



GOD'S TENDERNESS

REFLECTIONS ON HIS MERCY

CARLOS AYXELÀ (EDITOR)

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Contents

Preface.

1. Mercy in Sacred Scripture: Christ Reveals the Father's Mercy.
2. Go and do likewise.
3. God's open heart: Mercy and Apostolate.
4. With love in our eyes: Mercy and Fraternity.
5. You did it to me: the Corporal works of Mercy.
6. Serene attentiveness: The Spiritual works of Mercy.
7. Restore to me the joy of your salvation: Mercy and Conversion.
8. Mary, Mother of Mercy.

Share...

Preface

If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly (...). But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits (James 3:14-17).

God's Mercy is wisdom that comes from on high, the medicine which can cure the world, because it is the one which truly embraces it.

“God is a Father – your Father! – full of warmth and infinite love.”¹ And we, children of God are called to welcome this tenderness, and to transmit it to the whole world, which is so much in need of understanding, of forgiveness, of peace: of this wisdom which appears ingenuous, but which is a most clear gaze into the heart of man, for it is God's gaze.

This book attempts to be a help to continue meditating and putting into practice the central trait of the Gospel which Pope Francis has encouraged us to rediscover during the Jubilee Year of Mercy (8 December 2015 to 20 November 2016). The closing of the Holy Year will then not be “a destination point and turning to other things, but rather a departure point to undertake the path of our Christian progress with renewed eagerness”.² The articles in this edition first appeared on the web when the Holy Door was opened in every corner of the world. Mercy is approached from various aspects: the apostolic mission, Christian fraternity, sin and penance, the works of

mercy, etc.³ Consideration for meditations and suggestions for daily life have been selected from the Scriptures, the Magisterium of Pope Francis and his predecessors, and from the teachings of St Josemaría Escrivá. For the call to be “merciful like the Father” is always close at hand.⁴

Mercy is not a sugary glance at the Gospel: it is the Gospel in all its radicalness. With mercy, it is “all or nothing. If we do not go into this deeply, we will fail to understand”:⁵ for the one who is calculating and puts too many conditions, finds love escapes him like water trickling through ones fingers. Throughout the Jubilee Year we have tried to let God dilate our heart.⁶ Now, it is a matter of trying to follow this way, because “charity never comes to an end” (1 *Cor* 13:8).

Hand in hand with Our Lady, Mother of Mercy, may we draw water from “the well of prayer”⁷ and of Reconciliation: to receive the mercy “which comes from on high”, so as then with full hands to be able to give it, without being noisy, to those around us, to bring to them a caress from God.

CARLOS AYXELÀ (EDITOR)*

[Back to contents](#)

¹ St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 331.

- 2 Bishop Javier Echevarría, Pastoral Letter, 1 November 2016.
- 3 The suggestions made by Guillaume Derville y Rodolfo Valdés have been a great help in developing the concept and texts in this edition.
- 4 Cf. *Lk* 6:36; Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11 April 2015, 13.
- 5 Pope Francis, First Meditation at the Jubilee for priests, 2 June 2016.
- 6 Cf *Ps* 119(118):32.
- 7 Pope Francis, Homily, 24 December 2015.
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1. Mercy in Sacred Scripture: Christ Reveals the Father's Mercy

Among the dialogues of God with Moses recorded in the Book of Exodus, there is a scene shrouded in mystery where Moses asks the Lord to show him his face. *You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.*¹ When the fullness of time comes, Philip makes the same petition to Jesus, in one of those conversations filled with trust that the Apostles had with the Master: *Lord, show us the Father.*² The reply of God Incarnate is immediate: *He who has seen me has seen the Father.*³

Jesus reveals the Father. When we meditate on the Gospels we can discover the features of God – including, first and foremost, his mercy – made known by the simplicity of Jesus' words and life. Divine mercy, which God revealed throughout the history of the Chosen People, shines brightly in the Word Incarnate. In Him, “the face of the Father's mercy,”⁴ we see fully realized the tender prayer that the Lord had taught Moses for the priests to use when blessing the children of Israel: *The Lord bless you and keep you: the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*⁵ In Jesus, God makes his face shine definitively upon us, and grants us the peace the world cannot give.⁶

God who seeks us and listens

Right from the first pages of Genesis, we are shown the mercy of God. After their sin, Adam and Eve hide among the trees in the garden, because they experience their nakedness, and they no longer dare to look God in the face. But the Lord immediately comes forth to find them. “If that moment of sin marks the beginning of his exile from God, there is already a promise of return, a possibility of return. God immediately asks: ‘Adam, where are you?’ He seeks him out.”⁷ The Lord makes known to them the future triumph over the serpent’s offspring, and he even makes them some garments of skin as a sign that, despite their sin, his love for them has not died out.⁸ God closes the door of paradise behind them,⁹ but on the horizon he opens the door of mercy: *For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.*¹⁰

In the Book of Exodus, the Lord acts decisively to free the oppressed Israelites. His words to Moses from the burning bush, like those in Genesis, echo down the centuries. *I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.*¹¹ What an example for us, who are sometimes slow to listen and to put into practice what others need from us! God is a good Father, who sees the tribulation of his children and intervenes to give them freedom. After they cross the Red Sea, in the solemn setting of Sinai, the Lord shows himself to Moses as a *God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*¹²

A “visceral” love

Psalm 86 repeats the phrase from Exodus almost word for word: “*Deus miserator*” (*raham*) et “*misericors*” (*hanun*), “*patiens et multae misericordiae*” (*hesed*) “*et veritatis*” (*emet*).¹³ In his

translation of the Bible into Latin, Saint Jerome chose to translate three Hebrew concepts with three practically synonymous terms, derived from the Latin word *misericordia*. These three concepts are indeed connected, but each of them contributes a nuance that it is worthwhile analyzing if we wish to appreciate the full extent of God's mercy, which cannot be expressed in a single word.

The adjective *raham* (*miserator*) is derived from *rehem*, which means "bowels, viscera, womb," and is used in the Bible to speak of the birth of a living being.¹⁴ *Rahum* describes the feelings of a mother for the being who is literally flesh of her flesh. *Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*¹⁵ "God has a tenderness for us like a mother when she takes her child into her arms, wanting only to love, protect, help, ready to give all, even her very self. That is the image that this term suggests. A love, therefore, which may be defined in a good sense as 'visceral.'"¹⁶ A love that suffers especially when faced with forgetfulness, contempt, or neglect by the children. *My people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?*¹⁷

But at the same time, it is a love that is always ready to forgive them and to overlook any coldness, since God *does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love.*¹⁸ It is a love that takes pity on the misfortunes the children may fall into with the passing of the years – *I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal*¹⁹ – and does not let up in its effort to bring them back if they have strayed. It is a solicitous love, eager to protect the children if they are being mistreated or persecuted. *Fear not, O Jacob my servant, says the Lord, nor be dismayed, O Israel; for lo, I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make*

*him afraid.*²⁰ It is a welcoming and affectionate love, right down to the smallest details: *Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.*²¹ It is a love that teaches us to be concerned about others, to suffer with their sufferings, and to rejoice with their joys; to be truly close to those around us, with our prayer and interest, visiting the sick... giving of our time.

God is also described as *hanun* (*misericors*). This adjective, which could be translated as “compassionate,” is derived from the word *hen*, which means “grace” or “favor”: something that is offered out of pure benevolence, and that goes beyond strict justice. It expresses the attitude of God which is reflected in one of the commandments of the Covenant code: *If ever you take your neighbor’s garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down; for that is his only covering, it is his mantle for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate (hanun).*²² This commandment is inspired by compassion for the poor man, who is unable to pay what in justice he ought. The Lord cannot stand seeing him suffering, and that compassion, which God inspires in those who are his own, opens the path to true justice. *For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.*²³ A person who truly knows God readily recognizes a brother or sister who is suffering. How many opportunities for serving others we will discover if we ask our Lord for this compassionate outlook! The Jubilee of Mercy is a good opportunity for us to join others in doing some of the corporal works of mercy, wherever we find ourselves.

A faithful God, who waits for us

Psalm 86 also says that the Lord is a God of great mercy, “*multae misericordiae*” (*hesed*), using a word that can be translated literally

as “piety.” It refers above all to the loving respect between parents and children, and also between spouses. Therefore, when Jacob, now very elderly, is about to die, he calls his son Joseph and asks him: *promise to deal loyally (hesed) and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt.*²⁴ That is, he asks him to act as befits a good son and to fulfill his father’s last wish. Saying that God abounds in *hesed* is the same as saying that God always looks upon us as his children: his gifts and his call are irrevocable.²⁵

“It is also said of this merciful God that he is ‘*slow to anger*,’ literally, ‘of great breadth,’ that is, having a *broad capacity of forbearance and patience*. God knows how to wait, his time is not the impatient one of man; he is like the wise farmer who knows how to wait, allowing time for the good seed to grow, in spite of the weeds (cf. *Mt 13:24-30*).”²⁶

Finally, the Lord’s mercy is governed by the abundance of truth: *et veritatis* (‘*emet*). For mercy is not a pretence that masks the offenses and wounds as if they didn’t exist; the wounds are not bandaged over “without first curing them and treating them,”²⁷ because they would become infected. Our Lord is a “physician, and he heals our selfishness, if we let his grace penetrate to the depth of our soul.”²⁸ Letting him cure us means recognizing that we are sinners, showing our wounds with the readiness to use the means needed to cure them. “Show your wound so that it gets properly healed and all possibility of infection is removed, even if doing this hurts you as much as having an operation.”²⁹ And then our Lord promises that *though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*³⁰

A stable and serene relationship with God and others is only achieved on the basis of truth. True happiness, writes Saint Augustine, both here on earth and in heaven, is *gaudium de veritate*,

joy in discovering and communicating the truth.³¹ To walk in the truth is much more than knowing a set of facts. The Hebrew term ‘*emet*’ denotes both “truth” and “fidelity.” A sincere person is faithful, and whoever wishes to be faithful loves the truth. “Abounding in ‘*faithfulness*’: this is the final word of God’s revelation to Moses. God’s faithfulness never fails, because the Lord is the guardian who, as the Psalm says, never slumbers but keeps constant vigil over us in order to lead us to life: *May he not suffer your foot to slip; may he slumber not who guards you: Indeed he neither slumbers nor sleeps, the guardian of Israel... The Lord will guard you from all evil; he will guard your life. The Lord will guard your coming and your going, both now and forever (Ps 121(120):3-4, 7-8).*”³²

In summary, in the Old Testament divine mercy is the tender, maternal welcome that the Lord offers to those who admit the truth of their situation, their weaknesses, errors, sins and infidelities. God not only frees them from the burden weighing them down, but also heals and restores them to the dignity of his children.

The face of the Father’s mercy

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.*³³ These ardent words of the Apostle whom Jesus loved retain all the force with which they were written. In Jesus, John saw and touched the love of God, and all of us Christians can also do so, so *that our joy may be complete.*³⁴ Christ “is divine mercy in person: encountering Christ means encountering God’s mercy.”³⁵ Saint Josemaria invited us not to tire of savoring “the flavor of those moving scenes where the Master performs works that are both divine and human, and tells us,

with human and divine touches, the wonderful story of his pardon for us and his enduring Love for his children.”³⁶

Christ is the Good Samaritan,³⁷ who never ignores those suffering any spiritual or material need, but rather is moved to pity and puts a remedy to their misfortune. “God gets involved with our misery, he draws close to our wounds and he heals them with his hands; he became man in order to have hands with which to heal us. Jesus’ work is personal: one man committed the sin, one Man came to heal it.”³⁸ Our Lord’s whole life is filled with works of mercy. He forgives the sins of the paralytic who is lowered on his stretcher from the roof of the house where he is staying;³⁹ he raises up and restores to his mother the only son of the widow at Naim;⁴⁰ he miraculously feeds the hungry crowds that follow him.⁴¹ “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.”⁴²

Our Lord’s unconditional love reaches its maximum expression in his Passion. There all is forgiveness for men, patience with our sins, words showing no sign of bitterness. Nailed to the wood, he is moved by a thief’s sincere confession: *We indeed [are under the sentence of condemnation] justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; and he asks Jesus: remember me when you come into your kingdom.*⁴³ Jesus responds immediately with a perfect expression of mercy. Jesus accepts the petition made by the thief, who is in need of love and admits the evil in his life in all simplicity; he forgives him and opens to him the door into Heaven. *Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*⁴⁴ Our Lord’s reply shows us that he had been awaiting that moment, as he awaits each one of us, not once but many times. “Jesus received sinners with kindness. If we think in a human way, the sinner would be an enemy of Jesus, an

enemy of God. But he approached them with kindness; he loved them and changed their hearts.”⁴⁵

At the foot of the Cross stood our Lady. Trusting in her intercession, we approach God with words our Father heard in a divine inspiration: *Adeamus cum fiducia ad thronum gloriae ut misericordiam consequamur*;⁴⁶ let us draw near with confidence to the throne of glory, that we may obtain mercy.

[Back to contents](#)

¹ *Exod* 33:23.

² *Jn* 14:8.

³ *Jn* 14:9.

⁴ Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, 1.

⁵ *Num* 6:24-26.

⁶ Cf. *Jn* 14:27.

⁷ Pope Francis, Homily, 7 April 2013; cf. *Gen* 3:9.

⁸ Cf. *Gen* 3:14-21.

⁹ Cf. *Gen* 3:24.

- 10 *Rom* 11:32.
- 11 *Exod* 3:7-8.
- 12 *Exod* 34:6. An almost identical expression is repeated in several places in Sacred Scripture, especially in Psalms 86(85):15, and 103(102):8.
- 13 *Ps* 86(85):15.
- 14 For example, *Exod* 13:2: *Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb [rehem] among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.*
- 15 *Is* 49:15.
- 16 Pope Francis, Audience, 13 January 2016.
- 17 *Mic* 6:3.
- 18 *Mic* 7:18.
- 19 *Jer* 30:17.
- 20 *Jer* 46: 27.
- 21 *Is* 55:1.
- 22 *Exod* 22:26-27.
- 23 *Hos* 6:6.
- 24 *Gen* 47:29.
- 25 Cf. *Rom* 11:29.
- 26 Pope Francis, Audience, 13 January 2016.
- 27 Pope Francis, Speech, 18 October 2014.
- 28 St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 93.
- 29 St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 192.

- 30 *Is* 1:18.
- 31 Cf. St Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 23, 33.
- 32 Pope Francis, Audience, 13 January 2016.
- 33 *1 Jn* 1:1.
- 34 *1 Jn* 1:4.
- 35 Joseph Ratzinger, Homily, Mass for Election of a Pope, 18 April 2005.
- 36 St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 216.
- 37 Cf. *Lk* 10:33-35.
- 38 Pope Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 22 October 2013.
- 39 Cf. *Mk* 2:3-12.
- 40 Cf. *Lk* 7: 11-15.
- 41 Cf. *Mt* 14:13-21; 15:32-39.
- 42 Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, 8.
- 43 *Lk* 23:41-42.
- 44 *Lk* 23:43.
- 45 Pope Francis, Audience, 20 February 2016.
- 46 Cf. *Heb* 4:16.

2. Go and do likewise

A doctor of the Law once approached Jesus to ask what he should do to attain eternal life. What he really wanted it seems was to test the orthodoxy of this rabbi from Nazareth, unsure what to make of him.¹ But our Lord was not annoyed; he entered into conversation with the man, answering him with another question. *What is written in the Law; how do you read it?*² The doctor of the Law replied with words from the *Shema, Israel – Listen, O Israel*, which all Israelites learned as children: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind;*³ and he added from the Book of Leviticus, *and your neighbour as yourself.*⁴ *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*⁵ And our Lord replied, *You have answered right; do this, and you will live.*⁶ The doctor of the Law had not expected his question to be answered with such disarming simplicity. *But he, desiring to justify himself,*⁷ posed a new question: *And who is my neighbor?*⁸ Our Lord did not give up. He wanted to gain his questioner's confidence. So his next words went straight to his heart, and to those of men and women of all times. In language at once simple and solemn, he told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Being a good neighbour

In the poor man who was attacked on his journey from Jerusalem to Jericho, the Church Fathers saw Adam and, because Adam means simply *man*, the whole of mankind with him, wounded by its own sins – our own sins. In the Good Samaritan they recognized Jesus,

who patiently comes to heal us, after others have come and gone who had no real power to save the world. He, in contrast, can and wants to. This is how an ancient and venerable homily imagines his meeting with Adam – which is also his meeting with each one of us – when He descended into the underworld: “I am your God, who for you and for all those to be born from you, have made myself your son. And now I say to you that I have the power to declare to those who are enchained, ‘Come forth,’ and to those who are in darkness, ‘Be enlightened,’ and to those who sleep, ‘Arise’.”⁹ With Jesus, his anointed ones – “Christians” – are likewise called to bring salvation, to be good Samaritans. Like their Master they too must bind up people’s wounds and pour on oil and wine.¹⁰ They must be good innkeepers until the Samaritan returns. “This inn, if you reflect on it, is the Church. Now it is an inn, because our life is a journey; it will be our home that we shall never abandon, once we have arrived safely in the kingdom of heaven. Meanwhile we gratefully accept the care given in the inn.”¹¹

These are the horizons that our Lord wants to open up to the doctor of the Law, and with him all Christians. He does not reproach him for his limited understanding. He leads him first to reflect, and then to dream: *Go and do likewise*.¹² As often with the Gospels, it is wise not to pass over the abrupt ending of the story too quickly. The answer to Jesus’ question about who was the wounded man’s neighbour is certainly clear: *the one who showed mercy on him*.¹³ What is not so clear is why our Lord asked that question, which turned around the question asked by the doctor of the Law. “Jesus shifts our understanding: it is not just about seeing the other as someone like myself, but of the ability to make myself like the other.”¹⁴ Faced with a narrow attitude that limits our field for doing good, weighing up for example whether or not the other person

belongs to our group or will later return the favour, our Lord responds by inviting us to broaden our perspective, to become a neighbour to the other person.

The word “neighbour” then changes from meaning the type of person who deserves my attention, to meaning a quality of the heart. In order to teach us, God turns around the question “Who ought I do good to?” and transforms it. What had been a matter of discussion and argument in the rabbinical schools (What is the limit? How far do I have to go in taking pity on other people?) becomes a bold challenge. “For the Christian,” said St. John Paul II, “every human being is a ‘neighbour’ to be loved. He should not ask himself whom he should love, because to ask ‘who is my neighbour?’ is already to set limits and conditions . . . The right question is not ‘who is my neighbour?’ but ‘to whom should I become a neighbour?’ And the answer is: ‘anyone in need, even if a stranger to me, becomes a neighbour I must help’.”¹⁵

This is what being close to others means, the “art of accompaniment” that Pope Francis stresses,¹⁶ in reminding us of our call to be close to our neighbour, to be “islands of mercy in the midst of a sea of indifference.”¹⁷

The path to the fullness of the Law

We could see this dialogue with a doctor of the Law as a path from the moral teaching of the Old Testament to the fullness of moral life in Christ. As St. Paul reminds us, the Law of the Chosen People is good and holy,¹⁸ but not final and complete. It was designed above all to prepare their hearts for our Lord’s coming.

The Pharisee’s question about *which is the great commandment in the Law*¹⁹ seems to reflect a sense of dismay at the multitude of

precepts that their legalistic view had added on to Jewish religious life. Jesus complained elsewhere to the doctors of the Law that they loaded *men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.*²⁰ Worse still, human traditions had sometimes been used as an excuse for not obeying a divine commandment. Our Lord condemned the attitude of those who made their offerings to the Temple an excuse for not helping their parents.²¹

Therefore Jesus turns their eyes to what is fundamental: love for God and neighbour. He thus confirmed his words that He had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. *I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfil them.*²² The Covenant God had made with his People included commandments whose original intention was not to impose burdens, but on the contrary to lead them into paths of freedom. *See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day . . . then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to take possession of it.*²³

The land promised to the Jews is a figure of the inner land that men and women of all times can enter, if we live according to the true meaning of God's commandments. They are the doorway to reach communion with God, because any other land will be inhospitable. "You need a heart in love, not an easy life, to achieve happiness."²⁴

Though the ritual and legal precepts of the People of Israel ceased with the coming of Christ, the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue, are permanently valid. They summarize the key principles for loving God: putting him before everything, respecting

his holy name, dedicating days to him as Christians do on Sundays; and also for loving other people: affection and respect for our parents, protecting life, purity of heart, etc. How many generations of Israelites meditated on the truth and fatherly care contained in these words! *Your testimonies are my heritage for ever . . . the joy of my heart,*²⁵ an example of the mercy of God who does not want us to lose our way, who wants us to have a full life. The world may sometimes seem to discard the Commandments as outmoded, suitable only for mankind's "infancy." But there are many examples of societies and individuals collapsing when they thought they could ignore them. These ten "words" of the Lord are the constants for mankind's inner life; if they are distorted, people's hearts become warped.

So that you become children of your Father

The Decalogue is taken up in the New Law established by Christ on saving us by giving his life on the Cross. The New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ.²⁶ Hence we no longer have just a moral goal to aspire to: we now aim to live in Jesus, to become more and more like him, letting the Holy Spirit transform us so that we can fulfil his Commandments.

How can we become more like Christ? Where can we see what He is like? The Catechism says that "the Beatitudes depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity."²⁷ These Gospel teachings show us our Lord's portrait, his face revealing the Father's compassionate love for all men and women. They take up the promises made to the Chosen People and perfect them, directing them no longer merely to the possession of a territory but to the Kingdom of Heaven.²⁸

In St. Matthew's Gospel the first four beatitudes refer to an attitude or a way of being: *blessed are the poor in spirit,*²⁹ *those who mourn,*³⁰ *the meek,*³¹ *those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*³² They invite us to have complete confidence in God rather than in our own resources, to face suffering with a Christian spirit, and to be patient day after day. To these beatitudes are added others that put the emphasis on action: *blessed are the merciful,*³³ *the pure in heart,*³⁴ *the peacemakers.*³⁵ And the remaining ones make clear that in following Jesus we will have to suffer difficulties,³⁶ but that we should always react cheerfully. For "happiness in Heaven is for those who know how to be happy on earth."³⁷

The Beatitudes certainly show us the mercy of God, who is determined to give unlimited joy to those who follow him: *rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*³⁸ Nevertheless they are not a series of maxims painting a utopia, a better world that it will be someone else's job to bring about, or a false consolation in the face of life's difficulties. The Beatitudes are also demanding appeals that God makes to each person's heart, urging us to commit ourselves to work for goodness and justice here and now on this earth.

Thinking frequently about the Beatitudes, maybe in our personal prayer, helps us to find ways to apply them in our daily life. For example, meekness is so often shown in "the cheerful smile for those who bother you; that silence when you are unjustly accused; your kind conversation with people you find boring and tactless; the daily effort to overlook one irritating detail or another in those who live with you..."³⁹

If we try to live according to the spirit of the Beatitudes, we will little by little acquire attitudes and criteria that help us to fulfil the

Commandments more easily. Cleanness of heart enables us to see the image of God in each person, viewing them as someone worthy of respect and not as an object to satisfy twisted desires. Being peaceable leads us to live as God's children and to recognize others as his children, following the *more excellent way*⁴⁰ of charity *that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*,⁴¹ transforming injuries into opportunities to love and to pray for those who do us harm.⁴² In short, shaping our hearts in accord with the lines marked out by the Beatitudes makes a reality of the ideal Christ sets forth for us: to be *merciful even as your Father is merciful*.⁴³ We become bearers of God's love, and learn to see others as the neighbour who needs our help. In Christ, we are the good Samaritan who acts mercifully to fulfil fully the law of charity. And then our heart grows larger, as did our Blessed Lady's.

[Back to contents](#)

¹ Cf. *Lk* 10:25.

² *Lk* 10:26.

³ *Deut* 6:5.

⁴ *Lev* 19:18.

⁵ *Mt* 22:40.

- 6 *Lk 10:28.*
- 7 *Lk 10:29.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Homily on the Holy and Great Sabbath* (PG 43, 462).
- 10 Cf. *Lk 10:34.*
- 11 St Augustine, *Sermon* 131, 6.
- 12 *Lk 10:37.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Pope Francis, Message, 24 January 2014.
- 15 St John Paul II, Speech, 2 February 1999.
- 16 Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 169.
- 17 Pope Francis, Message, 4 October 2014.
- 18 Cf. *Rom 7:12.*
- 19 *Mt 22:36.*
- 20 *Lk 11:46.*
- 21 Cf. *Mt 15:3-6.*
- 22 *Mt 5:17.*
- 23 *Deut 30:15-18.*
- 24 St Josemaría, *Furrow*, 795.
- 25 *Ps 119(118)*, 111.
- 26 Cf. St Thomas, *Summa* I-II, q. 106, a.1, c, and ad 2; quoted in St John Paul II, Enc. *Veritas Splendor*, 24.

27 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1717.

28 *Ibid.* 1716.

29 *Mt* 5:3.

30 *Mt* 5:4.

31 *Mt* 5:5.

32 *Mt* 5:6.

33 *Mt* 5:7.

34 *Mt* 5:8.

35 *Mt* 5:9.

36 *Mt* 5:10-12.

37 St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 1055.

38 *Mt* 5:12.

39 St Josemaría, *The Way*, 173.

40 *1 Cor* 12:31.

41 *1 Cor* 13:7.

42 Cf. *Mt* 5: 44-45.

43 *Lk* 6:36.

3. God's Open Heart: Mercy and Apostolate

My kingship is not of this world, Jesus replies when Pilate questions him about the Sanhedrin's accusations. He is a King, but not over a worldly kingdom: *If my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.*¹ A few hours earlier in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus spoke to Peter in similar terms to convince him to sheathe his sword. *Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*²

God does not enter the world with the weapons of mankind: *the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit . . . and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*³ Jesus “does not fight to build power. If he breaks down walls and challenges our sense of security, he does this to open the floodgates of that mercy which, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he wants to pour out upon our world. A mercy which expands; it proclaims and brings newness; it heals, liberates and proclaims the year of the Lord's favor.”⁴

God looks at the heart

*In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world – ego vici mundum.*⁵ Jesus' priestly prayer in the Cenacle brings consolation to his disciples down through the ages. Our Lord conquers, even when the preaching of the Gospel

encounters great difficulties, and it seems that God's cause may fail. *Christus vincit*, Christ conquers; but he conquers according to a plan that does not match human ideas of power: *My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.*⁶

*To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.*⁷ When the devil showed Jesus all the nations of the earth, he did not offer him mere wealth and possessions but rather the subjection of mankind to his will by worldly control. The devil distorts the promise of the Father to the Son that we find in Psalm 2: *Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage.*⁸ He offers Christ a worldly vision, a redemption without suffering. But "Jesus is very clear that it is not worldly power that saves the world, but the power of the Cross, of humility and of love."⁹

By rejecting this temptation, Christ traces out the path that all Christians should follow. He gives us a glimpse of how his dominion will be carried out in history, even though it may appear foolish to human eyes: God will reign with his mercy. If his kingdom is not of this world, then neither is his mercy. But precisely because of this, because it is born *from on high*,¹⁰ it can embrace the world and save it.

*Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.*¹¹ God has no use for the kind of formal, external submission that is hollow inside. He seeks out each person; he knocks at the door of each heart.¹² *My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.*¹³ This is the way God rules: he conquers because he manages to disarm us. He conquers not by suppressing our desires for happiness, but by showing us that without him, they lead to a dead end.

The more I called them, the more they went from me, the Lord laments through the words of the prophet Hosea.¹⁴ But although men may resist God's call, we Christians know that, in the end, if we open the door of our soul even slightly, God enters into our life and we are captured by his overwhelming love. His is "a Mercy in motion, a Mercy that each day seeks to make progress, taking small steps forward and advancing in that wasteland where indifference and violence have predominated."¹⁵ Therefore our apostolate, born of faith, is imbued with serenity: "It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being 'anti anything.' On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy and peace."¹⁶

Loving with God's Love

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.¹⁷ God looks at souls with compassion. He wants to reach out to every human being through his children. God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.¹⁸ He introduces us into divine Love, the warm and welcoming climate in which he wants us to be immersed here and now on this earth, and afterwards for all eternity. "Our love," says Saint Josemaria, "is not to be confused with sentimentality or mere good fellowship, nor with that somewhat questionable zeal to help others in order to convince ourselves of our superiority. Rather, it means living in peace with our neighbor, venerating the image of God that is found in each and every human being and doing all we can to get them to contemplate that image, so that they may learn how to turn to Christ."¹⁹ We need to let God, who lives in us, love through the heart of each one of us: loving with God's love.

“God’s Love is well worth any love!”²⁰ These ardent words of Saint Josemaria show us the infinite Heart of God alongside our human heart, that is so small, but capable of expanding to accomplish great deeds. God’s Love is well worth the love we show by dedicating our lives to being filled with him and spreading his mercy generously to other people. This is a calling for big-hearted people, an invitation to soar high while often leading a prosaic and ordinary life. “A merciful heart does not mean a weak heart. Anyone who wishes to be merciful must have a strong and steadfast heart, closed to the tempter but open to God. A heart which lets itself be pierced by the Spirit so as to bring love along the roads that lead to our brothers and sisters. And, ultimately, a poor heart, one which realizes its own poverty and gives itself freely for others.”²¹

“Removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other”

A heart that “realizes its own poverty” is capable of being filled with the riches of God’s love. “The God who shares our sufferings, the God who became man in order to bear our cross, wants to transform our hearts of stone. He invites us to share in the sufferings of others. He wants to give us a ‘heart of flesh’ . . . filled with compassion, leading us to the love that heals and restores.”²²

Then we will be able to accompany each person, not only as having a lot to teach others, but also as having a lot to learn. The more capable we are of receiving from others, the more the gifts we have received from God will shine and be perfected. Our heart needs to speak to another heart: *cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaks to heart, as Blessed John Henry Newman perceived so well.²³ If we “remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other,”²⁴ if we let ourselves be surprised by others, then we can truly help them.

“And if you see a friend who has slipped up in life and fallen, go and offer him or her your hand, but do so with dignity. Put yourself on their level, listen to them . . . Let them speak, let them share their experience, and then little by little, they will offer you their hand, and, in the name of Jesus Christ, you can help them. But if you go in suddenly and begin to give them a sermon, going on about the same thing, well then, he or she will be worse off than before.”²⁵

Nowadays Christians encounter people in all sorts of situations. If we truly reach out to each person with an open heart, we can leave in that person's soul *the peace of God which passes all understanding*,²⁶ and each in our own way can leave a mark on that soul. Sometimes these are baptized people who have never practiced their faith, or who abandoned it after their First Holy Communion; or perhaps people who, after a number of years of practicing the faith, sometimes fervently, have given in to the temptations of comfort-seeking, relativism, or lukewarmness. Other times we will meet people who have never spoken with anyone about God in a personal conversation.

Some may be a bit reticent at first to speak about this topic because they feel it is an invasion of their freedom. Our serenity as children of God is always the best weapon then. *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand.*²⁷ The mercy of God will move us to reach out to everyone, as Jesus did;²⁸ and also like Jesus, to let ourselves be reached by others,²⁹ to spend time with people. We can help them confront their worries and problems, and open up new horizons for them, starting from where they find themselves right now. We can make clear yet gentle demands on them, while always helping them to fulfill them.

“The Church, united to Christ, is born of a wounded Heart. From this Heart, opened wide, life is transmitted to us.”³⁰ All authentic apostolate is also an apostolate of Confession. We have to help others experience the overwhelming mercy of God, who waits for us as the father of the prodigal son, eager to give us his fatherly embrace that purifies us and enables us to once again look at him and at others face to face. “If you should stray from him for any reason, react with the humility that will lead you to begin again and again; to play the role of the prodigal son every day, and even repeatedly during the twenty-four hours of the same day; to correct your contrite heart in Confession, which is a real miracle of God’s Love. In this wonderful Sacrament our Lord cleanses your soul and fills you with joy and strength to prevent you from giving up the fight, and to help you keep returning to God unwearied, even when everything seems black. In addition, the Mother of God, who is also our Mother, watches over you with motherly care, guiding your every step.”³¹

It could seem superfluous to say this, but we know that it is not: the first to receive God’s mercy should be our brothers and sisters in the faith. *For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*³² Our first apostolate has to be with those in our own home, and with those who are part of the house of God, the Church. Our zeal for souls would be false if our heart were not sensitive to other Catholics. God wants them to receive a lot of love so they can share it with others in their turn. Therefore we have to be on our guard against “getting used” to those we live with, creating barriers by following only our natural affinities, or letting friction arise out of small daily occurrences. “It was said of the first followers of Christ: ‘See how they love one another.’ Can this be said of you, and of me, at all times?”³³ God wants the fraternal love of Christians to be the channel for the torrent of his Mercy,³⁴ so

that it may find a path into the hearts of all men and women. Then, with the force of the Holy Spirit, the world will come to know that the Father loves all men and women as he loves the Son he sent to us.³⁵

[Back to contents](#)

¹ *Jn* 18:36.

² *Mt* 26:53.

³ *Heb* 4:12.

⁴ Pope Francis, Homily, 24 March 2016.

⁵ *Jn* 16:33.

⁶ *Is* 55:8.

⁷ *Lk* 4:6.

⁸ *Ps* 2:8.

⁹ Benedict XVI, General Audience, 13 February 2013.

¹⁰ *Lk* 1:78.

¹¹ *1 Sam* 16:7.

¹² Cf. *Rev* 3:20.

- 13 *Prov* 23:26.
- 14 *Hos* 11:2.
- 15 Pope Francis, Homily, 24 March 2016.
- 16 St Josemaría, *Furrow*, 864.
- 17 *Mt* 9:36.
- 18 *Rom* 5:5.
- 19 St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 230.
- 20 St Josemaría, *The Way*, 171.
- 21 Pope Francis, Lenten Message, 4 October 2014.
- 22 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Presentation of the Way of the Cross, 25 March 2005.
- 23 This is the motto Blessed John Henry Newman chose when made a cardinal.
- 24 Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 169.
- 25 Pope Francis, Address, 16 February 2016.
- 26 *Phil* 4:7.
- 27 *Phil* 4:4-5.
- 28 Cf. *Mt* 9:10-11; *Jn* 4:7ff.
- 29 Cf. *Lk* 7:36; 19:6-7.
- 30 St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 169.
- 31 St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 214.
- 32 *1 Jn* 4:20.
- 33 St Josemaría, *Furrow*, 921.

³⁴ Cf. Pope Francis, Homily, 24 March 2016.

³⁵ Cf. *Jn* 17:23.

4. With Love In Our Eyes: Mercy and Fraternity

Little by little, in following the liturgical feasts and the various Jubilee ceremonies and celebrations, we are trying to “gaze even more attentively on mercy”¹ during this Holy Year. In the Papal Bull convoking the Jubilee year, the Pope stressed that the mystery of God’s mercy is not only for those living far away from the Father’s house, but also for those of us who are trying to live close to God despite all our limitations. Then we too can be “a more effective sign of the Father’s action,” so that “the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective.”²

“Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life,”³ and therefore embraces every aspect of Christian living. At first this might look like a mere slogan, a different way of referring to the same topics as always. But it is much more than that. Mercy is the light and strength from God to rediscover *with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth*⁴ of his Love.

Looking again at our love

Reflecting in depth on mercy, seeing it as a reality that concerns us directly, will help us pinpoint in our dialogue with our Lord where our love may be slackening. We will be helped to see whether we somehow resemble the elder son in the parable of the merciful father – the son who was unable to rejoice with the others.⁵ Or whether, perhaps, we are like the Pharisee, who went up to the Temple satisfied with all he had accomplished, but whose heart was cold.⁶ Or

like the servant who, after being forgiven by his master, wasn't ready to forgive the little debts of his fellow-servant.⁷

*I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance . . . I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you: that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*⁸ In these words from the Apocalypse, God is knocking at the door of Christians who are trying hard to practise their faith deeply. He confirms us in the good we are doing, while at the same time urging us on to a new conversion. Saint Josemaría's words below reflect the same concern, and can shine a light into the depths of our soul:

“You fulfil a demanding plan of life: you rise early, you pray, you frequent the sacraments, you work or study a lot, you are temperate and mortified... But you are aware that something is missing!

“Consider this in your conversation with God: since holiness, or the struggle to achieve it, is the fullness of charity, you must look again at your love of God and your love of others for his sake. Then you may discover, hidden in your soul, great defects that you have not even been fighting against: not being a good son, a good brother, a good companion, a good friend, a good colleague...

You ‘sacrifice’ yourself in many small personal details, and so you are attached to yourself, to your own person. Deep down you do not live for God or for others, but only for yourself.”⁹

If we allow God's mercy to enter into our soul, it leads us to look again at our love, to clear out the ruts our heart may have got stuck in without our realizing it. His mercy helps us to discover anew what it means to live for others; it rescues us from an excessive desire for personal security¹⁰ that leaves little room for God and those around us. The Pope asks: does my happiness lie in “getting out of myself to

go to meet my neighbour,” or in “having everything sorted out, enclosed inside myself?”¹¹

Rejoicing with other people

“God is joy,” said Saint John Paul II to young people, “and the joy in our lives reflects the original joy that God experienced on creating mankind.”¹² A joy he experiences anew whenever he forgives us: there is *more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*.¹³ Underlying the mystery of divine mercy is “the joy of God who wants to enter the world.”¹⁴ Hence Saint Paul’s plea: *he who does acts of mercy, [let him do so] with cheerfulness*.¹⁵

Therefore mercy is not only called into action by the weakness or imperfections of those around us. It is love without reserves, uncalculating love. It is a light that pervades everything and makes the Christian virtues into attractive aspects of a person’s character. Above all, it is the radiance of a Love that is not of this world.¹⁶ “True virtue is not sad and disagreeable, but pleasantly cheerful,” wrote Saint Josemaría in *The Way*.¹⁷ Years later he would return to the same idea with reference to a comment someone had made.

“‘You are all so cheerful, and one doesn’t expect that,’ I heard someone say.

“It has been happening for a long time; insistently and with diabolical determination, Christ’s enemies never tire of complaining that the people who give themselves to God are all sullen and sad. And, unfortunately, some of those who wish to be ‘good’ have lent support to those words, with their ‘sad virtues.’

“We give you thanks, Lord, because you have chosen to count on our cheerful, happy lives to erase that false caricature.

"I also ask You that we may not forget it."¹⁸

Mercy, then, in order to “work,” to be genuine, has to permeate joyfully our whole life. Joy is connected with youth because a young spirit does not calculate or set limits. For our Christian life not to be a false caricature, it has to be flooded with joyful mercy.

This is no utopia. Mercy is compatible with weakness, and in fact our very weakness is what enables us to grow in mercy, since it makes us humbler and better able to understand that the people around us also have defects. Therefore, although our hard-heartedness or lack of self-giving sometimes prevents us from reflecting God’s mercy, we can at least tell our Lord that we want to be merciful in everything. He will help us to stop calculating, to stop excluding certain people or circumstances, so that we too can experience this reality: “To give oneself sincerely to others is so effective that God rewards it with a humility filled with cheerfulness.”¹⁹ And we will also be able to pass on to others this good atmosphere, which is not mere “physiological good spirits – the happiness of a healthy animal,”²⁰ but the true “supernatural happiness that comes from the abandonment of everything and the abandonment of yourself into the loving arms of our Father-God.”²¹

If we abandon ourselves in God’s arms like that, we will pass on to others, often without even realizing it, the joy that God gives us, a joy that “is born of a free encounter,” of “hearing that ‘you matter to me,’ not necessarily in words ... And that is precisely what God makes us understand,”²² and what we can make others understand, also without any words.

Affection

When Saint Josemaria talked about charity he would often also call it “affection,”²³ to make it clear that real charity is not “official, dry or soulless,” but full of “human warmth,”²⁴ understanding and openness. Practising charity is much more than observing the outward forms of good manners, or being coldly respectful – which in fact keep the other person at a distance. Charity means opening our hearts,²⁵ demolishing the barriers we sometimes set up between ourselves and others when there is something about them that we don’t like.

The word “respect” comes from the Latin *respectus*, meaning an attentive look, consideration. True respect is not well-mannered resignation about other people’s failings, which would be no more than a defensive wall to protect ourselves from them. Real respect means being approachable, understanding, magnanimous, and able to look people in the eyes. It is this attitude that the Pope refers to when he talks about “tenderness,” which is “respectful, delicate charity.”²⁶ As he said at one point: “Always try to have eyes that welcome, a helping, accompanying hand, consoling words, and a tender embrace.”²⁷

“Following our Lord’s example, understand your brothers or sisters, with a very big heart that is not shocked by anything, and love them really and truly . . . By being very human you will be able to pass over small defects and always see, with motherly understanding, the good side of things.”²⁸ Even though we already know it, it will do us good to rediscover the keynote of mercy running through this comparison made by Saint Josemaría: “Graphically and jokingly I have pointed out the different ways people see the same thing, depending on whether they look at it with or without affection. I said – and forgive me, because it’s very graphic – that when a child has his finger in his nose, visitors say ‘How dirty!’ But his mother

says ‘He’s going to be a researcher!’ My daughters and sons, you understand me: we have to forgive. Don’t be put off by unimportant spiritual or material details. Look at your brothers or sisters with love and you will come to the charitable conclusion that we are all researchers!”²⁹

People can appear very different to us, depending on whether we look at them “with or without affection.” Mercy is not just a praiseworthy attitude of our hearts; Saint Josemaria shows us that it is a necessary condition if we are to get to know others without the distortions introduced by our self-love. Looking at people mercifully does not mean becoming sentimental, but seeing them as God sees them. Then we see them as they really are: men and women with virtues that we admire, but also with defects that probably make them suffer, even if they don’t show it, and that call for our understanding and help. Without mercy, on the other hand, our view is deprived of breadth and depth, and we diminish others. Looking at them affectionately, with love, enables us to know them better and so also to love them better. “The human heart is endowed with an enormous coefficient of expansion. When it loves, it opens out in a crescendo of affection that overcomes all barriers. If you love our Lord, there will not be a single creature that does not find a place in your heart.”³⁰

Daily forms of forgiveness

Family unity is more than merely living together, just as peace is more than merely the absence of war. In a home or a business, although no major conflicts may be present, subtle walls can sometimes be raised behind which people try to protect themselves from others. These walls can even appear without our really intending them to, because daily life alongside others almost

inevitably gives rise to clashes or annoyances. “There may be friction and differences, but that’s quite normal. In a certain sense it even adds flavour to our daily life. These problems are insignificant, time always takes care of them.”³¹

As long as we don’t allow our pride to magnify things disproportionately, with time we will see that something we thought was very important was in fact not important at all. So, especially in family life, it is important to be vigilant to prevent the appearance of any walls, even very small ones, that separate us from others. If instead of passing over things we find annoying we were to harbor grudges, something that was in itself inoffensive would chill our hearts little by little, spoiling our relationship with the others and the atmosphere at home.

Resentment is a vicious circle that leads us to keep a list of grievances, feeding our own ego by contrast with other people’s deficiencies, real or imagined. It is mercy that frees us from this vicious circle. God’s Love impels us to seek him in our hearts, pouring out our concerns to him. “From what point do we begin to pardon the small and great wrongs that we suffer each day? First of all, beginning with prayer . . . We begin with our own heart: with prayer we are able to face the resentment we feel, by entrusting to God’s mercy those who have wronged us: ‘Lord, I pray to you for him, I pray to you for her.’ Then we discover that this inner struggle to forgive cleanses us of evil, and that prayer and love free us from the interior chains of bitterness. It is so awful to live in bitterness! Every day we have the opportunity to practise forgiving, to make a gesture so lofty that it brings man closer to God.”³² Saint Josemaría, for example, in the Mementos of the Mass, used to pray for those who had tried to harm him in any way.³³

A merciful heart is a heart that is agile, quick to confront daily annoyances with a sporting spirit, not making a drama out of them.³⁴ We can sometimes find it difficult to forgive others when we are weighed down by tiredness, discouragement or tension. But it is a good idea to aim to forgive right away (with God's help, which never fails us), and even to forgive in advance, generously, without keeping any account. If we make allowances for people – giving them, so to speak, a margin in which to make mistakes, be thoughtless or get irritable – we won't have to forgive them as though making concessions to them. Rather we will forgive them without giving ourselves importance, with a charity that *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*.³⁵

We may certainly find it hard to get over someone else's behavior, and it may be appropriate to point it out gently to them, at the right time, to help them improve. But whatever the case, we can forgive straight away, even though it hurts. Very often we won't even need to say so in words, so as not to dwell on the episode. Our warmth and a friendly remark will be enough to smooth things over. When we overcome the temptation to return harm for harm, or coldness for coldness, our Lord fills our souls. Then we can say with the Psalmist, *misericordia tua super vitas*, your mercy is better than life.³⁶ And we can say with Saint Josemaria, who knew that it was our Lord who enlarged his heart, "I haven't needed to learn how to forgive, because God has taught me how to love."³⁷

[Back to contents](#)

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- 1 Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, 3.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 4 *Eph* 3:18.
- 5 Cf. *Lk* 15:28-32.
- 6 Cf. *Lk* 18:10-14.
- 7 Cf. *Mt* 18: 23-35.
- 8 *Rev* 2:2-4.
- 9 St Josemaría, *Furrow*, 739.
- 10 Cf. St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 18.
- 11 Pope Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 25 February 2016.
- 12 St John Paul II, Speech, 6 April 1995.
- 13 *Lk* 15:7.
- 14 Benedict XVI, Homily, 18 April 2010. Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmos*, 24 6: “In God we recognise kindness, in other words, the passing on of his blessings to his creatures, because good is diffusive of itself. Mercy, in turn, refers to a special outpouring of his kindness to overcome wretchedness.”
- 15 *Rom* 12:8.
- 16 Cf. *Jn* 17:21.
- 17 St Josemaría, *The Way*, 657.

- 18 *Furrow*, 58.
- 19 St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 591.
- 20 St Josemaría, *The Way*, 659.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Pope Francis, Speech, 6 July 2013.
- 23 Cf. for instance *Furrow*, 821; *The Forge*, 148; *Friends of God*, 125 and 229; and *Christ is Passing By*, 36.
- 24 St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 167.
- 25 Cf. St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 225.
- 26 Pope Francis, Message, 6 December 2013.
- 27 Pope Francis, Speech, 9 November 2013.
- 28 St Josemaría, *Letter 29 September 1957*, 35; quoted in E. Burkhart and J. Lopez, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría: estudio de teología espiritual*, Madrid: Rialp 2011, vol. II, pp. 331-332.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 St Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, Eighth Station, 5.
- 31 St Josemaría, *Conversations*, 101.
- 32 Pope Francis, Angelus, 26 December 2015.
- 33 Cf. Javier Echevarria, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, Madrid: Rialp 2010, pp. 106 and 151.
- 34 Cf. *Conversations*, 91.
- 35 *I Cor* 13:7.
- 36 *Ps* 63(62): 3.
- 37 St Josemaría, *Furrow*, 804.

5. You did it to me: the Corporal Works of Mercy

Our God did not limit himself to saying that he loves us. He is the one who formed us from the clay of the earth.¹ “It was God’s hands that fashioned us: God the artist.”² He created us in his image and likeness, and even became “one of us.”³ The Word was made flesh; he worked with his hands, carried on his shoulders the weight of the wretchedness of all the centuries, and chose to keep the wounds of his passion forever as a permanent sign of his steadfast love. Therefore we Christians not only call ourselves God’s children, but we truly are such.⁴ For God and his children, love “can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes and behaviors that are shown in daily living.”⁵

Saint Josemaría alerted us to the danger of seeing Christianity “as a collection of devout practices, failing to realize the relation between them and the circumstances of ordinary life, including the urgency to meet the needs of other people and remedy injustices. I would say that anyone who has that attitude has not yet understood the meaning of the Incarnation. The Son of God has taken the body and soul and voice of a man; he has shared our fate, even to the extent of experiencing the excruciating anguish of death.”⁶

Called to mercy

In the scene of the Last Judgment that Jesus sets forth in Matthew’s Gospel, both the just and the unjust are puzzled and ask our Lord when it was that they saw him hungry, naked or ill, and

either helped him or refused to do so.⁷ And our Lord replies, *Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*⁸ This is not just a nice phrase, as though our Lord were merely encouraging us to remember him and imitate his way of showing mercy. Jesus announces solemnly, *Truly, I say to you ... you did it to me.* He “has united Himself in some fashion with every man,”⁹ because he takes love to its ultimate conclusion: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*¹⁰ Being a Christian means entering into God’s unconditional love, yielding our lives to “the infinite love of God.”¹¹

In the scene of the Last Judgment, our Lord speaks of hunger, thirst, being a stranger, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment.¹² The works of mercy are already present here in outline. The Fathers of the Church made frequent reference to them, and began the now-familiar division into corporal and spiritual works of mercy, without attempting to enumerate every form of human need exhaustively. As time went by, the duty of burying the dead was added to the corporal works, accompanied by the spiritual work of praying for the living and the dead.

In this article and the next, we will review these works in which Christian wisdom has summed up our calling to mercy. For indeed it is nothing less than a vocation – and a universal one at that – when our Lord tells his disciples down through the ages: *Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*¹³ The works of mercy help us visualize this call in concrete terms. “It would be beautiful if you could memorize them so it is easier to do them!” the Pope suggested recently.¹⁴

Person-to-person solidarity

If we take a look around us while reviewing the corporal works of mercy, we might initially think that in many parts of the world opportunities to practice them are not that common. Centuries ago, human life was far more exposed to the forces of nature, human caprice, and bodily weakness. Today, in contrast, there are many countries where there is rarely any need to bury the dead or shelter the homeless (except in the case of an emergency or natural disaster) because government organizations often provide these services. Nonetheless, in many places, each of these works of mercy is still an urgent priority. Even in the most developed countries, alongside the safety net provided by social services, one can find many situations of great material poverty: the so-called “fourth world.”¹⁵

We are all called to become aware of these painful realities and to consider how we can help remedy them. “We have to open our eyes; we have to look around us and recognize how God is calling us through the people at our side. We cannot turn our backs on others, ignoring them because we are caught up in our own little world. That wasn’t how Jesus lived. The Gospel often speaks of his mercy, his ability to feel the sorrow and share the needs of others.”¹⁶

The first step in the corporal works of mercy is solidarity with those who suffer, even if we do not know them. “We are concerned not only about the problems of each person; we also feel full solidarity with our fellow citizens in the calamities and misfortunes suffered by the whole of society, which affect us in the same way.”¹⁷ At first sight, this sentiment could appear praiseworthy but ultimately not very useful. And yet solidarity is the soil in which mercy can grow and strengthen. The word “solidarity,” derived from the Latin word *solidum*, denotes the conviction of belonging to a whole, such that we experience the ups and downs in the lives of other people as our own. Although the word is meaningful on the

merely human level, it acquires its full force in the life of a Christian. *You are not your own*,¹⁸ Paul tells the Corinthians, a statement that could strike people today as a threat to their autonomy. Yet it simply conveys the thought expressed by recent Popes that humanity, and in a particular way the Church, is a “great family.”¹⁹

*Let brotherly love continue ... Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body.*²⁰ Though it is not humanly possible to keep abreast of everyone’s pains and sorrows, nor to find a solution for every material need, we Christians cannot just wash our hands of these concerns, since we love with God’s heart: *God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*²¹ When at Holy Mass we ask God the Father that “nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son, and filled with his Holy Spirit, [we] may become one body, one spirit in Christ,”²² we contemplate the fullness of what already is a silently-growing reality, “like a forest, where sound trees provide solidarity, communion, trust, support, security, happy sobriety, friendship.”²³

True Christian solidarity takes shape above all in prayer. Most of the time, we will not see the fruit of these prayers of ours, expressed also in sacrifices and the offering of our work, but we are convinced that “all of these encircle our world like a vital force.”²⁴ For the same reason, the Roman Missal contains a large number of Masses for various needs, corresponding to the intentions of all the works of mercy. The Prayer of the Faithful, at the end of the Liturgy of the Word, awakens our *anxiety for all the churches*²⁵ and for all men and women, so that we are able to say with Saint Paul: *Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*²⁶

Solidarity also unfolds in “simple daily gestures that break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness,” challenging “a world

of exacerbated consumption” that is at the same time “a world which mistreats life in all its forms.”²⁷ In olden days, it was a custom in many families to kiss a piece of bread that fell on the floor, in recognition of the work that went into obtaining this food, and as thanksgiving for having something nourishing to eat. “Feeding the hungry” can be concretized in eating what is set before us, in avoiding little caprices at meals, in making creative use of leftovers. “Giving drink to the thirsty” might lead us to be more careful not to waste water, which is in scarce supply in so many places.²⁸ “Clothing the naked” could involve a greater effort to care for our clothes and to make them last, to hand clothes on from one sibling to another, to forgo some of the latest trends in fashion, etc. These small or not-so-small renunciations can provide us with alms to bring joy to the needy, as Saint Josemaría taught the Saint Raphael boys; or to contribute to funds for humanitarian relief. Some months back, the Holy Father stressed: “If the Jubilee does not touch the pocket, it is not a true jubilee.”²⁹

Hospitality: not turning our back on the weak

Parents, beginning with their own example, can do a lot to help their children live like this, by “teaching them not to be selfish and to spend some of their time generously in the service of other less fortunate people, doing jobs suited to their age, in which they can show in a practical way a human and supernatural concern for their fellow men.”³⁰ Since charity is ordered (it would be false for someone to show great concern for those who live far away and ignore those close at hand), the struggle to overcome selfishness usually begins at home. All of us, both young and less young, need to learn to open our eyes to the small daily needs of those with whom we live. In particular, we are called upon to accompany family members and

friends in times of illness, without considering their sufferings simply as disturbances in our routine that call for technical solutions alone.

“Do not cast me off in the time of old age, forsake me not when my strength is spent (Ps 71:9). This is the plea of the elderly, who fear being forgotten and rejected.”³¹ Many scientific advances are now available that improve the condition of the sick, but none of these can replace the human accompaniment provided by those who see the sick and elderly not as a nuisance but as “Christ passing by,” Christ who needs us to care for him. As Saint Josemaría wrote, “the sick are He,”³² a daring expression that reflects our Lord’s demanding words: *Truly I say to you ... you did it to me.*³³

*When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?*³⁴ At times it is a challenge to see God in those who suffer, because they are moody, demanding or self-referential. Nevertheless, the sick have even a greater right to our love precisely on account of their weakness. A divine glow illuminates the features of the sick person, who resembles the suffering Christ, with *no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.*³⁵

Thus care for the sick, the elderly, and the dying requires a good deal of patience and generosity with our time, especially when their illness lasts for an extended period. The Good Samaritan “also had his own commitments and things to do.”³⁶ Those who refuse to hide behind the coldness of solutions that ultimately amount to “throwing away” people who humanly speaking can no longer contribute much, but instead, like the Good Samaritan, undertake the essential task of care, can hear our Lord telling them: *If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*³⁷ For those who have cared for the

weak, God reserves a tender welcome: *Come, O blessed of my Father.*³⁸

“The true measure of humanity,” Benedict XVI said, “is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through ‘com-passion’ is a cruel and inhuman society.”³⁹ Therefore the sick give us back our humanity, which at times vanishes in the frenetic rhythm of daily endeavors. They remind us that things are less important than people, utility is less important than life.

Some people, either because God has called them or simply through personal choice, end up devoting a large portion of their time to caring for those who suffer, without expecting anyone to take notice of their efforts. Even though they do not feature in tourist guides, they truly are part of mankind’s “heritage,” since they teach us that we are in the world to care for others.⁴⁰ This is the perennial meaning of hospitality and welcome.

We are rarely called upon to physically bury the dead, but we can accompany the dying and their families in their final days and hours. Thus attending a funeral is always something more than just fulfilling a social obligation. If we consider the deepest meaning of these gestures, we come to see them as the expression of a true humanity open to eternity. “Here too, mercy gives peace to those who pass away and those who remain, allowing them to feel that God is greater than death, and that by abiding in Him even the last parting is a ‘see you again.’”⁴¹

Creativity: working with what’s at hand

Refugees emigrating from war-torn regions, the unemployed, “those bound by new forms of slavery in modern society”⁴² such as addictions to drugs or gambling, or hedonism... We see so many material needs around us, and could easily be overwhelmed thinking about what to do or where to begin. Yet experience shows that many small initiatives aimed at alleviating a nearby need, beginning with whomever we can and with what we have at hand (often with more creativity and good humor than time, money or public assistance), can accomplish a lot of good. For generosity that does not look for recompense generates a thankful response that in turn gives rise to new initiatives. Mercy gives rise to mercy⁴³ and is contagious. Thus the Gospel parable of the mustard seed is fulfilled: *It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*⁴⁴

The needs of each place and the possibilities of each person are quite varied. The best approach is to begin working with what we have at hand. Over time, and often in less time than we thought, doors that seemed to be permanently shut begin to open. And we begin to reach prisoners behind bars and prisoners of so many addictions, who have been abandoned by a world that has discarded them when they seemed broken.

For example, some people who did not think they have time for these works of mercy owing to a demanding work schedule may find a way to redirect part of their efforts towards helping others escape from a life of aimlessness. Synergies arise: one person has little time to dedicate to this effort, but provides expertise and networking. Another, with less organizational ability, can offer longer hours of work. Retired people may find a whole new panorama opening up, like a second youth, in which they can pass on their abundant life

experience. “Independently of one’s educational level or wealth, all people have something to contribute to the building of a fair and fraternal civilization. In a practical way, I believe that everyone can learn a lot from the example of generosity and solidarity of the simplest people; that generous wisdom of knowing how ‘to make the food go further,’ which our world needs so much.”⁴⁵

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Evoking his earliest years as a priest, Saint Josemaria recalled how he went to the poor districts on the outskirts of Madrid “to wipe away tears, to help whoever was in need, to bring a little warmth to the children, the old people and the sick; and to receive a lot of love in return and... once in a while, a pelting with rocks.”⁴⁶ And he was already dreaming of the initiatives that, along with so many others promoted by Christians and other people of good will, are today a reality in many places of the world, and that need to keep growing *quasi fluvium pacis*, like a river of peace.⁴⁷ “Today, for me, this is a dream, a blessed dream, that I relive in so many outskirts of great cities, where we treat people with affection, looking at them straight in the eye, because we are all equal.”⁴⁸

[Back to contents](#)

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- 1 Cf. *Gen* 2:7; *Wis* 7:1.
- 2 Pope Francis, Daily Meditation, 12 November 2013.
- 3 Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, 22.
- 4 Cf. *1 Jn* 3:1.
- 5 Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11 April 2015,, 9.
- 6 St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 98.
- 7 Cf. *Mt* 25:36, 44.
- 8 *Mt* 25:40.
- 9 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.
- 10 *Jn* 15:13.
- 11 Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 7; cf . St John Paul II, Enc. *Redemptor Hominis*, 4 March 1979, 9.
- 12 Cf. *Mt* 25:35-36.
- 13 *Lk* 6:36.
- 14 Pope Francis, Angelus, 13 March 2016.
- 15 The phrase “fourth world” commonly refers to indigenous or tribal peoples, who are often stateless. Here it is used more broadly to include any group socially excluded from global society, especially marginalized groups living in a “first world” country in “third world” material conditions.
- 16 St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 146.
- 17 St Josemaría, *Letter 14 February 1950*, 20; quoted in E. Burkhart - J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, vol. 2, Rialp, Madrid, 2011, p. 314.

- 18 *1 Cor* 6:19.
- 19 Cf. for example, Blessed Paul VI, Message to the General Assembly of the United Nations, 24 May 1978; St John Paul II, Enc. *Dives in Misericordia*, 30 November 1980, 4 - 12 ; Benedict XVI, Message for the 41st World Day of Peace, 8 December 2007.
- 20 *Heb* 13:1-3.
- 21 *1 Jn* 3:20.
- 22 Roman Missal, Third Eucharist Prayer.
- 23 Pope Francis, Speech to National Numerous Family Association, 28 December 2014.
- 24 Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 279.
- 25 *2 Cor* 11:28.
- 26 *2 Cor* 11:29.
- 27 Pope Francis, Enc. Letter *Laudato si'*, 24 May 2015, 230.
- 28 Cf. *ibid.*, 27-31.
- 29 Pope Francis, Audience, 10 February 2016.
- 30 *Conversations*, 111.
- 31 Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Amoris Laetitia*, 19 March 2016, 191.
- 32 *The Way*, 419.
- 33 *Mt* 25:40.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Is* 53:2.
- 36 Pope Francis, Audience, 27 April 2016.
- 37 *Jn* 13:17.

- 38 *Mt 25:34.*
- 39 Benedict XVI, Enc. Letter *Laudato si' Spe Salvi*, 30 November 2007, 38.
- 40 Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 209.
- 41 Pope Francis, Audience, 10 September 2014.
- 42 Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 16.
- 43 Cf. *Mt 5:7.*
- 44 *Mt 13:32.*
- 45 Pope Francis, Video message to the People of Rio de Janeiro, 1 January 2015.
- 46 Quoted in Michele Dolz, *St Josemaría Escrivá*, Scepter Press, 2002, p. 19.
- 47 *Is 66:12* (Vulgate).
- 48 St Josemaría, Notes from a family get-together, 1 October 1967, quoted in Salvador Bernal, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, Scepter, 1977, p. 180.

6. Serene Attentiveness: the Spiritual Works of Mercy

The Church has the wisdom of a good mother who knows what her children need to grow healthy and strong in body and spirit. With the works of mercy she invites us to keep rediscovering that our fellow men and women need care in both body and soul, and that God has made each of us responsible for them. “The object of mercy is all of human life: as ‘flesh’ it hungers and thirsts, it needs to be given shelter and clothing, and also to receive a proper burial – something none of us, however rich, can do for ourselves ... And our life, as ‘spirit,’ needs education, correction, encouragement and consolation. We need others to counsel us, to forgive us, to put up with us and to pray for us.”¹

We are now going to consider the spiritual works of mercy, which seek to provide for the many different ways the human heart experiences hunger and thirst, nakedness and helplessness, sickness and imprisonment: types of spiritual poverty we all suffer from and that we can also perceive, unless we are asleep, in those around us.² Despite the weight we carry on our own shoulders, God expects our hearts to be moved just as his own is, and that we not be insensitive to other people’s needs. “In the midst of so much selfishness, so much coldness – everyone out for what they can get – I call to mind those little wooden donkeys. They were trotting on a desk-top, strong and sturdy. One had lost a leg, but it carried on forward, supported by the others.”³

Everyday mercy

St. Josemaria once spoke about his happy experience of Christian generosity, which had been confirmed over the years: “I know thousands of cases of students . . . who have refused to build their own little private worlds. They are giving themselves to others through their professional work which they try to do with human perfection, through educational projects, and through social and welfare activities, in a spirit of youth and cheerfulness.”⁴ Wherever there are Christians who see themselves as “branded by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing, we begin to see nurses with soul, teachers with soul, politicians with soul, people who have chosen deep down to be with others and for others. But once we separate our work from our private lives, everything turns grey and we will always be seeking recognition or asserting our needs.”⁵ “We, all of us men and women, are likewise all children of God, and we cannot think that life consists in building up a brilliant ‘curriculum vitae’ or an outstanding career.”⁶ It is only natural to dream about the horizons opening up to us in our work. But if we don’t want these dreams to be a mere illusion, *vanity of vanities*,⁷ they must be inspired by a passion to enlighten people’s minds, soothe tensions, and comfort hearts.

In one way or another every one of us influences society and public opinion, not just writers, teachers or media professionals. Each of us in our own way can do much to “instruct the ignorant,” “counsel the doubtful,” and “admonish sinners.” We can assist those who are unwitting victims of superficiality or ideology; those who thirst for knowledge, who long to drink from the fountains of human and divine wisdom; those who do not know Christ, who “have not seen the beauty of his face, nor realize how wonderful his teaching is.”⁸ This includes our effort to reflect deeply on the Faith, so as to help

others perceive the splendor of truth; our readiness to complicate our lives by organizing means of formation in the most diverse situations; our desire to shape our own profession or job in a Christian way, purifying it of abuses and opening up horizons; the interest teachers take in helping their pupils grow; the way we offer our own experience to help those just starting out in their career; our readiness to help or advise colleagues in difficulties; the support we give to young people who are not sure if they can form a family because of their precarious job situation; the unselfishness and courage involved in “correcting those who stray.”

All these and other attitudes that go much further than the bare minimum demanded by ethics, are examples of the *everyday mercy* that God asks of ordinary Christians. Although it is always good to support special projects where we can, the usual place for us to exercise mercy is within our daily work, out of a desire to be helpful. What more can I do? Who else can I involve? All this is mercy in action, with no timetable, and no calculations. As Pope Francis said, we need “a dynamic mercy, not as a noun with a fixed and closed meaning, nor as an adjective that provides a bit of color to life, but rather as a verb: ‘to show mercy’ and ‘to receive mercy’ [*misericordiar* and *ser misericordiad*os].”⁹

Covering over other people’s weaknesses

This twofold verb – “to show mercy” and “to receive mercy” – reflects the beatitude that best expresses this jubilee year: *blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy*.¹⁰ Mercy will find a home in these people because on giving it they will receive it from on high. As Shakespeare said so eloquently:

*The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes...*¹¹

To the merciful, then, our Lord promises not just forgiveness and understanding at the end of their lives, but also a generous measure of gifts – the *hundredfold*¹² – in this life. Those who are merciful perceive more intensely how God forgives and understands them, and so they in their turn rejoice to forgive and understand others, even though it hurts. They also experience the joy of seeing how others, through them, are “infected” with God’s mercy. *For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*¹³ When we drown evil in an abundance of good; when we don’t let other people’s hardheartedness harden our own hearts, and we don’t meet coldness with coldness; when we refrain from making those around us suffer for our difficulties; when we try to overcome our touchiness and self-love, then we are waging “God’s battles . . . We have no choice but to take this beautiful war of peace seriously, if we really want to achieve interior peace, and God’s serenity for the Church and for souls.”¹⁴

Another of the spiritual works of mercy is “bearing other people’s defects patiently.” This requires more than just not showing the other person up, not pointing a finger at them. Showing mercy means covering over others’ weaknesses, as the good sons of Noah did,¹⁵ even though we notice the “smell” of their defects in doing so. Mercy from a distance is not mercy. The “smell of the sheep”¹⁶ (since all of us in the Church are both *sheep and shepherd*¹⁷) is usually not pleasant; but exposing ourselves to it is a sacrifice that, if done without fuss, without being noticed, has an aroma very pleasing to God – the *bonus odor Christi*.¹⁸ *When you fast, anoint your head*

*and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men, but by your Father who is in secret.*¹⁹

Mercy reverses the common tendency to be demanding on others and easy on ourselves. We then often discover that what we considered a defect was simply a label we had put on the other person, maybe because of an isolated incident or a first impression: a “rash judgement.” This stopped us from seeing them as they are because we could only see a negative aspect, with one feature swollen out of proportion by our own self-love. God’s mercy helps us to avoid forming such severe judgements and, if we have – perhaps subconsciously – done so, to change them. Tertullian’s wise saying is very apt here: “*desinunt odisse qui desinunt ignorare* – when people cease to be ignorant, they cease to hate.”²⁰

The challenge of *everyday mercy*, then, is to get to know the people around us better and to avoid putting labels on them: parents, children, brothers and sisters, neighbors, colleagues... Moreover, when we understand someone, when we don’t give up on them, we help them to grow. By contrast, if we are obsessed with others’ defects, our attitude produces tension and coldness, which will not help to bring out the best in them. All our relationships with other people, especially within the family, must be “a ‘shepherding’ in mercy. Each of us, by our love and care, leaves a mark on the life of others.”²¹

Mercy is also needed to react without resentment when other people treat us badly or unfairly. It is not easy to love when receiving hard knocks or indifference, but *if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*²² A Christian atmosphere is characterized not only by mutual understanding, but also by a readiness to seek mutual

forgiveness when we make a mistake or others treat us badly. A sincere willingness to “forgive offences” is the only way to break down the circles of misunderstanding that can develop around us, and that are almost always a result of mutual ignorance about one another. This is not being idealistic or naive, refusing to see any meanness or cynicism in the world. Rather it is *the strength of God*,²³ a gentle breeze capable of toppling the strongest structures.

Sent to console

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*²⁴ Christians suffer just like anyone else, and sometimes more so, because of the incomprehension or difficulties created by their fidelity to God.²⁵ At the same time their sufferings are lighter because they are consoled by their Father. “This is your security, a haven where you can drop anchor no matter what is happening on the surface of the sea of life. And you will find joy, strength, optimism: victory!”²⁶ The consolation given by God enables us to console others; he has sent us into the world to give consolation, “because our infinite sadness can only be cured by infinite love.”²⁷

To be able to “console those who are sad” we have to learn to read other people’s needs. Some are sad because they are experiencing “the bitterness that comes from loneliness or indifference.”²⁸ Others, because they are under a lot of pressure and need to rest. If so, we can try to accompany them, and sometimes actually teach them how to rest, because they have never learned that skill. A good child of God tries to copy the discreet work of the true Consoler, the Holy Spirit, “in toil comfort sweet, pleasant coolness in the heat, solace in

the midst of woe.”²⁹ We try to look after other people in such a way they don’t notice we are assisting them, and never give the impression that we are granting them “an audience,” or that we are “managing” them. “We are speaking about an attitude to life, one that approaches life with serene attentiveness capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, that accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full.”³⁰ A child of God goes through life with the profound conviction that “each person is worthy of our self-giving.”³¹ A smile, our willingness to be helpful, true interest in other people, including those we may not even know, can change their day and sometimes their lives.

With everyone, people we know and those we don’t, our mercy finds a channel, “a broad smooth-flowing stream”³² in our prayer. “Since Abraham, intercession – asking on behalf of another – has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God’s mercy,”³³ and so the Church encourages us to “pray for the living and the dead.” One of our joys in heaven will be to discover the good done to so many people by a brief prayer offered in the midst of heavy traffic or on public transport, sometimes perhaps as a merciful response to less-than-polite behavior; or the hope that God has inspired, through our intercession, in someone who was suffering for some reason; or the comfort received by the living and the dead through our remembering them at Mass, inserted in Jesus’ prayer to the Father, in the Holy Spirit.

We are finishing our brief consideration of the works of mercy, which in reality “are endless, but each bears the stamp of a particular face, a personal history. They are much more than the lists of the seven corporal works and seven spiritual works of mercy. Those lists are like the raw material – the material of life itself – that, worked and shaped by the hands of mercy, turns into an individual artistic

creation. Each work multiplies like the bread in the baskets. Each one gives abundant growth like the mustard seed.”³⁴

[Back to contents](#)

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- ¹ Pope Francis, Third Meditation for the Jubilee of Priests, 2 June 2016.
 - ² The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* lists them as: to counsel the doubtful, to instruct the ignorant, to admonish sinners, to comfort the afflicted, to forgive offences, to bear wrongs patiently, and to pray for the living and the dead (Appendix B: Formulas of Catholic Doctrine).
 - ³ St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 563.
 - ⁴ St Josemaría, *Conversations*, 75.
 - ⁵ Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 273.
 - ⁶ St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 76.
 - ⁷ *Eccles* 1:2.
 - ⁸ St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 179.
 - ⁹ Pope Francis, First Meditation for the Jubilee of Priests, 2 June 2016.
 - ¹⁰ *Mt* 5:7.
 - ¹¹ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, scene 1. Quoted by Pope Francis in his Message for the 50th World Communications Day, 24 January 2016.

- ¹² *Mt* 19:29.
- ¹³ *1 Cor* 1:25.
- ¹⁴ St Josemaría, Notes from a meditation, February 1972, quoted in the Spanish historical-critical edition of *Christ is Passing By*, 2013, 8d.
- ¹⁵ Cf. *Gen* 9:22-23.
- ¹⁶ Pope Francis, Homily, 28 March 2013.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Javier Echevarría, Pastoral Letter, 1 August 2007.
- ¹⁸ Cf. *2 Cor* 2:15.
- ¹⁹ *Mt* 6:17-18.
- ²⁰ Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 1, 1. St. Augustine also discusses this, *In Evangelium Ioannis Tractatus*, nos. 89-90.
- ²¹ Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Amoris Laetitia*, 19 March 2016, 322.
- ²² *Mt* 5:47.
- ²³ *1 Cor* 1:18.
- ²⁴ *2 Cor* 1:3-4.
- ²⁵ The Psalms frequently echo this difficulty of the believer. Cf. e.g. Ps 42 (41):10-12; 44(43):10-26; 73(72).
- ²⁶ St Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, seventh station, 2.
- ²⁷ Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 265.
- ²⁸ St Josemaría, Speech at the inauguration of the Centro ELIS, 21 November 1965.
- ²⁹ Sequence of the Mass for Pentecost, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*.
- ³⁰ Pope Francis, Enc. Letter *Laudato si'*, 24 May 2015, 226.
- ³¹ Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 274.

- ³² St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 306.
- ³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2635.
- ³⁴ Pope Francis, Third Meditation for the Jubilee of Priests, 2 June 2016. Cf. *Mt* 13:31-32 and 14:19-20.

7. Restore to Me the Joy of Your Salvation

*Miserere mei, Deus, secundum misericordiam tuam – Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love.*¹ For over three thousand years the psalm *Miserere* has nourished the prayer of each generation of the People of God. It is recited every Friday in the Lauds, or Morning Prayer, of the Liturgy of the Hours. As Saint Josemaria did, his successors pray it every night prostrate on the floor,² expressing bodily the meaning of the words of this “*Magnificat* of mercy,” as the Pope recently called it. “It is the *Magnificat* of ‘a humble and contrite heart’ capable of confessing its sin before the God who, in his fidelity, is greater than any of our sins.”³

The psalm *Miserere* immerses us in “a profound meditation on guilt and grace.”⁴ Jewish tradition puts these words on the lips of David, after the prophet Nathan reproached him, at God’s bidding, for his adultery with Bathsheba and the death of Uriah.⁵ The prophet did not directly accuse David of his wrong-doing; he presented a parable⁶ in which David recognized his sin. *Peccavi Domino – I have sinned against the Lord.*⁷ The *miserere*, the plea for mercy that springs from David’s heart, also expresses his interior desolation and his awareness of the suffering he has caused. The realization of the harm done by his sin – against God, others, and himself – leads him to seek refuge and healing in God, the only one who can put things right. *By this we shall ... reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*⁸

For they know not what they do

Sin can at first seem attractive because of the liberation it promises: freedom from God so that we can truly be ourselves. But this apparent liberation is a false mirage that soon turns into a heavy burden. The strong, autonomous man, who tries to silence his conscience, sooner or later reaches a dead end. “He has had enough of the usual explanations. The lies of the false prophets no longer satisfy.”⁹ This is the beginning of conversion, or of one of the “continuous conversions in our life that are even more important, and increasingly demanding.”¹⁰

The process of conversion is not always as quick as King David’s. The blindness that precedes and accompanies sin, and that grows with each sin, can be prolonged. We can easily deceive ourselves by justifying our actions; we tell ourselves that the matter is not all that important.. We can also encounter this attitude around us, “in a world which all too often is merciless to the sinner and lenient with the sin.”¹¹ Merciless to the sinner, because the great harm done by sin is evident in the person’s behavior; but lenient with the sin, because to recognize the sin would mean losing certain “freedoms.” We are all exposed to this risk. We see the ugliness of sin in others, but we do not condemn our own sins. Not only do we then lack mercy, but we render ourselves incapable of receiving it.

The darkness of sin and lukewarmness contains a certain element of self-deception, a deliberate blindness. We want *not to see*, and act as if we cannot see. This is what needs God’s forgiveness. Jesus sees sin like that when he says from the Cross: *Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*¹² We would fail to grasp the depth of Christ’s words *forgive them*, if we were to view them as merely a benevolent covering-over of sin. When we separate ourselves from

God we both “know” and “do not know” what we are doing. We realize that we are doing wrong, but we forget that by doing it we will not achieve anything. Our Lord takes pity on both things, and also on the deep sadness produced in our soul. Saint Peter both knew and did not know what he was doing when he denied his Friend. Afterwards *he wept bitterly*,¹³ and his tears purified his vision and enabled him to see more clearly.

“Christ’s mercy is not a grace that comes cheap, nor does it imply the trivialization of evil. Christ carries the full weight of evil and all its destructive force in his body and in his soul. He burns and transforms evil in suffering, in the fire of his suffering love.”¹⁴ His words of forgiveness from the Cross, *they know not what they do*, reveal to us the aim of his merciful plans: that we return to the Father’s house. Therefore also from the Cross he entrusts us to the protection of his Mother.

Nostalgia for the Father’s house

“Human life is in some way a constant returning to our Father’s house.”¹⁵ The first conversion, and successive ones, all stem from the realization that in some sense we are homeless. The prodigal son “longs for the fresh baked bread that the servants in his house, his father’s house, eat for breakfast. Homesickness, nostalgia, is a powerful emotion. Like mercy, it expands the soul. It makes us think back to our first experience of goodness – the homeland from which we went forth – and it awakens in us the hope of returning there. Against this vast horizon of nostalgia, the young man – as the Gospel tells us – came to his senses and realized that he was miserable. Each one of us can come to, or be led to, the point of feeling greater misery. Each one of us has his or her hidden misery; we need to beg for the grace to find it.”¹⁶

Being away from his father's house, the prodigal son realizes, is in reality being away from his own home. And he comes to see once again that the place he thought was an obstacle for his full personal development is actually the home he should never have abandoned. But those living in the father's house, too, may not have their hearts there. Such is the case with the older brother in the parable. He never left home, but his heart was elsewhere. The words of the prophet Isaiah, used by Jesus in his preaching, hold true for this son: *This people ... honor me with their lips while their hearts are far from me.*¹⁷

The older brother “never says ‘father,’ never says ‘brother,’ and thinks only about himself. He boasts of having always remained at his father's side and of serving him; yet he never lived this closeness with joy. And now he accuses the father of never having given him so much as a kid to feast on. The poor father! One son went away, and the other was never close to him! The suffering of the father is like the suffering of God, the suffering of Jesus when we distance ourselves from him, either because we go far away or because we are nearby without being close.”¹⁸ Sometimes in our own lives, although perhaps we do not distance ourselves from the father as the younger son did, we will realize more clearly that in some way we are like the older son. God gives us more light to see that he wants us to draw closer to his heart, through a new conversion.

In the Gospel scene narrating the conversation between the older son and his father, we see not only the tenderness of the father but also the hard-heartedness of this son.¹⁹ His harsh response shows that he had lost the joy that should have come from being in his father's house. And hence he had lost the ability to rejoice with his father and brother. All he could do was complain about his brother's failings. “Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own

interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others ... God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too.”²⁰

The father is taken aback and tries to soften the heart of his elder son. Although that son has stayed at home, he envies, perhaps without realizing it, the reckless selfishness of his younger brother. His is a more “reasonable,” more subtle, and perhaps more dangerous selfishness. His father insists: *It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.*²¹ With the fortitude of a father and the tenderness of a mother, he chides him: My son, you should rejoice. What's going on in your heart? “The elder son needs mercy too.”²² He too needs to feel nostalgia for the Father's house, the gentle sorrow that leads us to return home.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation

*Tibi, tibi soli peccavi et malum coram te feci – Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight.*²³ The Holy Spirit, who “will convince the world concerning sin,”²⁴ helps us see that this nostalgia, this yearning, is not just an interior unrest. Rather, it stems from a wounded relationship. We have distanced ourselves from God and left him alone, and we have *left ourselves alone*. Saint Augustine writes, “*in multa defluximus*”²⁵: when we separate ourselves from God, our life is dispersed among many polluted streams and our house is forsaken and desolate.²⁶ The Holy Spirit's prompting urges us to return to God, who alone can forgive sins.²⁷ As he moved over the waters at the beginning of creation,²⁸ he now moves over souls. He moves the sinful woman to draw close to Jesus, without words; and God's mercy welcomes her, while the

guests at the meal fail to understand the reason for her tears, the perfume, the anointing of his feet.²⁹ Jesus' heart is moved, and he says she has been forgiven much because she has loved much.³⁰

The longing for the Father's house is a longing for God's nearness, for divine mercy, for our heart to beat "in a way that is both human and divine, with a love that is strong, self-sacrificing and generous."³¹ If we return, like the younger son, to the Father's embrace, we will realize that the best medicine to cure our wounds is our Father God. And then a "third son" comes on the scene: Jesus, who washes the feet of sinners, Jesus, who has become a servant for us. "It is the one *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Phil 2:6-7)*. This Servant-Son is Jesus! He is the extension of the arms and heart of the Father: he welcomed the prodigal son and washed his dirty feet; he prepared the banquet for the feast of forgiveness."³²

*Cor mundum crea in me, Deus – Create in me a clean heart, O God.*³³ Psalm 51 speaks again and again about cleansing our heart.³⁴ It is not a question of obsessive self-regard or scruples, because "a Christian is not a neurotic collector of good behavior reports."³⁵ Rather, it is a question of love. The repentant sinner is ready to do whatever is needed to get his heart cured, to regain the joy of living with God. *Redde mihi laetitiam salutaris tui – Restore to me the joy of your salvation.*³⁶ When we look at things in this light, confession is not something cold and routine, a merely bureaucratic process. "It would be good for us to ask ourselves: after going to confession, do I rejoice? Or do I move on immediately to the next thing, as we would after going to the doctor, when we hear that the test results are not so bad and put them back in their envelope?"³⁷

A person who rejoices appreciates the gift received, and is thankful for being forgiven. And then penance is seen as something much more than just a dry process to reestablish justice. Penance is a demand of the heart that feels the need to back up its words “I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned,” with deeds. Therefore Saint Josemaría advised everyone to have a “spirit of penance.”³⁸ *A broken and contrite heart*³⁹ understands the need to undertake the path of returning to God, of being reconciled with him, which does not always happen in a single day. Since it is love that has to be restored in order to acquire new maturity, love itself is the remedy: “love is repaid with love.”⁴⁰ Penance, then, is the love that leads us to accept suffering – joyfully, without giving ourselves too much importance, “without doing strange things”⁴¹ – in reparation for all that we have caused God and others to suffer.

This is the meaning behind the words the priest says in the Rite of Penance when dismissing the penitent: “May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ ... whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life.”⁴² Besides, “how little a life is for making atonement!”⁴³ Our entire life then becomes joyful contrition, confident suffering, without anguish or scruples, because *Cor contritum et humiliatum, Deus, non despicias* – *a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*⁴⁴

[Back to contents](#)

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- 1 *Ps* 51(50), 1.
- 2 Cf. Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, volume III, Scepter, New York 2005, p. 266.
- 3 Pope Francis, First Meditation at the Jubilee for priests, 2 June 2016.
- 4 St John Paul II, General Audience, October 24, 2001.
- 5 Cf. 2 *Sam* 11:2ff.
- 6 Cf. 2 *Sam* 12:2-4.
- 7 2 *Sam* 12:13.
- 8 1 *Jn* 3:19-20.
- 9 St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 260.
- 10 St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 57.
- 11 Pope Francis, Homily, 24 December 2015.
- 12 *Lk* 23:34.
- 13 *Mt* 26:75.
- 14 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Homily, *Missa pro eligendo pontifice*, April 18, 2005.
- 15 St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 64.
- 16 Pope Francis, First Meditation at the Jubilee for priests, 2 June 2016.
- 17 *Is* 29:13; cf. *Mt* 15:8.
- 18 Pope Francis, General Audience, 11 May 2016.
- 19 Cf. *Lk* 15:28-32.

- 20 Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 2.
- 21 *Lk* 15:32.
- 22 Pope Francis, General Audience, 11 May 2016.
- 23 *Ps* 51(50):4.
- 24 Cf. *Jn* 16:8. This is St John Paul II's translation of these words from Jesus' priestly prayer, which he meditated on deeply in his encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* (May 18, 1986), 27-48.
- 25 St Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 29, 40.
- 26 Cf. *Mt* 23:38.
- 27 Cf. *Lk* 7:48.
- 28 Cf. *Gen* 1:2.
- 29 Cf. *Lk* 7:36-50.
- 30 Cf. *Lk* 7:47.
- 31 *Friends of God*, 232.
- 32 Pope Francis, Angelus, 6 March 2016.
- 33 *Ps* 51(50):10.
- 34 Cf. *Ps* 51 (50), 2, 7, 9, 10, 17.
- 35 St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 75.
- 36 *Ps* 51 (50):12.
- 37 Pope Francis, Homily, 24 March 2016.
- 38 Cf. St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 784. In *Friends of God*, nos. 138-140, our Father explains the true meaning of the spirit of penance and illustrates it with various examples.
- 39 *Ps* 51(50):17.

- 40 St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 442.
- 41 St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 60.
- 42 Rite of Penance, 104.
- 43 St Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, Eighth station.
- 44 *Ps* 51(50):17.

8. Mary, Mother of Mercy

When Gabriel announces the joyful news – the *evangelion* – which from a humble village in Galilee is to change men’s lives forever,¹ “the Lady of the sweet name, Mary, is withdrawn in prayer.”² Before departing, the Angel tells Our Lady that God has also listened to Elizabeth. Mary ponders Gabriel’s words for a few moments, and her heart experiences an overpowering joy. She becomes absorbed in adoration of the hidden God, *latens Deitas*,³ now dwelling in her womb. Soon Mary is on her way to the hill country; her cousin may need her help, and she herself needs to see Elizabeth. She has to share her joy, and Elizabeth is the only one, apart from Joseph, to whom she can tell this happy secret. During this time Mary is an “image of the Church to come, which carries the hope of the world in her womb across the mountains of history.”⁴

Greater even than the joy of life that a mother senses in her newborn baby, Mary’s and Elizabeth’s happiness is evident to everyone in Ain Karim. God has taken the initiative; he has chosen the fertile soil of their generosity and self-abandonment and has begun in them the true springtime of history. While the world at large tries to live on its uncertain joys, in this corner of Judaea God’s joy silently breaks forth. Saint Luke tells us that when Mary greets Elizabeth, John the Baptist jumps for joy in his mother’s womb. The prophet David danced and leapt before the Ark of the Covenant, and now the *greatest of those born of women*, he who is *more than a prophet*,⁵ jumps for joy at the arrival of Mary, the new Ark of the Covenant. In this way too, John the Baptist is the forerunner of the

Son of David; as he himself will say years later, he is the *friend of the bridegroom, who . . . rejoices greatly at the Bridegroom's voice*.⁶ Even now, on hearing the Bridegroom's Mother, he is moved by the Holy Spirit and, though not yet able to speak, becomes the prophet of the joy of the Gospel.

My spirit rejoices in God

*The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.*⁷ Saint Luke had the prophet Zephaniah very much in mind when he recounted these moments in Our Lady's life. The heartfelt, exultant joy that she had contained within herself during the journey from Nazareth now spread to Elizabeth and Saint John and overflowed in the *Magnificat* – that great song of joy and mercy.⁸ “Our Mother had meditated deep and long on the words of the holy men and women of the Old Testament who awaited the Saviour, and on the events they had taken part in. She must have marveled at all the great things that God, in his boundless mercy, had done for his people, who were so often ungrateful. As she considers the tenderness shown time after time by God towards his people, Mary's immaculate heart breaks out into loving words: *my soul magnifies the Lord*.”⁹

My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. Our Lady is a daughter of the Mediterranean world, of lands where people dance and sing, and emotions felt in the depths of the soul are expressed in gestures and exclamations. “Sometimes you'll find that words are not enough, and you'll need to sing for love . . . You'll walk through the world giving light like burning torches streaming with sparks of fire.”¹⁰ Mary's joy is not just because God has come into her life, but because, through

her, the Son of God has become one of us. *His mercy . . . is from generation to generation.*

The Church recognizes herself in the *Magnificat*, “the song of the People of God walking through history,”¹¹ and so she proclaims it every day in the office for Vespers. Like Our Lady, the Church does not sing of a small private joy; she sings of the joy of all mankind, a joy that comes from hope in *God my Saviour*. The Church knows that God is stronger than evil. *The weakness of God is stronger than men.*¹² The strength of the *powerful* and the *proud of heart*, who *make war on . . . those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus*,¹³ and threaten to crush the Love of God, is no more than outward force, noise, vanity: *like chaff which the wind drives away.*¹⁴

“Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love.”¹⁵ Mercy is God’s joyful love that comes to meet a saddened world, a “vale of tears.”¹⁶ *God comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs his course with joy.*¹⁷ He comes with his affectionate love, his forgiveness, his understanding. He comes above all with the joy of the Holy Spirit, uncreated Charity, a joy that is the continual source of his mercy, because only from joy can come the strength to forgive unreservedly and limitlessly. God’s joy is closely tied to his mercy. He has created us for himself, and wants to save us from the sadness of sin so as to give us a happiness that no one can take from us.¹⁸

God has entrusted this joy to his Church, and no one can take it from her “in spite of everything.”¹⁹ That is why she sings with Mary, *all generations will call me blessed*. Every generation eventually finds in the Church a Mother who, through the crises and tragedies of history, and even in her suffering because of the children or

strangers who ill-treat or despise her, overflows with the joy of God's salvation, and tirelessly offers his mercy to all. Together with Mary in her *Magnificat*, the Church in a way stands above history.²⁰ She holds firmly to the joy of the Resurrection and glimpses, amid all the sorrow and wretchedness, so much hidden and fruitful sanctity. She sees the mercy of God that *is on those who fear him from generation to generation*.

God's poor

The *Magnificat* is infused with the “the spirituality of the biblical *anawim*, that is, of those faithful who not only recognize themselves as ‘poor’ in the detachment from all idolatry of riches and power, but also in the profound humility of a heart . . . open to the bursting in of the divine saving grace.”²¹

Our Lady (and we with her) does not sing of her own greatness, but of her smallness – *the lowliness of his handmaid* – and the *great things* that God had done for her. *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, “my soul magnifies the Lord”: every generation and culture has set these words to music and will continue doing so. They could be rendered as, “How great God is! How well he does things!” Mary’s enthusiasm at Ain Karim will resound on her Son’s lips three decades later, at the point in the Gospels when Jesus’ joy was specifically remarked upon. It is beautiful to observe that his joy has the same notes as the *Magnificat*. *In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.”*²² God’s special love for humble people contains a deep mystery. God is “disarmed” by simple people; their language, seemingly so naive and inoffensive, *put(s) down the mighty from their throne*. Mercy shows us the true face of God and

*the power of his arm, which always conquers in the end. By the mouths of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark . . . to still the enemy and the avenger.*²³

When John sends his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is *he who is to come*,²⁴ our Lord spells out the signs of God's presence in the words of the prophet Isaiah,²⁵ among which one stands out: *the poor have the good news preached to them.*²⁶ The poor in the Bible are those who wait for the coming of God. Zachary is poor, and therefore he recognises *that through the tender mercy of our God the day shall dawn on us from on high.*²⁷ Simeon is poor, and therefore his *eyes have seen thy salvation.*²⁸

This poverty is not an impoverished soul or a narrow outlook, nor does it mean an absence of learning. The wise men who went to Bethlehem, and who surely belonged to the cultural elite of their country, were *poor in spirit.*²⁹ Their attitude contrasted with the self-sufficiency of the scribes, the anxiety of Herod and the superficial curiosity of the people in Jerusalem who, once they had got over the trepidation caused by the arrival of the Magi and their question about the King who had been born, thought no more of it. The wise men had the simplicity of the Bethlehem shepherds; they had a heart to understand, eyes to see, ears to listen,³⁰ and so they were among the first to adore him.

He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . . and his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. The merciful gaze of God rests on those who can receive him, for they recognize with the psalmist: *I am poor and needy; but the Lord takes thought for me.*³¹ God “needs” us to be poor if he is to enter into our soul. “Jesus has no time for calculations, for astuteness, for the cruelty of cold hearts, for attractive but empty beauty. What he

likes is the cheerfulness of a young heart, a simple step, a natural voice, clean eyes, attention to his affectionate word of advice. That is how he reigns in the soul.”³²

Daughter and Mother of Mercy

Our Lady is Daughter of God and Mother of God: *genuisti qui te fecit*,³³ you became the Mother of your Maker. Mary was the Mother of the God who created her, and who redeemed her in a special way that distinguishes her from the rest of mankind. “At her conception Mary received a blessing from the Lord and loving kindness from God her saviour.”³⁴ Therefore she is the first Daughter of God’s mercy. And while being Daughter, Mary is also Mother of the God of mercy. This is why we call her *Mater misericordiae*, Mother of mercy. “Let us address her in the words of the *Salve Regina*, a prayer ever ancient and ever new, so that she may never tire of turning her merciful eyes upon us, and make us worthy to contemplate the face of mercy, her Son Jesus.”³⁵ Saint Josemaria taught us that “we always go to Jesus, and always ‘return’ to him, through Mary.”³⁶ Our Mother dissolves the pride in our hearts and helps us to become little, so that God may see our humility and Jesus may be born in us. Let us turn to her with the confidence of children, in so many small details of affection; one that Saint Josemaria recommended to the faithful of Opus Dei is to kiss the rosary before praying Psalm Two every Tuesday.

All generations have called her and *will call her blessed*, because “love brings joy, but a joy that has its roots in the shape of the Cross.”³⁷ With her Son, Our Lady suffered on Calvary “the dramatic encounter of the sin of the world and God’s mercy.”³⁸ The Pietà, as representations of Our Lady holding her dead Son have come to be called, powerfully depicts our Mother’s intimate sharing in God’s

mercy. “Piety” is a direct translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*, one of the terms by which the Hebrew Bible expresses God’s mercy. On the Cross, despised by men, God more than ever helps his servant Israel to remember his mercy.

When men forget God’s mercy, God takes it to the extreme: *Woman, behold your son . . . behold your mother.*³⁹ These words of Our Lord from the Cross to his Mother and to each of us,⁴⁰ show “the mystery of a special saving mission. Jesus left us his mother to be our mother. Only after doing so did Jesus know that ‘all was now finished’ (*Jn* 19:28).”⁴¹ We have recourse to her protection, beseeching Mary to make us merciful as the Father is merciful. “She will enlarge our heart and fill it with mercy.”⁴²

[Back to contents](#)

¹ Cf. *Lk* 1:26-38.

² St Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, 1st Joyful Mystery.

³ Cf. hymn *Adoro Te devote*

⁴ Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi*, 30 September 2007, 50.

⁵ *Mt* 11:9, 11.

⁶ *Jn* 3:29.

- 7 *Zeph 3:17-18.*
- 8 Cf. *Lk 1:46-55.*
- 9 St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 241.
- 10 St Josemaría, *Letter 11 March 1940*, 30.
- 11 Pope Francis, Homily, 15 August 2013.
- 12 *1 Cor 1:25.*
- 13 *Rev 12:17.*
- 14 *Ps 1:4.*
- 15 Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 265.
- 16 Antiphon *Salve Regina*
- 17 *Ps 19:7.*
- 18 Cf. *Jn 16:22.*
- 19 St Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 131.
- 20 “In the original Greek of Luke’s Gospel, we have seven aorist verbs that indicate the same number of actions which the Lord carries out repeatedly in history: ‘He has shown strength... he has scattered the proud... he has put down the mighty... he has exalted those of low degree... he has filled the hungry with good things... the rich he has sent empty away... he has helped... Israel’.” Benedict XVI, Audience, 15 February 2006.
- 21 Benedict XVI, Audience, 15 February 2006.
- 22 *Lk 10:21. Cf. Mt 11:25-27.*
- 23 *Ps 8:2.*
- 24 *Mt 11:3.*
- 25 Cf. *Is 42:7, 18; 61:1; Lk 7:19-20; Mt 11:2-3.*

- 26 *Lk 7:22; cf. Mt 11:5.*
- 27 *Lk 1:78.*
- 28 *Cf. Lk 2:30.*
- 29 *Mt 5:3.*
- 30 *Cf. Deut 29:3.*
- 31 *Ps 40 (39):17.*
- 32 *St Josemaría, Christ is Passing By, 181.*
- 33 *Roman Missal, Common of the Blessed Virgin, Introit.*
- 34 *Divine Office for 8 December, Office of Readings, Antiphon.*
- 35 *Pope Francis, Bull Misericordiae Vultus, 11 April 2015, 24.*
- 36 *St Josemaría, The Way, 495.*
- 37 *St Josemaría, Christ is Passing By, 43.*
- 38 *Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. Evangelii Gaudium, 285.*
- 39 *Jn 19: 26-27.*
- 40 *Cf. St John Paul II, Enc. Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 17 April 2003, 57.*
- 41 *Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. Evangelii Gaudium, 285.*
- 42 *St Josemaría, “El compromiso de la verdad”, 9 May 1974, published in Josemaría Escrivá y la Universidad, Pamplona: Eunsa 1993, p. 109.*

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