

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis
To Representatives of Different Religions
Thursday, 3 November 2016

Dear Friends,

I offer you a warm welcome. I am pleased to meet you and I thank you for accepting this invitation to reflect together on the theme of mercy.

As you are well aware, we are approaching the end of the Holy Year, in which the Catholic Church has pondered the heart of the Christian message from the viewpoint of mercy. For us, mercy reveals the name of God; it is "the very foundation of the Church's life" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 10). It is also the key to understanding the mystery of man, of that humanity which, today too, is in great need of forgiveness and peace.

Yet the mystery of mercy is not to be celebrated in words alone, but above all by deeds, by a truly merciful way of life marked by *disinterested love*, *fraternal service* and *sincere sharing*. The Church increasingly desires to adopt this way of life, also as part of her "duty to foster unity and charity" among all men and women (*Nostra Aetate*, 1). The religions are likewise called to this way of life, in order to be, particularly in our own day, messengers of peace and builders of communion, and to proclaim, in opposition to all those who sow conflict, division and intolerance, that ours is a *time of fraternity*. That is why it is important for us to seek occasions of encounter, an encounter which, while avoiding a superficial syncretism, "makes us more open to dialogue, the better to know and understand one another; eliminates every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect; and drives out every form of violence and discrimination" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 23). This is pleasing to God and constitutes an urgent task, responding not only to today's needs but above all to the summons to love which is the soul of all authentic religion.

The theme of mercy is familiar to many religious and cultural traditions, where compassion and nonviolence are essential elements pointing to the way of life; in the words of an ancient proverb: "death is hard and stiff; life is soft and supple" (*Tao-Te-Ching*, 76). To bow down with compassionate love before the weak and needy is part of the authentic spirit of religion, which rejects the temptation to resort to force, refuses to barter human lives and sees others as brothers and sisters, and never mere statistics. To draw near to all those living in situations that call for our concern, such as sickness, disability, poverty, injustice and the aftermath of conflicts and migrations: this is a summons rising from the heart of every genuine religious tradition. It is the echo of the divine voice heard in the conscience of every person, calling him or her to reject selfishness and to be open. Open to the Other above us, who knocks on the door of our heart, and open to the other at our side, who knocks at the door of our home, asking for attention and assistance.

The very word "mercy" is a summons to an open and compassionate heart. It comes from the Latin word *misericordia*, which evokes a heart – *cor* – sensitive to suffering, but especially to those who suffer, a heart that overcomes indifference

because it shares in the sufferings of others. In the Semitic languages, like Arabic and Hebrew, the root RHM, which also expresses God's mercy, has to do with a mother's womb, the deepest source of human love, the feelings of a mother for the child to whom she will give birth.

In this regard, the prophet Isaiah conveys a magnificent message, which, on God's part, is both a promise of love and a challenge: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even though she may forget, yet I will never forget you" (Is 49:15). All too often, sad to say, we forget, our hearts grow heedless and indifferent. We distance ourselves from God, our neighbour and even our historical memory, and we end up repeating, in even more cruel forms, tragic errors of the past.

This is the drama of evil, of the grim depths to which our freedom can plunge when tempted by evil, ever-present, waiting to strike and bring us down. Yet precisely here, before the great riddle of evil that tests every religious experience, we find the most amazing aspect of merciful love. That love does not leave us prey to evil or to our own frailty; it does not "forget", but "remembers", and draws near to every human misery in order to relieve it. Like a mother. Whatever the evil done by her child, a mother always sees past the sin to recognize the face she bore in her womb.

In today's ever more hectic and forgetful world, which leaves so many men and women behind as it races on, breathlessly and aimlessly, we need the oxygen of this gratuitous and life-giving love. We thirst for mercy and no technology can quench that thirst. We seek a love that endures beyond momentary pleasures, a safe harbour where we can end our restless wanderings, an infinite embrace that forgives and reconciles.

How important this is, when we consider today's widespread fear that it is impossible to be forgiven, rehabilitated and redeemed from our weaknesses. For us Catholics, among the most meaningful rites of the Holy Year is that of walking with humility and trust through the door – the Holy Door – to find ourselves fully reconciled by the mercy of God, who forgives our trespasses. But this demands that we too forgive those who trespass against us (cf. Mt 6:12), the brothers and sisters who have offended us. We receive God's forgiveness in order to share it with others. Forgiveness is surely the greatest gift we can give to others, because it is the most costly. Yet at the same time, it is what makes us most like God.

Mercy extends also to the world around us, to our common home, which we are called to protect and preserve from unbridled and rapacious consumption. Our commitment is needed for an education to sobriety and to respect, to a more simple and orderly way of life, in which the resources of creation are used with wisdom and moderation, with concern for humanity as a whole and coming generations, not simply the interests of our particular group and the benefits of the present moment. Today in particular, "the gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which requires patience, self-discipline and generosity" (*Laudato Si'*, 201).

May this be the path we take. May we reject the aimless paths of disagreement and closed-mindedness. May it never happen again that the religions, because of the conduct of some of their followers, convey a distorted message, out of tune with that of mercy. Sadly, not a day passes that we do not hear of acts of violence, conflict, kidnapping, terrorist attacks, killings and destruction. It is horrible that at times, to justify such barbarism, the name of a religion or the name of God himself is invoked. May there be clear condemnation of these iniquitous attitudes that profane the name of God and sully the religious quest of mankind. May there instead be fostered everywhere the peaceful encounter of believers and genuine religious freedom. Here, our responsibility before God, humanity and the future is great; it calls for unremitting effort, without dissimulation. It is a call that challenges us, a path to be taken together, for the good of all, and with hope. May the religions be *wombs of life*, bearing the merciful love of God to a wounded and needy humanity; may they be *doors of hope* helping to penetrate the walls erected by pride and fear.