

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY, MELBOURNE SENATUS, 11 SEPTEMBER 2016

In Rome last June, the Jubilee of Priests for the Year of Mercy was celebrated, and with thousands of priests I was privileged to be led in three hour-long meditations by Pope Francis himself. These were on the theme of mercy, so in these last months of the Year of Mercy, it's good to reflect further on his words.

The Holy Father, after giving many examples of mercy in the lives of different saints, spoke of 'Mary as vessel and source of mercy': 'Ascending the stairway of the saints in our pursuit of vessels of mercy, we come at last to Our Lady. She is the simple yet perfect vessel that both receives and bestows mercy... As she says in the Magnificat, she knows that God has looked with favour upon her humility and she recognizes that his mercy is from generation to generation.' (2nd Meditation)

Mary's prayer reminds us of the right understanding of humility. First, we remember that no virtue can exist in opposition to truth. Humility doesn't mean pretending. So, an essential part of humility is accepting the truth of who we are: our sins and weaknesses, yes, but also the gifts we've received from God. And here humility means acknowledging that every good thing we have is only there by God's generosity. Thus St Bernard writes, 'Not he is blameworthy who glories in what he has, but he who glories in it as though he had not received it.' (*On the Love of God*)

So Our Lady says in the Magnificat, 'My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. He looks on His servant in her lowliness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed. The Almighty works marvels for me, Holy his name.' Mary's humility doesn't consist in her saying what a terrible sinner she is. That would be a lie. It consists in recognising and rejoicing that all the marvels received in her lowliness were gifts of the Almighty, and so glorified him.

These are gifts of *God's mercy*, not in the sense of forgiving any supposed sin of hers, but in the deeper sense of gifts *totally free and undeserved* (including the gift of being totally preserved from sin in the first place). (In this sense, St Thomas Aquinas teaches that all of creation is a gift of God's mercy, since there was nothing there in the first place to 'deserve' God's gift, which is pure generosity. This is why divine mercy is something radiating through the existence of all created things. (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, 21, 4)) We might further characterise humility then, as the 'emptiness', the receptivity, of being ready to be filled by God's merciful gifts (rather than being so full of ourselves that we deny our neediness).

Later in his Meditation, Pope Francis quoted Isaac of Stella: 'Whatever is said of Mary specially is said of the Church universally and of each soul individually' So, a first application we can make today of this understanding of mercy and humility is to the Church.

Part of the humility of the Church means recognising that all her greatness and beauty as Bride of Christ comes as gift from the Bridegroom. (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 748-750) But the Church on earth, *in us her members*, does not yet have the perfect holiness of Mary, so the Church's humility also means recognising our own sinfulness, and how we all fail in various degrees to live fully in accord with the truth and grace Christ offers us through his beloved Bride.

Now, a bridegroom is not normally pleased if we make critical comments about his bride. It is never Christ's spotless Bride (*Eph* 5:25-27) who sins *as such*: 'the Church is held, as a matter of faith, to be unfailingly holy'. (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 39) It is we ourselves, both shepherds

and faithful, who choose to be less than fully Christian, less than fully Catholic, and so prevent the truth and grace with which Christ has endowed his Bride from shining forth as it should.

Blessed Pope Paul VI explained in the *Credo of the People of God* that the Church is ‘holy, though having sinners in her midst, because she herself has no other life but the life of grace: if they live her life, her members are sanctified; if they move away from her life, they fall into sins and disorders that prevent the radiation of her sanctity. This is why she suffers and does penance for those offences, of which she has the power to free her children through the blood of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ (19)

And speaking to journalists recently, Pope Francis succinctly expressed the same duality, when after saying how the Church should apologise for various wrongs, he added, ‘when I say “the Church”, I mean Christians; the Church is holy, we are sinners!’ (26/6/16)

All this helps us rightly understand, and joyfully proclaim, the greatness of belonging to the holy Church, such as Pope Pius XII expressed in his Encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ *Mystici Corporis Christi*: ‘For nothing more glorious, nothing nobler, nothing surely more honourable can be imagined than to belong to the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church, in which we become members of One Body as venerable as it is unique; are guided by one supreme Head; are filled with one divine Spirit; are nourished during our earthly exile by one doctrine and one heavenly Bread, until at last we enter into the one, unending blessedness of heaven.’ (91)

Inspiring words – but maybe they make us nervous because, someone might say, it doesn’t sound very humble. But properly understood, this isn’t what’s called ‘triumphalism’, a proud glorying in ourselves or a denial of the evident sinfulness of the Church’s members, her ministers included (cf. *Mystici Corporis* 66). Rather, it’s a humble recognition of the gifts of Christ to his Bride, spotless inasmuch as she proceeds from him, and whose essential holiness all our sinfulness can never destroy or even diminish.

So: we’re meant to be humble about *ourselves*, but not about God, or about the salvation Christ offers us in his Church. That is, we’re not meant to say, ‘Well, our God isn’t actually so very great; Christ’s Sacrifice didn’t actually achieve so very much for us.’ That of course would not be humility, but rather a lie and blasphemy. Thus to praise and glorify God as much as we can, with our whole being, with all the resources at the Church’s disposal – that belongs to the heart of our humility as Church: reflecting everything we’ve received back to God’s glory, and honouring, with Mary, the pure gift of his mercy.