

ALLOCUTIO July 2016 - Fr. Justin Ford, Senatus Spiritual Director

In the *Handbook*, we read, ‘The very first praesidium of the Legion was given the title of Our Lady of Mercy. This was done because the first work undertaken was the visitation of a hospital under the care of the Sisters of Mercy. The legionaries thought they were choosing that name, but who can doubt that in reality it was conferred by the sweet Virgin herself, who thereby indicated the quality which must ever distinguish the legionary soul.’ (p. 282)

This reminds us how much the ‘Year of Mercy’ should resonate with every legionary. We march under the banner of the one whom in the *Salve Regina* we call ‘Mother of Mercy...our life, our sweetness and our hope’. We ask our Queen to turn her eyes of mercy towards us, and then at the end, again we acclaim her as *clement*, loving and sweet. In all the apostolic activity of the Legion, we’re engaging in the various spiritual works of mercy. But how important it is that they be conducted in a *spirit* of mercy – and in a spirit of mercy, furthermore, that’s *clearly visible* to others.

Again the *Handbook* tells us, ‘For the legionary there is only one way of doing God’s work – the way of gentleness and sweetness. Let him not depart from that way under any circumstances whatsoever. If he does, he will not achieve good; he will rather work harm. Legionaries who stray outside that realm of Mary lose touch with her on whom their work depends. What then can they hope to accomplish?’ (p. 282) So the Year of Mercy is a great opportunity for us to make sure that mercy and gentleness permeate everything we do.

I also wanted to share with you today my experience of being in Rome last month for the Year of Mercy ‘Jubilee for Priests’ called by Pope Francis. I made pilgrimage to various places, and I was able to especially pray for the Legion, both in Rome and also at the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal at the Rue de Bac in Paris, in the very place where Our Lady appeared to St Catherine Labouré in 1830 and requested to have the Medal made and distributed, and where St Catherine’s body, preserved incorrupt, can still be seen.

For the Jubilee in Rome, several thousand priests from around the world came together and took part in a day of teaching and spiritual retreat in the Roman basilicas led by the Holy Father himself. Over the course of the day, Pope Francis went from one basilica to another, giving an hour of meditations at each one, this being telecast also to the other basilicas. The next day, the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, which is also the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests, we concelebrated Mass with the Holy Father in St Peter’s Square.

There was a great wealth of teaching from the Pope on this theme of mercy. What I wanted to start with today, however, was a wonderful catechesis that the English-speaking priests received earlier in the week from Bishop Robert Barron, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, (who has been a great communicator of the faith even before he became a bishop).

The Bishop described God’s mercy as having four great qualities: God’s mercy is *relentless*; God’s mercy is *divinising*; God’s mercy is *demanding*; and God’s mercy *sends us on mission*.

So first, God’s mercy is relentless. God never gives up on us. No matter how distant we are from him, he’s always chasing after us, the Shepherd searching for the lost sheep. He doesn’t force us: he always leaves us free – but to the end of our lives, his grace is always being lavished upon us. So as sinners who always need forgiveness, we never despair of God’s mercy. And as legionaries called to be instruments of mercy to others, we never give up on *anyone else* either. We don’t view any individual as beyond God’s relentless mercy, as a waste of our time.

Second, God’s mercy is divinising. Because God’s mercy is one with his infinite power, he doesn’t just forgive us by words that remain external to us – his mercy actually transforms us. When we accept God’s mercy, he changes us from within, even to make us sharers by grace in his own divine nature. (2 Pet 1:4) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes St Athanasius: ‘By the participation

of the Spirit, we become communicants in the divine nature...For this reason, those in whom the Spirit dwells are divinised.' (n. 1988) This is why sanctifying grace is also called 'deifying grace'. (*Catechism* n. 1999) This grace is the seed of life in heaven, the Beatific Vision. And all this is central to why God's mercy is such amazing Good News. This is central to why, when as legionaries we act as instruments of mercy, we're helping lead other people to something which is incredibly precious even in this world – whether by their newly accepting God's divinising grace, or by their sharing more deeply in that grace.

Third, God's mercy is demanding: it challenges us. God always leads us to make the commitment to change, to truly repent. Mercy isn't God saying, 'Yes, stay in the slavery of sin, everything's OK'. No, at the very beginning of the preaching of Jesus, he says, 'Repent, and believe the Good News'. (Mk 1:15) God *meets* each one of us where we are. (After all, there's no other place where we can be met! We can't move to a new place without his help.) But his mercy doesn't want us to *stay* completely as we are. He always leads us on towards the fullness of life. And to let ourselves be transformed in that way is challenging.

And finally, God's mercy sends us on mission. We've received a great gift ourselves in the mercy of God – given to us in the first place in the Sacrament of Baptism, but then again and again through our lives in the repeated forgiveness of our sins. But we can't keep that gift of mercy for ourselves. We're obliged, we're impelled, to share what we've received with others. We do this by forgiving others as we've been forgiven, but also by becoming messengers of mercy. Our legionary apostolate is a great opportunity given to us to live out God's call to every Christian to share the gift of mercy with others. And we do that under the guidance, and following the example, of our Blessed Mother of Mercy.