes out of the heart penetrates another heart. From the heart of God comes His mercy for us and it enters into our hearts. And if it really enters, then we have to show it also towards others.

In paragraph 12 towards the end he says: “Consequently, wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.” It is very beautiful and important.

Then in paragraph 13, half way through, it says: “In order to be capable of mercy, therefore, we must first of all dispose ourselves to listen to the Word of God.” So, the more we come in contact with the Word of God, the more we are going to experience His mercy. “This means rediscovering the value of silence in order to meditate on the Word that comes to us. In this way, it will be possible to contemplate God’s mercy and adopt it as our lifestyle.” So here it is giving us a hint that in our contemplation, in our studies, and prayer, with the Word of God, silence is a must.

In paragraph 14, half way through, he says that “This will be a sign that mercy is also a goal to reach and requires dedication and sacrifice.” Mercy is not something automatic. It demands, the Pope is telling us here “dedication and sacrifice”, which means endurance in the Word of God. We read in the Gospel: “Those who endure to the end, they will sit at the table that God the Father has prepared for His Son Jesus Christ.” “May pilgrimage be an impetus to conversion:” “by crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God’s mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us.” So one way of living this year of Mercy is not only that we experience it, but we also have to pass it on to others. “Mercy is not an abstract concept. It is very much concrete.”

In the same paragraph the Pope quotes from Luke chapter 6. “For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

In paragraph 14, half way through the Pope says “Merciful like the Father”, therefore, is the “motto” of this Holy Year. In mercy, we find proof of how God loves us. He gives His entire self, always, freely, asking nothing in return. He comes to our aid whenever we call upon Him. What a beautiful thing that the Church begins her daily prayer with the words, “*O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.*” (Ps 70:2)! The assistance we ask for is already the first step of God’s mercy toward us.”

So, it is through the power that God gives us that we can turn to Him and pray the Our Father. It is this that gives us the power to do so.

At the next talk we will start with paragraph 15, which is very important when it speaks especially about the works of mercy ... corporal works of mercy and spiritual works of mercy, In

paragraph 15 the Pope quotes St. John of the Cross: “Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: ‘as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love’”.