

## **Pilgrimage to Caravaggio – October 1, 2016**

Jubilee of Mercy

“Lord, I am a sinner: come with your mercy” (Pope Francis)

### **1) The Year of Mercy. What a grace!**

What boundless gratitude for His mercy throughout this whole year! Each of us can take advantage of this moment to become even more aware of how often in these months we have been invaded by the mercy of Christ, by His boundless tenderness to us.

Let's listen again to what Pope Francis tells us: “For all our sins, our limitations, our failings, for all the many times we have fallen, Jesus has looked upon us and drawn near to us. He has given us His hand and showed us mercy. To whom? To me, to you, to you, to you, to everyone. All of us can think back and remember the many times the Lord looked upon us, drew near and showed us mercy. [...] That is what Paul calls ‘sound teaching’ – think about it! – sound teaching is this: that we received mercy.” (From the *Video message on the occasion of the celebration of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in the Americas*, August 27-30, 2016, Bogotá, Columbia.)

In the light of Christ's unique preference for us, all our distraction comes to the surface. What a difference from that “seeking Him day and night” and that striving we spoke about in Mary Magdalene: “On my bed at night I sought him, whom my heart loves” (Song of Songs, 3:1). Each of us knows how often other interests and preferences have taken precedence, how far we are from “preferring nothing to the love of Christ” (cf. Rule of St. Benedict, 4:21).

Perhaps now we can be even more aware of the difference in the way we have treated each other on many occasions this year. How many intense arguments, how much violence, at times even spiteful envy!

“When we forget how the Lord has treated us. [...] We take on a separatist mindset. [...] We fragment the present by creating ‘groups’” (From the *Video message on the occasion of the celebration of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in the Americas*, August 27-30, 2016, Bogotá, Columbia.)

How much impatience, without giving ourselves the time to understand the epochal change we are going through! How little willingness to listen to each other, to open ourselves to the perspective of the other, confusing the truth with custom and habit! If we are not open among ourselves, how can we be so with others?

If we are sincere and honest, we must recognize with pain some signs of our lack of openness: the attack on the unity of an experience that precedes us; the prevailing of the conflict of ideas over a lived belonging; the emptying of the ontology of the Christian fact to the point of

identifying it with a set of ideas and rules of our definition; the reduction of the charism to inspiration, without real *sequela*, real following.

Some have even gone so far as to contest the magisterium of the Pope, something inconceivable in a reality like ours. Perhaps we should admit our presumption, in the whole range of ways it can be manifested, as Fr. Giussani told us in 1992: “Each of us can do what we want with the charism and its history: reduce it, paralyze it, accentuate some aspects to the detriment of others (making it monstrous), bend it to our own pleasure or for our own advantage, abandon it out of negligence, out of willfulness, out of superficiality, abandon it to an accent that makes us feel more comfortable, find more pleasure, and have less difficulty” (L. Giussani, *L'avvenimento Cristiano* [The Christian Event], Bur, Milano 2003, p. 68).

## 2) “Lord, I am a sinner”

Precisely all this, all these circumstances in which our presumption has wounded the body of our great Fraternity as the consequence of not seeking Him day and night, can help us live this moment as a gesture in which we are protagonists – such is our great need – without reducing it to a purely formal or pietistic act.

We come here, at the feet of Our Lady, with this awareness. We come as beggars of mercy, even more aware of being needy. “Let us ask her [...] to have the courage to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of mercy, and not to fear surrendering our hands into her maternal hands” (Francis, Presentation of the Christmas greetings to the Roman curia,” December 22, 1014).

Only when we do not reduce our evil, and all the more, only when we do not justify it, can we realize the newness of His mercy, which is necessary for not leaving anything behind, for not being crushed under the weight of our evil, for not having to censure anything. And so we stand in amazement of Him: “How is this? With all that I have done and continue to do, You still have mercy on me, on us, Christ?” This turns everything upside down! “You do not flee from love,” said the Brazilian prisoner. “You are worth much more than your actions,” Paul Ricoeur would say (*La memoria, la storia, l'oblio* [Memory, History, Oblivion], Cortina, Milano, 2003, p. 702).

We are here to beg for the conversion of our hearts, for a true gaze upon ourselves that enables us to take up the journey again.

## 3) How does He respond to our need?

“Infidelity always arises in our hearts even before the most beautiful and true things; the infidelity in which, before God’s humanity and man’s original simplicity, man can fall short, out of weakness and worldly preconception, like Judas and Peter,” said Fr. Giussani on May 30, 1998 (L. Giussani – S. Alberto – J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1998, p. XI).

The prophet Ezekiel reminds us of this: “But you [Jerusalem] were captivated by your own

beauty, you used your renown to make yourself a harlot, and you lavished your harlotry on every passer-by, whose you became [...]”.

But then as now, the Lord tells us through the mouth of the same prophet: “Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you when you were a girl, and I will set up an everlasting covenant with you [...] that you may remember and be covered with confusion, and that you may be utterly silenced for shame when I pardon you for all you have done, says the Lord God” (*Ez* 16:15,60,63). Notwithstanding our sins, God does not break His covenant. Saint Paul reminds his friend Timothy of the ultimate reason: “If we are unfaithful He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). God cannot deny His own nature: this is our hope.”

How does His mercy reach us? Giussani shows us in a moving way, immersing himself once again in the figure of Mary Magdalene: “All of a sudden the sense of life dulls. The circle remains closed, cold, encompassing ourselves: egoism. [...] You no longer look for the person, for whom alone the soul is broken and opens up, giving itself, sacrificing itself. [...] Mary Magdalene broke open the alabaster vase and “wasted” the perfume: she gave it away. Giving is always loss. Really loving a person seems like a waste: a waste of oneself, a waste of energy, a waste of time, a waste of forecasting in view of a return, a waste of the possibility of personal profit, a waste of the possibility of enjoyment. Watching what Mary Magdalene does, the others shake their heads, saying, “She’s crazy! Unthinking! No thought for the profit she could have had!” But in that dining room only she “lived” because only loving is living [...]. That opening oneself to others—to the others, to all others—by breaking opening the “peel” of our “I,” usually happens by means of **a face that breaks through the bark of our egoism** and keeps this marvelous wound open. That face arouses and inspires our love. Our spirit blossoms with generosity when it comes in contact with it, and by means of that face our spirit gives itself, gushing forth, to others, all others, to the universe” (Manuscript notes by Fr. Giussani, in *Vita di don Giussani* [Life of Fr. Giussani], Bur, Milano 2014, p. 135).

In order to make an opening in the shell covering Mary Magdalene, God did not use violence. A face evoked and stimulated her love. Only a gaze was adequate for challenging the freedom of that woman. That face, that gaze full of mercy is the culmination of the testimony of God, of His tenderness towards us. Christ responds to our boundless need by bending down to pass through our freedom. It is up to us to embrace His unconditional mercy, which can arrive through a person from whom you would least expect it.

“This morning I came into class with a wound, because one of my students asked me, ‘What was bothering you today? Were you mad at us?’ I wasn’t angry with them, but it was true that I wasn’t present, because I had lost my house keys and I was worried. I was struck that he’d noticed that something was bothering me. It made me think, because it meant that it isn’t true that everything is the same, that it doesn’t matter if you’re there or not. This morning I came to school with that question about presence that he had evoked, the importance that I be present in class, and not with my mind elsewhere. As I entered the classroom, I kind of jumped inside, because I perceived that I need him in order to be there. I need their faces in order to be present. This is simple and liberating. It helped me understand a bit better what you said in Cervinia, that “the Movement is the form, the modality through which Christ has reached us, fascinated us, and seized us. It is the way Christianity has become interesting for us, the way Christ has become a

real presence in our life. We have discovered Him through experience, through His ability to attract us, to fascinate us, and, in belonging to the Movement, to change our life. But this dynamic never stops, because circumstances change constantly. For this reason, the Church always needs to scrutinize the signs of the times to seek the adequate form of witness.” Today I am attracted by an attention to myself that I hadn’t even imagined. I’ve always thought that being present depended on me, and in part, that’s true. Today I discovered that there’s someone who needs me to be present, and I need him in order to be there. This experience is fascinating. It’s a reciprocity that marks me. It’s not that I know what the good of this boy is. Today I know that I am a good for him, because of the passion I have for my life. It’s up to me to respond to this question, not by doing him the good that I imagine he needs, but by doing what I did this morning. Yesterday I was in class but I wasn’t there; this morning I was there, and my being present is a good for him. I saw it looking at his surprise today!”.

#### **4) Without mercy, there is no journey**

If He did not renew His initiative with us time after time, there would be no chance of a journey. In a relationship, there is no journey without mercy. We know this well: without forgiving and being forgiven no relationship would have the chance of lasting. If we do not let ourselves be embraced again, let ourselves be forgiven again, we cannot embrace and forgive ourselves on our own. In this we see the Mystery reveal Himself to us as mercy, as Fr. Giussani says, “The point in which the Mystery reveals itself to us as mercy is a Man born of woman, who shatters all the limited images and plans that we can form with our imagination” (L. Giussani, *Generating Traces*, op. cit., p. 138). Talk about mercy does not enable us to live. What does so is the relationship with a Presence that causes you to abandon yourself in the arms of an Other. Abandoning yourself is what enables you to live, says Giussani. “Man can only surrender. In this surrender he experiences the love of the Mystery as a power that ‘absorbs’ him and re-creates him. It is an absolute trust, an absolute surrender, a surrender comparable to that of Our Lady in the instant in which ‘the angel left her’” (*Ibid.*, p. 135).

For this reason, I do not understand how one can think it possible to make a journey without returning to the “yes” of Peter. Otherwise, how can we start anew? There is no possibility of morality, no possibility of attachment without a presence. Without Presence there is no morality. For this reason, “A particular story [...] is the keystone of the Christian conception of man, of his morality,” (*Ibid.*, p. 59). Mercy is a person. Mercy has a face. It is called Jesus Christ and it reveals itself in the relationship with you as it revealed itself in the relationship with Peter. Even with all his mistakes, his failures, his betrayals, none of this was an objection. None of all this is an objection. The only true objection is skepticism: ‘Well, I don’t know about that!’”.

Therefore, we can take up the journey again only if He once again draws us to Himself. Only in this way do we understand that “mercy is not a human word. It is identical with Mystery; it is the Mystery from which everything comes, upon which everything is supported, and in which everything will end, inasmuch as it is communicated to human experience” (*Ibid.* p. 135). All our preconceived notions, all our measures are blown away by this continual revelation of the boundless Mystery of mercy, challenging all our alibis that make us say such a mercy is not possible.

Only those who yield to this embrace can win the battle against the claim to autonomy, through the continually renewed experience that our “I” is a relationship with an Other, that I am truly I only in the relationship with the Mystery present. Autonomy is like refusing to yield to this gaze of mercy that has reached us and that we bear within.

## 5) Mission

“The world has been won over to Christianity in the end by this word that sums up everything: ‘mercy’” (see *Ibid.* p. 117). From the experience of this continual mercy there can arise the new forms of presence the world needs today.

In his most recent book, Benedict XVI says, “It is clear above all that the de-Christianization of Europe is proceeding, that the Christian element is disappearing more and more from the fabric of society. Consequently, the Church must find a new form of presence, must change her way of presenting herself. Epochal upheavals are underway, but we have yet to know at what point one can say with exactness that one or the other is beginning” (*Ultime conversazioni* [Last Conversations], edited by Peter Seewald, Garzanti, Milano 2016, p. 218) [translation ours].

Again, “Actually, the important thing is that we announce the faith not only in beautiful and authentic forms, but also that we learn to understand them and express them in a new way for the present, and thus that a new style of life be formed. This is what happens, anyway, thanks to Providence, thanks to the Holy Spirit, in modern institutes and religious movements. In these movements there are forms in which the life of the Church is presented in a new way. If for example, I compare [...] the Memores [who live with Benedict XVI] and the traditional religious the way they used to be, I recognize a great impulse to modernization. To put it simply, where faith is active and vital, where it does not live in negation but in joy, it also finds new forms. For me, it is a source of great joy that in the new movements faith is presented in a different way, renewing the face of the Church” (*Ibid.* p. 208).

In the Page One of the September issue of *Traces* we spoke about the “form of witness.” “We do not live in the sky, we live in the circumstances, in front of the challenges of a concrete moment in time: therefore, the forms of our witnesses can be different, because they are determined by historical circumstances. This does not mean that we renounce the origin of our experience, but this origin is incarnated in historical circumstances, in such a way that we can verify if it resists the evolution of the times, the pressure of changes (J. Carrón, “The Form of Witness” *Traces* n. 9/2016, p. II).

**Mercy** appears in history as the opposite of **revolution**. In fact, it is a totally positive presence in the life of the world. “The capacity for mercy is expressed as sensitivity to the good, as the certainty that with the power of Christ the good wins over: ‘I love you God, my strength;’ ‘I am capable of all things in Him in whom is my strength’” (L. Giussani, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, op. cit., p. 117).

This is how true revolution takes place, the only kind that needs no other power than “the certainty that with the power of Christ the good wins over.” This is an experience that is impossible for the human person but becomes real experience through mercy: forgiveness.

“Forgiving means embracing the difference of the other as your own, as a part of yourself. This is what mercy means: it means the attitude of adhering, of embrace, like a mother for her child! [...] You look at other people all the way into their heart, their truth, their relationship with God, that is, with Christ, because they have been called by Christ as I have, and so you embrace them, accept them as part of your journey—no matter what difference there may be, they are part of me. [...] What excuse do we usually give for not esteeming others, and therefore for not loving them? The pretext is a failure to respect their freedom, because the freedom of the other is the way his comparison with the infinite is translated into the daily terms of the circumstances to be faced” (FRATERNITY OF COMMUNION AND LIBERATION (FCL), Milan, *Audiovisual documentation*, Spiritual Exercised of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, Rimini, March 30 –April 1, 1984).

This is why it is in our best interests to follow the Pope, who never tires of calling us to the right position in front of the world, with its boundless need to encounter the One who is among us. “It is by loving that the God-who-is-Love is proclaimed to the world: not by the power of convincing, never by imposing the truth, no less by growing fixated on some religious or moral obligation. God is proclaimed through the encounter between persons, with care for their history and their journey. Because the Lord is not an idea, but a living person: His message is passed on through simple and authentic testimony, by listening and welcoming, with joy which radiates outward. We do not speak convincingly about Jesus when we are sad; not do we transmit God’s beauty merely with beautiful homilies. The God of hope is proclaimed by living out the Gospel of love in the present moment, without being afraid of testifying to it, even in new ways.” (*Homily, Jubilee of Catechists*, September 25, 2016).

A young friend of ours bears witness to this with disarming simplicity:

“When I reflect on my experience of the GS équipe, I think of a “re-happening” of an encounter, of a great friendship that continually wins over my life. First of all, starting with the friends of my community, our friendship took nothing for granted, but opened out to new things, to the freshness of meeting new people whose lives and experiences are different from ours, with genuineness and simplicity [...], the dialogue between us opened into an encounter, a ‘bridge’ with the other, an encounter that affirms Christ’s promise to never leave us alone, to be present in a living and ‘carnal’ way in the existence of each of us, such that every day I say, as my friend Stella wrote, ‘Who are You, that I miss You?’. “Who are You, living presence, whom my heart desires because it is aware that without You, I can do nothing?”

At the équipe, I saw before my eyes the encounter I’d had a few years previously with the companionship of GS, when I felt that the thirst for living that filled and fills my heart was understood, loved, and taken seriously. It’s not that I wasn’t a believer before. I went to Mass every Sunday, and was active in the parish youth center activities, but through that overwhelming experience I sensed through people and events that there is a place where all my thirst for truth is looked at with sincerity and where I am ‘more me’ because there is One who has called me His friend, One who had mercy on my nothingness to the point of being nailed on a cross for me. From then on, I’ve never stopped. Life is exploding in my heart and every day is the moment for verifying the Encounter, ‘without moving one millimeter from reality,’ as Carrón said during the assembly Saturday morning.

I need to live that experience again, to live truly. I don’t settle any more. School, friends, music, sports, in everything reality challenges me to find the “slivers of truth” that correspond to my

heart. From that encounter with a greater Beauty in reality, in my existence, I have begun to live in a true way, worthy of my desire, and not according to my thoughts, because I want to ‘savor’ everything, to ‘throw myself into life’ in a big way, not in an ideal world, but in this reality that is given to me, that is a continual battlefield, where daily I have had, and continue to ask to have, the encounter with Him. The équipe was an opportunity to keep His memory, a springboard for continuing to journey with more decisiveness, because ‘people journey when they know well where to go.’”

Let us ask Our Lady for this simplicity of heart, in order to be great like children who know where to go.