

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY MELBOURNE SENATUS, 5 JUNE 2016

In this Year of Mercy, the Church has been focusing on the infinite mercy of God; thanking him for his gift of mercy granted to us in Christ; opening ourselves to its continued outpouring; and performing acts of mercy ourselves in response to the divine gift received.

As Legionaries conveying to others the proclamation of the Good News of God's mercy, it's important to have a right understanding of it. Something that can confuse people is how mercy fits with the warnings of Jesus and the Church about judgment and punishment for sin. Someone can fall into one of two opposite traps. On the one hand, we often find people denying in practice the reality of judgment and the possibility of hell, and assuming everyone must be saved. On the other hand, there are those who view this whole emphasis on mercy as too soft, as a dilution of the Gospel. So while rightly insisting on the teaching of Jesus that judgment is real and eternal punishment possible, they imagine that this is because God's mercy somehow reaches a limit.

As is often the case, the temptation to fall into either one-sided solution is because of the presence of mystery: here, the co-existence of God's infinite mercy, love and power, with human freedom. Our human concepts can't properly grasp both sides of the equation at once. So we're tempted to collapse the mystery by choosing one side to the exclusion of the other. But within a basic awareness and acceptance of that mystery, we can explore a little more deeply.

First, there can be no doubt of the teaching of Jesus on this matter: 'Unless you repent, you will perish as they did'. (Lk 13:3) Repeatedly, he warns of the danger of eternal punishment for those who persist in evil until the end of their lives. So if warning about eternal punishment is supposedly being unmerciful, then we're really pretending to be more merciful than Jesus himself.

Pope Francis, in his Bull *Misericordiae Vultus* announcing the Year of Mercy, naturally taught no differently. He wrote: 'I direct this invitation to conversion even more fervently to those whose behaviour distances them from the grace of God... For their own good, I beg them to change their lives. I ask them this in the name of the Son of God who, though rejecting sin, never rejected the sinner... Everyone, sooner or later, will be subject to God's judgment, from which no one can escape... This is the opportune moment to change our lives! This is the time to allow our hearts to be touched!' (19)

So here is the mystery: God's mercy is infinite, yet we learn again and again from Christ that unless we repent, we can't receive his forgiveness. At first sight, this does seem a limitation on God's mercy. After all, we ourselves are encouraged to forgive people who have wronged us, even if they're not yet sorry. So, is God less forgiving than us? Well, the mystery comes from the fact that God's mercy is actually more powerful than ours. The forgiveness that we give essentially means that we still love the person who has wronged us, we wish them well – especially, we wish for their conversion and salvation. It means we don't insist on any supposed right to avenge what's been done to us. All these aspects of forgiveness, God also has towards the sinner, even before they repent. So definitely, we're not more forgiving than him!

But here is the mystery: the fullness of God's mercy goes further, actually transforming the sinner within, restoring in them the gift of sanctifying grace, the seed of heavenly life. God's forgiveness isn't just words from outside. But to receive this transforming fullness of mercy, and so be set back on the path to salvation, we need to freely accept the gift, and to reject all that is incompatible with it. God never forces us to love him.

This helps us understand why unless we freely repent all our serious sins, we can't be forgiven (in this full sense of being transformed and thus being enabled once again to be united with God in heaven). Union with God is only possible for one whose will is in basic union with God's will – that is, someone for whom God's will is the supreme rule of their lives. (This is central to what it means to love God above all things.) Refusal to repent means rejecting the gift of supernatural love that God wants so much to restore to our souls, and which is necessary for salvation. So the great mystery: infinite mercy, the transforming power of the free gift of sanctifying grace – but in the end, God respects us so much, that he waits on our freedom to accept it.

We see from this the dangerous deception of imagining that we can safely continue in a state of mortal sin without repentance, on the grounds that God will supposedly forgive us anyway. This error, which at first sight gives more acknowledgment to God's forgiveness, actually downgrades it by overlooking its transformative power, and forgetting God's full respect for our freedom. This is why Jesus, in his burning love for us and desire for our salvation, again and again pleads with us to repent – to be truly sorry for our sins. (Though we must remember as well that with our repentance itself, God's grace is already constantly working behind the scenes, drawing us, prompting us to come back, to open ourselves once again to his love. We can't do it alone.)

But the transformative power of God's grace is indeed so wonderful. Having cleared away the misinterpretation that repentance isn't necessary, we can again focus on the extraordinary divine gift to which repentance opens us. When our serious sins are forgiven in Baptism or in Reconciliation, and the Holy Spirit brings the amazing gift of sanctifying grace to our soul, it actually changes us and makes us holy. So when God the Father looks at our souls after our sins have been forgiven, he doesn't see the sin and the shame that are now totally gone. Rather, he sees the most holy image of Christ his Son, crucified and risen, that is now really and truly imprinted on our hearts.