

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY, MELBOURNE SENATUS, 2 OCTOBER 2016

We've known about Pope Francis from the start that he has a profound devotion to Our Lady. Shortly after his election, he made a special visit to the Basilica of St Mary Major to pray before the icon of Our Lady, Salus Populi Romani (Protectress of the Roman People), and he does the same thing before and after each of his international trips. One of his particular devotions is to Our Lady, 'Untier of Knots'; and every day he recites fifteen decades of the Rosary.

As we approach the centenary year of Fatima, we recall that in the first weeks of his pontificate he asked the Cardinal Archbishop of Lisbon that his papacy be consecrated to Our Lady of Fatima, which was done on 13th May 2013. And then, on 13th October of that same first year of his papal ministry, the anniversary of the Miracle of the Sun at Fatima, he once again consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, in the footsteps of his predecessors. So: a very Marian pope.

At the Jubilee of Priests for the Year of Mercy in Rome last June, those of us attending were privileged three times to receive hour-long Meditations from the Holy Father himself on the theme of mercy; and in the second of these, delivered in the Basilica of St Mary Major, he spoke about 'Mary as vessel and source of mercy'. Referring back to his visit to Mexico earlier this year, he said:

'During the moments I was able to spend alone with Mary during my visit to Mexico, as I gazed at Our Lady, the Virgin of Guadalupe and I let her gaze at me, I prayed for you, dear priests, to be good pastors of souls. In my address to the bishops, I mentioned that I have often reflected on the mystery of Mary's gaze, its tenderness and its sweetness that give us the courage to open our hearts to God's mercy.'

'Mary's gaze makes us feel her maternal embrace. She shows us that the only power capable of winning human hearts is the tenderness of God. What delights and attracts, humbles and overcomes, opens and unleashes is not...the force of the law, but rather the omnipotent weakness of divine love, which is the irresistible force of its gentleness and the irrevocable pledge of its mercy.' (*Spiritual Retreat for the Jubilee for Priests, Second Meditation, 2 June 2016*)

It's good to see how the *Handbook* of the Legion is very much in line with the Holy Father's words. We read in Chapter 39, Section 2 ('Infinite Patience and Sweetness must be Lavished on a Priceless Soul'):

'The note of sternness must be banished from the legionary mission. Qualities essential to success, and above all when dealing with the outcast and the sinner, are those of sympathy and unvarying gentleness. Constantly in the affairs of life, we persuade ourselves that particular cases are subjects for rebuke or for the cutting word, and we use those words, and later are left regretting...'

'The flower that would have opened under the influence of the gentle warmth of softness and compassion closes tightly in the colder air. On the other hand, the air of sympathy which the good legionary carries with him, the willingness to listen, to enter wholeheartedly into the case as put before him, are sweetly irresistible, and the most hardened person, completely

taken off his (or her) balance, yields in five minutes ground which a year of exhortation and abuse would have failed to gain.'

'Every legionary ought to burn into his soul these words applied by the Church to Our Blessed Lady: "For the memory of me is sweeter than honey, and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb." (Sir 24:20) Others may effect good by stronger methods. But 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?' (pp. 281-82)

We might examine our own consciences on this matter. Is this way of mercy, gentleness and sweetness 'burnt into our souls'? Or are there circumstances where we see fit to depart from it? If the latter, we can ask Our Lady, Mother of Mercy, to lead us back to the path she herself shows us.

In the words again of the Holy Father's Meditation: 'What people seek in the eyes of Mary is "a place of rest where people, still orphans and disinherited, may find a place of refuge, a home." And that has to do with the way she "gazes" – her eyes open up a space that is inviting, not at all like a tribunal or an office. If at times people realise that their own gaze has become hardened, that they tend to look at people with annoyance or coldness, they can turn back to her in heartfelt humility. For Our Lady can remove every "cataract" that prevents them from seeing Christ in people's souls. She can remove the myopia that fails to see the needs of others, which are the needs of the incarnate Lord.'