

# Jesus Christ, the Face of the Merciful Father

“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. (Ps 27,8-9)

## *Summary*

*It is the intention of this article to explore the full consequence of the “unique fullness” of Christ’s revelation insofar as He is the “incarnation of God’s mercy”. The author does not discuss the elements of the Gospel which speak explicitly of mercy and forgiveness, but rather he considers the significance of certain gestures and words, which at first glance do not seem particularly merciful. He seeks to explain how these too are equally revelations of the Divine Mercy. First he offers a brief treatment of the concept of divine mercy. Then he considers God’s mercy in the light of Scripture’s reference to the “wrath of God”. He also considers the scourge of Jesus, and the strong language of Jesus with regard to the consequences of sin. He then seeks to explain how our vocation to take up our cross every day is an expression of God’s merciful love.*

## *Resumo*

*É a intenção deste artigo explorar a consequência completa da “plenitude única” da revelação de Cristo na medida em que Ele é a “encarnação da misericórdia de Deus”. O autor não discute os elementos do Evangelho que falam explicitamente de misericórdia e perdão, mas ele considera o significado de certos gestos e palavras que, à primeira vista, não parecem particularmente misericordiosos. Ele procura explicar como estas também são igualmente revelações da Divina Misericórdia. Primeiro, ele oferece um breve tratamento do conceito de misericórdia divina. Em seguida, ele considera a misericórdia de Deus à luz da refe-*

*rência da Escritura para a “ira de Deus”. Ele também considera o flagelo de Jesus, e a linguagem forte de Jesus no que diz respeito às consequências do pecado. Ele, então, procura explicar como a nossa vocação para tomar a nossa cruz a cada dia é uma expressão do amor misericordioso de Deus.*

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### **Incarnation of the WORD brings Revelation to Perfection**

Pope Francis began the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy with the Bull: *Misericordiae Vultus* in which he states:

Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him.... Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God.<sup>1</sup>

Further on, in this same Bull he says regarding Jesus: “Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion.”<sup>2</sup> These affirmations are in harmony with the similar statement made by St. Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical on Mercy:

Christ confers on the whole of the Old Testament tradition about God’s mercy a definitive meaning. Not only does He speak of it and explain it by the use of comparisons and parables, but above all He Himself makes it incarnate and personifies it. He Himself, in a certain sense, is mercy. To the person who sees it in Him - and finds it in Him - God becomes “visible” in a particular way as the Father who is rich in mercy.<sup>3</sup>

The consequence of the Incarnation of the Divine Word is a categorical or essential distinction between Jesus Christ and all other prophets who came before or will come after Him. It is true that some prophets were able to speak eloquently about God’s mercy and were able to reveal His mercy through miracles of healing, even to the point of raising the dead to

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<sup>1</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Misericordiae Vultus (MV)*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *MV* 8.

<sup>3</sup> ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia (DM)*, 2.

life. Nevertheless, their prophecies were sporadic events in the context of their lives; they spoke a word here and performed a gesture there. On the other hand, in Jesus, Who is the Image of the invisible God<sup>4</sup>, the mercy of God is made visible uninterruptedly from His birth in Bethlehem until his ascension into heaven. Even beyond the ascension, Jesus' presence in the Eucharist continues to speak silently and eloquently of His mercy. In this we see the unique fullness of his revelation. This means that there was no moment in His life on earth during which Jesus was not revealing. Given that "the mission Jesus received from the Father was that of revealing the mystery of divine love in its fullness"<sup>5</sup> it follows that every aspect of Jesus' life is a revelation of God's mercy.

It is the intention of this article to explore the full consequence of this "unique fullness" of Christ's revelation. When discussing the topic of Jesus as the incarnation of God's mercy, it is common to focus on some of the more evident words and gestures which reveal his compassion and clemency (his forgiveness of sinners, healing the sick, and his parables of mercy.) But our intention is to try to find the full revelation of the mercy of God in some of the less evident moments of Jesus' ministry. To this end we will not only discuss the elements of the Gospel which speak explicitly of mercy and forgiveness, but also, more importantly, we will consider the significance of certain gestures and words, which at first glance do not seem particularly merciful, but which are in fact equally revelations of the Divine Mercy.

## **Understanding of Divine Mercy**

First, we must indicate, at least briefly, certain unique aspects regarding the mercy of God. The common definition of mercy as given by St. Augustine is: "mercy is the compassion that our heart experiences at the misery of another, that brings us to alleviate it if we can."<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas points out a fundamental difference between the mercy of God and our experience of mercy. The experience of love in man is "caused" by the perception of goodness in someone or something. But with God it is different. He does not love someone or something because He perceives goodness in it. Rather, His love is what causes goodness in all

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<sup>4</sup> Col 1,15.

<sup>5</sup> *MV* 8.

<sup>6</sup> SAINT AUGUSTINE, *De Civitas Dei*, ix, 5.

created persons and things.<sup>7</sup> His love, in relation to creation, is always a “merciful” love in the sense that it is a creative love. It is the force that calls being out of non-being, order out of chaos. In this sense, it is an expression of God’s omnipotence.

When a man’s love is caused from the goodness of the one he loves, then that man who loves does so out of justice, inasmuch as it is just that he love such a person. When, however, love causes the goodness in the beloved, then it is a love springing from mercy. The love with which God loves us produces goodness in us; *hence mercy is presented here as the root of the divine love.*<sup>8</sup>

Pope Francis quoted St. Thomas who affirmed: “it is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way.”<sup>9</sup> In the particular context of this citation, St. Thomas is speaking of the forgiveness of sins as a manifestation of God’s omnipotence and mercy. This is because divine forgiveness entails a restoration of divine grace, which is a kind of re-creation in the supernatural order. Pope Francis points out that one characteristic of the parables that speak of the mercy involved in finding the lost sheep or lost coin is the mention of the joy of the angels in heaven.<sup>10</sup> This is reminiscent of another Biblical passage in which the joy of the angels is mentioned with reference to the initial creation of the universe:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk,  
or who laid its cornerstone  
when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on Ephesians*, ch. 2, lect. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 30. a. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *MV* 9; cf. Luke 15, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Job 38,4-7.

This parallel can be understood to signify that the exercise of the merciful omnipotence involved in the initial creation continues through the re-creation of men in the order of grace. When God confers His divine grace on a repentant sinner, it constitutes a new and marvelous creation which delights the angels. They marvel at the creations of grace because the wonders of God's mercy are always new, as the prophet Jeremiah taught: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; *they are new every morning*."<sup>12</sup> The unfolding of God's merciful designs in the history of the Church constitute matters into which the angels long to look,<sup>13</sup> for they are the continual manifestation of His creative act in the supernatural order of grace.

### Two facets of the divine mercy

The mercy of God, however, is not limited to granting to His creatures a *static* participation in the goodness of existence. Beyond this, He also allows His creatures the dignity of a *dynamic* ability to endow others with goodness. These two facets of mercy are indicated by Pope Francis when he mentioned Christ's vocation of St. Matthew. The commentary of Saint Bede on this event offers particular insight into this gesture of mercy in the phrase that became the episcopal motto of Pope Francis: *miserando atque eligendo*.

This phrase indicates the twofold aspect of God's mercy. The first feature of mercy expressed here is *miserando*, "commiserating" in the sense of "having clemency" towards the misery of the sinful tax-collector, which offers him pardon. With this gesture, St. Matthew is given forgiveness and with that a participation in the divine life.

The second aspect of mercy is conveyed by the word *eligendo*. By this election Jesus elevates the tax-collector to the dignity of being apostle. In this second sense, the mercy of God not only strives to communicate His goodness to Matthew as a mere passive receiver. Rather, the mercy of God allows the apostle to share in His mission of communicating the divine life to others.

This second dimension of mercy is part of the universal Christian vocation. "I chose you to bear fruit..."<sup>14</sup> The manner of bearing fruit will

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<sup>12</sup> Lam 3,22-23.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Peter 1, 12.

<sup>14</sup> John 15,16.

differ from one person to another, from one type of vocation to another. But everyone who is called to be a member of Christ's flock, is called to be an instrument of God's mercy to others. This is evident from the parable of the final judgment. It is interesting to note that while Jesus uses the analogy of a shepherd who separates the good sheep from the bad, He does not follow the inner logic of this analogy. That is to say, the criterion that He uses to distinguish the good from the bad is not based upon the fact that the good sheep followed him faithfully when He wanted to lead them to green pastures to provide for their needs. Such would seem to be the normal way of judging a sheep, for it is the shepherd who provides for the sheep and a good sheep is one who accepts what the shepherd offers. But here, the good sheep are those who faithfully provided for His needs by attending to the needs of others.

This expresses a central principle of Catholic spiritual theology. It is presented in the work of St. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Heavenly Hierarchy*:

For each of those who is allotted a place in the Divine Order finds his perfection in being uplifted, according to his capacity, towards the Divine Likeness; and what is still more divine, he becomes, as the Scriptures say, a fellow-worker with God, and shows forth the Divine Activity revealed as far as possible in himself. For the holy constitution of the Hierarchy ordains that some are purified, others purify; some are enlightened, others enlighten; some are perfected, others make perfect; for in this way the divine imitation will fit each one.<sup>15</sup>

The manner of being a "fellow-worker" with God will vary according to one's particular vocation. What is common to every vocation is that it is God's mercy which elevates us by allowing us a "divine imitation" fit to our call. These are the "gifts" that the Spirit confers upon the members of Christ's body:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> DIONYSIUS, *Celestial Hierarchy*, Bk 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ephesian 4,11-13.

In summary, the mercy of God consists in His ardent desire to communicate His divine goodness to creatures. This merciful communication entails both the creation in the natural order and the elevation of angels and men to the supernatural order of grace. In the order of grace, God offers the possibility to participate in His divine life. Resulting from this sharing in His nature, He awards the gift of participating in His own work of communicating His merciful goodness to others. Having said this, we can now consider some of the specific ways by which Jesus Christ chooses to exercise mercy towards us. These ways mark our participation in His work.

### **The Day of Vindication of God**

In the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth and read the passage from the prophet Isaiah concerning the signs that would accompany the proclamation of the “year of favor”<sup>17</sup>. Pope Benedict XVI (as Cardinal) pointed out that Jesus excluded the last half of the original prophetic passage: “The Messiah, speaking of himself, says that he was sent “to announce a year of favor from the Lord **and a day of vindication by our God**”<sup>18</sup> At first sight, it seems that these two affirmations are contradictory. But as Pope Benedict explained:

We hear with joy the news of a year of favor: divine mercy puts a limit on evil, as the Holy Father told us. Jesus Christ is divine mercy in person: encountering Christ means encountering God’s mercy. Christ’s mandate has become our mandate through the priestly anointing. We are called to proclaim, not only with our words but also with our lives and with the valuable signs of the sacraments, “the year of favor from the Lord”. But what does the prophet Isaiah mean when he announces “the day of vindication by our God”? ... [T]he Lord offered a genuine commentary on these words by being put to death on the cross. St. Peter says: “In his own body he brought your sins to the cross” (1 Pt 2,24). And St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Galatians: “Christ has delivered us from the power of the law’s curse by himself becoming a curse for us, as it is written, ‘Accursed is anyone who is hanged on a tree’. This happened so that through Christ Jesus the blessing bestowed on Abraham might descend on the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, thereby making it possible for us to receive the promised Spirit through faith” (Gal 3,13f.).

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<sup>17</sup> Luke 4,16-21.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 61,2.

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. The day of vindication and the year of favor converge in the Paschal Mystery, in the dead and Risen Christ. This is the vengeance of God: he himself suffers for us, in the person of his Son. The more deeply stirred we are by the Lord's mercy, the greater the solidarity we feel with his suffering - and we become willing to complete in our own flesh "what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ" (Col 1,24).<sup>19</sup>

The reconciliation between our notion of the mercy of God and the notion of "God's vengeance" is implicit in the affirmation: "Christ's mercy is not a grace that comes cheap, nor does it imply the trivialization of evil." Mercy does not entail attenuating the culpability or covering up the objective gravity of sin. Jesus takes on the full consequences of sin. In this sense we can understand the statement of Pope St. John Paul II: "the Paschal Mystery [is the] mystery which bears within itself the most complete revelation of mercy, that is, of that love which is more powerful than death, more powerful than sin and every evil, the love which lifts man up when he falls into the abyss and frees him from the greatest threats."<sup>20</sup> In another place he wrote: "The cross is the total fulfillment of the messianic program that Christ once formulated in the synagogue at Nazareth and then repeated to the messengers sent by John the Baptist."<sup>21</sup>

## The Reality of Sin

Even in the context of sustaining that the mercy of God is more powerful than any kind of evil, Pope St. John Paul II recognizes that there still exists the prospective of evil in the hearts of men that can cause them to be lost in hell: "the reality of the evil that is in the world, affecting and besieging man, insinuating itself even into his heart and *capable of causing him to "perish in Gehenna."*"<sup>22</sup> The awareness of the objective consequences of sin is found in the parables of Jesus. Even the parables that speak of mercy and forgiveness often mention the dismal outcome of certain attitudes that are contrary to mercy. For example, if we consi-

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<sup>19</sup> JOSEPH RATZINGER, Homily for the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, Vatican Basilica, 18 April 2005.

<sup>20</sup> *DM* 15.

<sup>21</sup> *DM* 8.

<sup>22</sup> *DM* 7.

der the story of the prodigal son and merciful father, we note that there are various lessons being taught. If the parable only wanted to show the faithful love of the father, then it would have ended with the celebratory feast consequent upon the arrival of the younger son. But the story does not end there. It goes on to speak of the elder brother whose envy causes him to refuse to enter his father's house. This refusal is in direct contrast to the "joy of the angels in heaven". If the elder son were obliged to enter the feast, we can easily imagine that it would only infuriate him all the more. He would brood and fume as he sees the joyful feasting offered for his profligate brother.

Envy, disordered anger and hatred are revealed as objective impediments to entering into the joy of the Father. In other places Jesus particularly points out that the unwillingness to forgive the offenses of another has the result of effectively blocking our ability to receive God's mercy. "But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."<sup>23</sup> In another place Jesus speaks clearly about the ultimate effect of our anger.

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.<sup>24</sup>

In this same context, He points out other sins of distorted self-love that also have similar effects:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that we are capable of assuming attitudes that effectively impede God's mercy is of grave consequence. Therefore, it is an expression of God's mercy to inform us of this truth with clarity. As Pope St.

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<sup>23</sup> Mat 6,15.

<sup>24</sup> Mat 5,21-22.

<sup>25</sup> Mat 5,27-32.

John Paul II pointed out, the language of Sacred Scripture concerning hell is clearly symbolic. It seeks to express the worse possible tragedy in a language that allows the simplest person to perceive that it speaks of the most terrible ending conceivable. “The images of hell that Sacred Scripture presents to us must be correctly interpreted. They show the complete frustration and emptiness of life without God.”<sup>26</sup> The God who is so anxious to communicate His divine goodness to us wants us to be open to that same gift. For this reason He makes us aware of the objective obstacles to that transmission and the danger of not removing those same impediments.

The famous observation of Pope Pius XII: “the greatest sin of our century is the loss of the sense of sin” has been repeated by Pope St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. Since it is the case that contemporary men are by and large blind to the reality of sin, it is no wonder that the awareness of the dreadful consequences of sin is also absent in many Christians. The mystery of iniquity is truly unfathomable. It seems impossible for us to imagine that we have the ability to make decisions that will definitively separate us from our only true source of happiness. Yet we cannot deny or ignore that fact that Jesus Christ spoke more often and more clearly on this topic than anyone else in Sacred Scripture. This teaching is undeniably motivated by God’s merciful desire for our salvation.

### **The Scourge of Jesus**

Perhaps the most dramatic expression of Jesus’ confrontation with sinners is when He forcefully drove the money-changers from the temple. What would motivate the meek and humble heart of the Savior to make so strong a statement with a physical act of violence? To help them understand this gesture, the apostles remembered the Old Testament passage: “My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.”<sup>27</sup>

Based upon the foundational principle that everything that Jesus did was mercy, it is necessary to interpret this gesture in view of God’s ardent desire to communicate His divine goodness. He is not simply insisting

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<sup>26</sup> ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Hell is the State of Those who Reject God*, General Audience of Wednesday, 28 July 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Mat 21,13.

on His own prerogatives in favor of His own advantage. Rather, as in all things, He seeks what is best for us. One of the most fundamental truths that must necessarily govern and form our relation to God is the awareness that He is Holy. It is for our benefit that we recognize the objective, immutable reality of God, which is His Holiness. We may note that the *first* petition of the Lord's Prayer is "Hallowed be thy Name." This is clearly indicative of the fact that the desire to preserve the sanctity of God should be our primary intention in prayer. Again, this is not because it profits God, but because it is to our supreme well-being. If God is not sacred, then nothing is sacred. Human life itself is treated as something cheap. Moreover, if we do not understand the intrinsic holiness of God, it is with difficulty that we will understand and submit to the means of entering into His friendship. Rejecting this vital truth, places our relationship to God upon a falsehood, making it likely that we will deviate from the correct path. The Catechism explains:

Beginning with this first petition to our Father, we are immersed in the innermost mystery of his Godhead and the drama of the salvation of our humanity. Asking the Father that his name be made holy draws us into his plan of loving kindness for the fullness of time, "according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ," that we might "be holy and blameless before him in love."<sup>28</sup>

The need for holiness is not an arbitrary requirement for our friendship with God. It is consequent upon the immutable divine nature and the intimate communion with Him which is the essence of heaven. Blessed John Henry Newman, in a sermon on the passage "Holiness without which no one will see the Lord." (Hebrews 12,14) explained this point as follows:

If a man without religion (supposing it possible) were admitted into heaven, doubtless he would sustain a great disappointment. Before, indeed, he fancied that he could be happy there; but when he arrived there, he would find no discourse but that which he had shunned on earth, no pursuits but those he had disliked or despised, nothing which bound him to aught else in the universe, and made him feel at home, nothing which he could enter into and rest upon. He would perceive himself to be an isolated being, cut away by Supreme Power from those objects which were still entwined around his heart. Nay, he would be in the presence of that Supreme Power, whom he never on earth could bring himself steadily to think upon, and whom now he regarded only as the destroyer of all that was precious and

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<sup>28</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2807.

dear to him. Ah! he could not bear the face of the Living God; the Holy God would be no object of joy to him. “Let us alone! What have we to do with thee?” is the sole thought and desire of unclean souls, even while they acknowledge His majesty. None but the holy can look upon the Holy One; without holiness no man can endure to see the Lord.

Since we are called to rejoice in the presence of God (Who cannot be any less holy than He is) it is clear that it is of fundamental importance that we not confound worldliness with holiness. From this we can understand why the desecration of the Temple in which God’s Name resided was so significant. Not only was there the issue of perverting religion by making it into a lucrative business at the expense of the faithful people, but there was also the question of the continual scandal involved in turning the area reserved for divine worship into a place of commerce. In the face of this desecration, Jesus publically disciplined his beloved sons, in the sense spoken of in the Letter to the Hebrews:

My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts. Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, *in order that we may share his holiness*. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.<sup>29</sup>

The word that is translated as “chastises” in the first sentence is *μαστιγοι*. This word can also be translated as “scourges”. It is strong language, but it offers some understanding of the scourge that the Incarnate Mercy made to use against His cherished children in the temple of Jerusalem. The merciful love that disciplines expresses an ardent desire to communicate, but which first must awaken the person to the fact that he is on the wrong path. The experience of this discipline, particularly for those who choose to “kick against the goad” may result in what seems to be the “wrath” of God.

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<sup>29</sup> Heb 12,5-11.

## The Wrath of God

When God's merciful love, which desires to communicate goodness and truth, comes upon those who are closed to receiving it, the result is a clash. Using the image of St. Ignatius of Loyola, it is like water falling on a rock as opposed to falling on a sponge.<sup>30</sup> The ensuing conflict can give rise to the experience of what is called the "wrath of God". The expression "wrath of God" is not only found in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we find the following texts:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.<sup>31</sup>

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.<sup>32</sup>

The attribution of human emotions to God (such as wrath) is clearly anthropomorphic language. It is a way of projecting on God "feelings of violence and aggression comparable with what we can experience ourselves."<sup>33</sup> But we must go further by following the same logic that exists in human "passions" or "affections". That is to say, we must remember that all the passions are rooted in and proceed from the common root of love. Anger, like all the other passions, originates from love as its motivating force. Hence, when anger is attributed to God, it is presupposed that it is an expression of divine love, which is always merciful. "The wrath of God is a way of saying that I have been living in a way that is contrary to the love that is God. Anyone who begins to live and grow away from God, who lives away from what is good, is turning his life toward wrath."<sup>34</sup>

God, in his love, seeks to rectify this "turning away" by means of a more or less severe correction. From the point of view of the one who is disciplined, it seems "painful rather than pleasant" at the time. When a doctor offers a honey tea to relieve throat pain, it may be easier to re-

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, *Spiritual Exercises, Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, the Second Week*, Rule 7.

<sup>31</sup> John 3,35-36.

<sup>32</sup> Rom 5,8-9.

<sup>33</sup> POPE BENEDICT XVI, *The Christian Faith Is Not An Idea But A Life*, L'Osservatore Romano, March 17, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> POPE BENEDICT XVI, *God and the World*.

cognize that his treatment is for our good than when he gives us a bitter draught for a liver ailment. But both have the same finality. The fact that some medicines are necessarily bitter or painful, particularly when in the spiritual realm, is consequent upon the objective gravity of the disorder. Since the spiritual realm, which is damaged by our sins, is invisible to us, the only way that we can perceive the “bitter” consequences of our actions is through the unpleasant medicine offered as a cure.

If we imagine that God, in his infinite wisdom, could formulate remedies that are always sweet and pleasant it is because we have a false notion of the consequences of sin. Sin is not simply an extrinsic, legal indictment that can be waved like a traffic violation to no one’s harm. Rather it is a distortion of the free will, fixing it on created things that are contrary to its true end and consequently the real happiness of man. The definitive sorrow of obstinately fixing the will upon some creature, as if upon false “gods” is called the “eternal punishment” of sin. In a lesser way, the suffering involved in breaking the attachments to sinful objects is what is called the “temporal punishment due to sin”.

Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the “eternal punishment” of sin. On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the “temporal punishment” of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin.<sup>35</sup>

Although the *Catechism* says that temporal punishment must not be conceived as a “vengeance inflicted by God” nevertheless, this way of perceiving the experience of the purification from sin finds expression even in Sacred Scripture. The Bible uses human language and expressions from human experience which are not always, strictly speaking, to be taken in their literal sense.

In order to discover the sacred authors’ intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current. For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in

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<sup>35</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1472.

the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, the language of “wrath” and “vengeance” of God can be understood as the human expression of what the merciful discipline of God seems, seen from the point of view of the one being disciplined. Those who remain eternally obstinate in refusing God’s mercy are said to experience His eternal “wrath”.

### **Consequences of the Doctrine of Hell**

There are grave misunderstandings with regard to the import of the doctrine of the eternal punishment of Hell. For example, one writer for a Catholic periodical wrote:

We can readily see the arrogant and callous self-righteousness that a belief in hell engenders. The “saved” proudly assert that they are going to heaven, with nary a care that everyone else will suffer for eternity. They might even glory in the damnation of others. Come on. Can that kind of attitude, with its smugness and indifference to (or even glee in) the pain of others, possibly have a place in heaven and be pleasing to God? I think belief in a God who sends people to hell, no matter how cloaked in theological sweetness, creates cruel people.<sup>37</sup>

This is a strange distortion of the true attitude of the saints in Christ. It is precisely in the light of the horrible possibility of eternal loss that they are motivated to undertake heroic acts of virtue. “If faith and salvation are no longer interdependent, faith itself becomes unmotivated.”<sup>38</sup> Far from assuming an attitude of callousness, the faithful are called to respond with generosity in prayer and sacrifice for all who have assumed stances that objectively close them to God’s merciful love.

Although God does not need our cooperation for our initial creation, for the communication of His grace, there is generally the need of some collaboration on our part. In the famous words of St. Augustine, “qui creavit te sine te, non salvabit te sine te”. This is especially the case when it deals with the return to His grace after having rejected or neglected it

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> <http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/debunking-myth-hell>.

<sup>38</sup> POPE BENEDICT XVI, *The Christian Faith Is Not An Idea But A Life*, L’Osservatore Romano, March 17, 2016.

by free acts. There exists the need to restore the lost order. As St. Pope John Paul II wrote:

In no passage of the Gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean indulgence towards evil, towards scandals, towards injury or insult. In any case, reparation for evil and scandal, compensation for injury, and satisfaction for insult are conditions for forgiveness.<sup>39</sup>

The Church requires repentance for a valid confession, not as an arbitrary ecclesiastical norm. Rather, it is rooted in the very nature of sin. Contrition, which holds the first place among the acts of the penitent, is a sorrow of mind, and a detestation for sin committed, with the purpose of not sinning for the future. This movement of contrition contains not only a cessation from sin, and the purpose and the beginning of a new life, but also a hatred of the old way of life.<sup>40</sup> Just as it would be impossible to expect a medical doctor to heal a knife wound without first removing the knife, in the same way, it is impossible to heal the wound caused by sin without first removing the cause of the sin which lies in a disordered attachment of the will.

When people are closed to repentance due to mistrust in God or the conviction that they cannot do any better or by the hardening of their hearts towards God's mercy, then they need the help of others. It is in the face of these and similar problems that the mercy of God, manifested in Jesus Christ, can act in and through His faithful members. This brings us to our next point.

### **The mercy of the Cross**

The final phrase from the aforementioned quotation from Pope Benedict XVI concerning the "day of vindication" indicates a very important dimension of our relation to God's mercy as revealed in the Paschal Mystery.

The more deeply stirred we are by the Lord's mercy, the greater the solidarity we feel with his suffering - and we become willing to complete in our own flesh "what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ".<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *DM*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV *De Sacramento Poenitentiae*, Chap.4.

<sup>41</sup> JOSEPH RATZINGER, Homily for the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, Vatican Basilica, 18 April 2005.

The mysterious claim of St. Paul regarding the “completing in his own flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ” points to a very significant manner in which the followers of Christ are offered a possibility to participate in Jesus’ supreme act of mercy. Jesus Himself taught that this manner is not reserved for a few select followers. Rather, it is for all who aspire to be His disciple:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?<sup>42</sup>

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches the universal call of Christians to participate in the merciful sacrifice of Christ realized once and for all on the Cross:

The cross is the unique sacrifice of Christ, the “one mediator between God and men”. But because in his incarnate divine person he has in some way united himself to every man, “the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery” is offered to all men. He calls his disciples to “take up [their] cross and follow (him)”, for “Christ also suffered for (us), leaving (us) an example so that (we) should follow in his steps.” In fact Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries. This is achieved supremely in the case of his mother, who was associated more intimately than any other person in the mystery of his redemptive suffering. Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven.<sup>43</sup>

In the presence of so much evil, violence, hatred, cruelty present in the world, the infinite act of love of Christ, realized in His passion and death, has created a “counterweight” of love in the terminology of Pope Benedict XVI. The Christian faithful should recognize that their lives can help contribute to this counterbalance:

[I]n front of the excessive power of evil only an infinite love was enough, only an infinite atonement. [Christians] knew that the crucified and risen Christ is a power that can counter the power of evil and save the world. And on this basis they could even understand the meaning of their own

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew 16,23-26.

<sup>43</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 618.

sufferings as inserted into the suffering love of Christ and included as part of the redemptive power of such love.<sup>44</sup>

It is the “tremendous” mercy of God that allows us to be coworkers with Him, even to the point of “being made partners in the Paschal Mystery”. By “inserting” our sufferings into the suffering love of Christ, we can become part of the ballast which opposes evil. The Cross is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”<sup>45</sup>

When Jesus mentioned to his disciples “that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised”<sup>46</sup> Peter was scandalized. In the face of Peter’s attempt to dissuade Him from the Cross, we have an example, in the response of Jesus, of a word that does not seem, at first sight, particularly merciful and compassionate: “Get behind me, Satan!” Just a few minutes prior to this, Jesus was praising Peter for his being inspired by God the Father. Now he is calling him an arch-enemy. These strong words spoken by “the Divine Mercy Incarnate” serve to give clear stress regarding Christ’s central mission: “it is for this reason that I have come.”<sup>47</sup> In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews:

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God.’”<sup>48</sup>

The symbol of our Christian faith is the Cross. This is because it is, as Pope St. John Paul II pointed out, it is the highest revelation of God’s mercy. But it is also the central feature of our response in faith to the revelation of Christ. In baptism we have been consecrated to serve as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”<sup>49</sup> This holy priesthood enables us “to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God

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<sup>44</sup> POPE BENEDICT XVI, *The Christian Faith Is Not An Idea But A Life*, L’Osservatore Romano, March 17, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Corinthians 1,23-24.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew 16,21.

<sup>47</sup> John 12,27.

<sup>48</sup> Hebrews 10,5-7.

<sup>49</sup> 1 Peter 2,9.

through Jesus Christ.”<sup>50</sup> St. Peter Chrysologus wrote in his commentary on the words of St. Paul, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercy of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”<sup>51</sup>:

How marvelous is the priesthood of the Christian, for he is both the victim that is offered on his own behalf, and the priest who makes the offering. He does not need to go beyond himself to seek what he is to immolate to God: with himself and in himself he brings the sacrifice he is to offer God for himself. The victim remains and the priest remains, always one and the same. Immolated, the victim still lives: the priest who immolates cannot kill. Truly it is an amazing sacrifice in which a body is offered without being slain and blood is offered without being shed.<sup>52</sup>

St. Paul made this appeal by the “mercy of God” for it is God’s merciful grace that allows us to share in Christ’s redemptive work. But in order for the faithful in Christ to recognize this challenging mercy as a true gift of God’s love, it is necessary to achieve the second half of St. Paul’s exhortation: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”<sup>53</sup> Pope Benedict explains the efficacy of our participation in the love of Jesus:

The counterweight to the dominion of evil can consist in the first place only in the divine-human love of Jesus Christ that is always greater than any possible power of evil. But it is necessary that we place ourselves inside this answer that God gives us through Jesus Christ. Even if the individual is responsible for a fragment of evil, and therefore is an accomplice of evil’s power, together with Christ he can nevertheless “complete what is lacking in his sufferings” (cfr. Colossians 1,24).... It means that we always allow ourselves to be molded and transformed by Christ and that we pass continuously from the side of him who destroys to the side of Him who saves.<sup>54</sup>

The participation in the Cross of Christ is not only for one’s own benefit, but it is for the “sake of His body the Church”.<sup>55</sup> It was mentioned

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<sup>50</sup> 1 Peter 2,5.

<sup>51</sup> Romans 12,1.

<sup>52</sup> ST. PETER CHRYSOLOGUS, *Sermon 108, PL 52, 499-500*.

<sup>53</sup> Romans 12,2.

<sup>54</sup> POPE BENEDICT XVI, *The Christian Faith Is Not An Idea But A Life*, L’Osservatore Romano, March 17, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Col 1,24.

earlier that contrition is needed in order to receive forgiveness. But for the benefit of those who are not repentant, there exists the possibility for the faithful to “bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”<sup>56</sup> One member of the Body of Christ can help the others who are less open to God’s grace.

As we saw above, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are an expression of God’s abundant mercy, permitting us to participate in the fullness of the life of Christ. St. Paul exhorts the Christians to “strive for the greater gifts.” Above all, he recommends that we desire love. And, as Jesus taught us, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”<sup>57</sup> In the light of this, we can see how the above-mentioned claim that the doctrine of Hell creates self-confident smugness fails to see the full consequences of our responsibility for one another in the Mystical Body of Christ. The love of Christ obliges us to be merciful as He is merciful, even to the point of laying down our lives for others.

### **The Sacrament of Mercy**

While it is true that the Sacrament of Reconciliation offers access to God’s forgiving mercy, the Eucharist offers us the strength to become channels of God’s merciful love for the renovation of the Church and the world. Jesus said to St. Faustina: “Look, soul, for you I founded the throne of mercy on the earth and this throne is the tabernacle. It is from this throne of mercy that I desire to descend into your heart.”<sup>58</sup> This is to be understood not only to imply that Jesus Christ offers His continual, static presence in our midst to which we can have recourse in prayer, as Solomon said with regard to the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>59</sup> Beyond this, Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist has a dynamic, transformative dimension. Pope Benedict, as Cardinal, explained that the essential transformation upon which the Eucharist is established was realized on the Cross, when Christ effected a real transformation of violence into an act of love. The way that Jesus instituted the Eucharist already points to this, when He

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<sup>56</sup> Gal 6,2.

<sup>57</sup> John 15,13.

<sup>58</sup> ST. FAUSTINA, *The Diary*, 1485.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. 1 Kings 8,29-30.

said “take this all of you and eat it, for this is my body which is given for you...this is my blood which is shed for you.”<sup>60</sup>

But now a new question emerges: what do “it is given” and “it is shed” mean? In truth, Jesus is killed; he is nailed to a cross and dies amid torment. His blood is poured out, first in the Garden of Olives due to his interior suffering for his mission, then in the flagellation, the crowning with thorns, the crucifixion, and after his death in the piercing of his Heart. What occurs is above all an act of violence, of hatred, torture and destruction.

At this point we run into a second, more profound level of transformation: he transforms, from within, the act of violent men against him into an act of giving on behalf of these men - into an act of love. This is dramatically recognizable in the scene of the Garden of Olives. What he teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, he now does: he does not offer violence against violence, as he might have done, but puts an end to violence by transforming it into love. The act of killing, of death, is changed into an act of love; violence is defeated by love. This is the fundamental transformation upon which all the rest is based. It is the true transformation which the world needs and which alone can redeem the world. Since Christ in an act of love has transformed and defeated violence from within, death itself is transformed: love is stronger than death. It remains forever.<sup>61</sup>

The Eucharist is founded upon Jesus’ perfect act of self-sacrifice and forgiveness realized in His passion and death. Cardinal Ratzinger goes on to point out that “The purpose of the Eucharist is the transformation of those who receive it in authentic communion.”<sup>62</sup> The transformation that we are to undergo consists in our becoming what we eat. Through Holy Communion, we enter into union with the Priest and Victim. This allows us the strength to exercise our dignity as priest and victim with him. St. Augustine applied this notion specifically to the vocation to martyrdom. But his observation relates to the various sacrifices of all those who are called to partake of that “great table”:

Elsewhere we read: You have taken your seat at the great table; consider carefully what is set before you, for you must prepare the same in return. The great table is the one at which the Lord of the banquet is Himself the food. No one feeds the guests with his very self, yet that is what Christ the Lord does. He invites and he is the food and drink. ... What shall I

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<sup>60</sup> Luke 22,19-20.

<sup>61</sup> JOSEPH RATZINGER, Bishops’ Conference of the Region of Campania in Benevento (Italy), *Eucharist, Communion And Solidarity*, June 2, 2002.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

give back to the Lord for all that he has given me? I shall take the cup of salvation. What cup is that? The bitter and saving cup of suffering, the cup the sick man would be afraid to put to his lips unless the doctor had drunk of it first. That is the cup meant here, and we find Christ himself speaking of it: Father, if possible, let this cup pass away from me.<sup>63</sup>

Each one, according to his own particular vocation, is required to “take up his Cross every day” to follow Christ. For some it involves bearing physical suffering, for others it means participating in the sadness of Christ, for still others (such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta) it means experiencing the “abandonment of God”, for others it means accepting with love being “nailed” to the obligations of ones state in life. There are as many variations on this theme as there are members of the Body of Christ. Each in his own way endeavors to accept the challenging mercy that allows us the dignity of not only participating in the Divine Life of grace, but to be co-workers with Christ in the communication of that grace to others. In the face of the hardships entailed, it is not unusual that we be inclined to protest the chaffing weight of the cross. Even so great a saint as St. Pio complained in the face of the excessive sufferings that he endured. On one occasion, in response to his grumblings, his guardian angel reminded him:

Thank Jesus who is treating you as one chosen to follow him closely up the steep ascent of Calvary; soul confided by Jesus to my care, I behold with joy and deep emotion this behavior of Jesus towards you. Do you perhaps think I would be so happy if I did not see you ill-treated like this? I, who in holy charity greatly desire your good, rejoice more and more to see you in this state. Defend yourself, always reject and despise the devil’s evil insinuations, and when your own strength is not sufficient, do not be distressed, beloved of my heart, for I am close to you.<sup>64</sup>

### **Blessed Laura Vicuña**

A heroic example of the principles presented in this article is found in the life and death of Blessed Laura Vicuña. Laura’s mother Mercedes was pressured into living with a man, without marrying him. Laura was taught the Catholic faith in school and so became aware of the gravity of her mother’s situation. Realizing that her mother was in danger of eternal damnation, she offered her own life for the conversion of her mother. She

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<sup>63</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, *Sermon* 329,1-2; PL 38, 1454-1455.

<sup>64</sup> ST. PIO OF PIETRELCINA, *Letters*, vol. I, no. 113.

became seriously ill with pulmonary tuberculosis. Before she died, Laura told her mother: "Mama, I offered my life for you, I asked our Lord for this. Before I die, Mother, would I have the joy of seeing you repent?" Mercedes answered: "I swear, I will do whatever you ask me! God is the witness of my promise!" Laura smiled and said to: "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Mary! Goodbye, Mother! Now I die happy!" At thirteen years of age Laura died of her disease, weakened by the physical abuse she previously received from her mother's paramour, having offered her life for the salvation of her mother.

Here we have an example of God's mercy which consists not only in His readiness to forgive the repentant Mercedes; but also in allowing Laura to participate in the supreme revelation of God's merciful love, the Paschal Mystery of Christ. It may be possible to argue that the sin of Mercedes was not subjectively culpable and due to mitigating factors she was not guilty of grave sin. But such arguments serve best to favor the sin of our century: the loss of the sense of sin. In the end, they favor mediocracy. The heroic virtue of Laura was possible because she was not influenced by an attempt to explain away the objectively grave sin of her mother. Rather she was influenced by the love of Christ, who inspired her to follow His path of love and mercy.

## Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the supreme manifestation of God's mercy. The paschal mystery is the central event Jesus' revelation. The Cross essentially marks His mission. Consequently it is etched into the mission of mercy of all His followers. This year of mercy encourages the faithful to a renewed dedication to the practice of mercifully serving others. But Christians need to remember the most fundamental exercise of mercy which consists in responding ever more generously to the call to complete in their own bodies what is lacking in the suffering of Christ for the sake of the Church and the world. We have been called to manifest the merciful face of Jesus by our willingness to embrace the Cross. This is truly folly. It is a stumbling block for some and a scandal for others. But for those who are saved, it is the highest wisdom and the greatest mercy of God.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 1,23-24.

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