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MERCY IS MISSION

The Holy Year and its Missionary Dimension

The Holy Year of Mercy convoked by Pope Francisco has enormous missionary potential, which cannot be neglected. The Year contains a triple perspective because: it is a *jubilee* that is dedicated to *mercy*; and because *Pope Francis* has convoked it to reflect on a Church which goes forth to bring about the necessary transformation of the missionary apostolate. Keeping in mind this triple perspective will enrich the concept of out-going mission as an exercise of mercy.

I. Jubilee: Missionary Call of Mercy

One cannot properly understand the celebration of a Holy Year and its missionary dimension unless seen in the jubilee perspective. And the jubilee is a summons (*a call*) to a *mission*, a task that affects reality as a whole, besides which this jubilee is enlivened by the prospect of mercy. This can be clearly seen by looking at the biblical roots of the jubilee practice.

The rationale and motivation of the Holy Year are well described by the third Evangelist, (Lk 4:16–30), in the first action of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus, in the Synagogue of Nazareth, proclaims and comments on the words of Isaiah 61:1 *ff*, indicating that at that time and in his person he himself was the Messiah foretold by the Prophet. Later we will pause to explain the role of mercy. Now we wish to show that the prophet's words (Is 61) were derived from the Jubilee custom of Israel.

John Paul II relied on this precedent and this logic to convene the Jubilee Year 2000. He prepared for it with foresight by publishing *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* in 1994, in which he affirmed that the practice of Jubilees, which originated in the Old Testament, continues in the history of the Church. In this context he quotes Luke 4:16 - 30 and Isaiah 61:1-2, and concludes that "*all Jubilees* point to this 'time' and refer to the *Messianic mission of Christ*", characterized by the proclamation of the Gospel to the poor. "It is he who brings liberty to those deprived of it, who frees the oppressed and gives back sight to the blind" (n. 11). So it is a *Year of Grace*, because faithfulness to God refers to the needs of human beings. Every Holy Year, Jubilee, Year of Grace of the Lord, must reflect this inescapable messianic component.

Francis too, in the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year *Misericordiae Vultus*, recalls the intimate connection between the texts of Luke 4 and Isaiah 61 to show that the Holy Year reflects the mission of Jesus. "This Holy Year will bring to the fore the richness of Jesus' mission echoed in the words of the prophet: to bring a word and gesture of consolation to the poor, to proclaim liberty to those bound by new forms of slavery in modern society, to restore sight to those who can see no more because they are caught up in themselves, to restore dignity to all those from whom it has been robbed" (n. 16). The profound experience of God implies the prophetic dimension that resonated in Isaiah.

The Hebrew Jubilee custom (mentioned in Isaiah and Luke) is prescribed and regulated in the Book of Leviticus, which devotes Chapter 25 to it. To understand it in all its depth and in all its breadth, and also to grasp its on-going relevance and missionary dimension: the three following requisites are fundamental:

- a. In the background is the salvific plan of God the Creator, who made good and beautiful things so that humanity could live in brotherhood, harmony and plenty. The earth's resources should

enable the human family to exist: the permanent celebration at the House of the Father was synthesized by the symbols of Paradise and the Sabbath.

Now, that harmony was lost because violence introduced fragmentation, selfish appropriation, mutual accusations, the submission of others.... So we should remember that original ideal, celebrate it and, as far as possible, implement it.

- b. Thus, the Jubilee Year: “was a time dedicated in a special way to God. It fell every seventh year” (n. 12) to actually experience what God had wanted at the beginning: the cancellation of all debts, that the dispossessed recover their land, that slaves be set free, even the land itself be freed from human exploitation and so be left fallow.... God's goal is truly *universal in its scope and intensity*, so that there can be no barrier, nor any periphery remaining at the margins of God's project of life.
- c. The importance, urgency and extent of the task to be realized calls for publicity, convocation, *commission and mission*: "You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Lev 25:10). It cannot be reduced to the private sphere, the intimate or "spiritual" level. It is addressed *to all* and concerns the most basic dimensions of life (and livelihood), and interpersonal relations which ensure that people co-exist without exclusion or abuse.

For the jubilee custom, and all it implies, to become reality and not fall into oblivion or disuse there must be people who feel called and are ready to undertake the task as their mission in life. It is within this logic that the texts of Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 must be understood. In both cases Grace and Mercy are present; both of which encounter so much difficulty in opening a way in reality. Thus, in both cases the Spirit's role and action have proven crucial. Throughout the history of salvation the Spirit has played a unique role in ensuring the generous communication of God; in overcoming the obstacles that hinder the Coming of the Reign of God.

Against this background the novelty of the New Testament shines out (again resuming the Old Testament). The comparison of the two texts bears witness to the singularity of the New Testament Jubilee because the action of Jesus surpasses that of the Vetro Testament source. Isaiah 61:1-3 contains a hope-filled proclamation addressed to the returnees to Palestine after the Exile, who needed encouragement and hope:

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me,
To bring good tidings to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
To proclaim the Year of the Lord's favour” (*TMA*, n. 11).
“And the day of vengeance of our God,
To give comfort to all who grieve;
To comfort those who mourn in Zion
And give them a garland instead of ashes,
oil of gladness instead of mourning... (Is 61:1-3).

According to the third Gospel Jesus went to the Synagogue of Nazareth at the beginning of his messianic mission. After perceiving the dejection of the followers of the Baptist and having seen that the crowds were like sheep without a shepherd and burdened with shortcomings and infirmities,

Jesus began by proclaiming, and calling for, the Jubilee of the Definitive Time. In view of those particular people one can understand the full scope of the messianic mission of Jesus:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and new sight to the blind;
to free the oppressed and
announce the Lord’s year of mercy” (Lk 4:18-19).

The Evangelist states that Jesus was reading the text of Isaiah. Indeed it announces a joyful message to the wretched and miserable because it is the Holy Year, the Year of Grace, the Jubilee Year. But it has passed over an expression in the Veteo Testament text: the allusion to vengeance, to revenge, to disquiet. Such words could not flow from the lips of the One who above all praises the unconditional goodness of the Father, whose way of being cannot be encountered other than through the Son who lives in his intimacy. The Christian Gospel seeks to reveal the Father's face. Only in the light of the mission of the Son can we understand the full meaning of mercy, as regards God and as regards human beings.

II. MERCY IS NOT ONLY MISSION – IT *IS* MISSION

Mercy is essentially mission that “goes forth” because it prevails over self-referentiality; the temptation so often denounced by Francis. Self-referentiality puts one’s selfish interests, wants and desires at the center; with respect to that center everything else and all others are subordinate and lose importance and relevance, they are reduced to something that is at one’s disposal. To recognize the other person in his/her dignity means abandoning the center, going out to meet others, to respond to the call of others, their appeals.

That is mercy. The etymology of the Latin term is very significant: it assumes and combines two terms, *miseri* (miserable, wretched) and *cor* (heart). It therefore means *exchanging one’s heart with that of the person one meets who is in need* - despondent, marginalized. These *miseri*, who cause me to approach them, can be described or identified in the following three ways:

- a. - they are wretches who are alienated from God, either because they are living in sin or because they deny God; in both cases they lack the deep experience of grace. God's grace which opens the horizon and gives hope to human existence;
- b. – misery can also take the form of illness, loneliness, neglect, poverty, injustice, manipulation, oppression...; in all these situations the essential gift of life and love seem to have disappeared leading to a dead end, from which it seems there is no escape or solution;
- c. - human beings have shortcomings and aspirations even if they have had their fair share; although a person may not deserve anything from the criterion of justice, yet he/she awaits something extra to complete his/her happiness.

Furthermore to have Mercy upon another becomes a token, *a sign, of love*. Love is not something abstract or generic, since it must confront reality in its darkest, negative aspects. That is when love manifests itself as *mercy, because then it never holds back or flinches or is resigned*: to those who reject God's offer, it responds by offering greater love, seeking requital like a lover; faced by a dead end or impasse in some inhuman situations love becomes mercy when it can relieve those who are suffering. It is ever ready to stand up to evil, resist its oppressive power, over-come it by opening new and unsuspected possibilities....

Mercy shows that love is able to reach far beyond what seemed unthinkable, in a dynamic output that passes *through evil to create a new world*, to renew the world in light of the original plan of God the Creator. Mercy defeats evil. So, from this point of view, it reveals God's most divine love for his creatures to the point of being fully on their side when they are threatened by evil: should they be in danger he cannot leave them on their own.

God Is Missionary by Being Merciful

The Old Testament uses striking images to express the depth and truth of the love that becomes mercy in others and flows from them. It is without doubt anthropomorphism but that does not take away from its value and content. One cannot speak of God other than through human concepts. In Hebrew the terms for *mercy* and female *entrails* have the same root (*rahamim*), and this indicates that the merciful action of God is an expression of the shock his maternal entrails experience before the suffering of his children. Above all the prophets have made clear God's passion for the human being, a passion equal to that of the maternal womb for the children it has born. Even so God's sentiment is stronger and more intense than that of women. This is expressed clearly in Isaiah 49:14: though a woman may forget the child of her womb, and have no compassion on it, God never would. God, we could say, is *beside himself, for the other* who is distant or in need.

Mercy is always *a way forward, it de-centralizes*, thus opening a universal horizon. It therefore overcomes barriers, borders and boundaries to go to meet the other in his/her practical situation. This is what motivates and nourishes the messianic mission of Jesus and the proclamation of the Reign of God: God reigns when he is beside the poor, those who mourn and those who are hungry, to assert their dignity and claim their rights in the face of all odds. Mercy is mission in the peripheries, walking with the inhabitants.

The wretched and miserable occupy a privileged place in the heart of God. To them God directs "his first mercy", says Francis thus making his own the words of John Paul II. Mercy is not indifferent but sensitive to peoples' different needs, and expresses its preferential esteem. "Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person". Francis rightly says: "Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 2). Mercy is the peculiar way God acts in history, it shows us a God who always goes forth; a missionary God. That he is a missionary God, from his most original paternity, is revealed in the action of the Son and of the Spirit.

And Origen in the third century explained the Incarnation from the aspect of the mercy and compassion God had experienced in eternity, a feeling that is attributed both to the Father and to the Son. He descended to earth out of compassion for the human race. He took on our suffering before suffering on the Cross and before assuming human flesh, because had he not suffered first he could not have mixed in human life. First, he suffered, then he descended to earth and became visible. What kind of suffering had he to endure for us? Love is passion. This applies not only to the Son, but also to the Father who sent him: And the Father himself, the God of the universe, does He not suffer in his own way? ... The Father is not impassive, when invoked he sympathizes with us and suffers for us. He suffers the suffering of love; pain that does not correspond to the greatness of His Being and he supports human suffering for us.

Therefore mercy, prompted both by the suffering and needs of others, *makes God come out of himself*, of his own happiness, to bridge the distance that separates Transcendence from immanence. This dynamic is visible in the Old Testament and continues in the mission of the Son and of the Spirit.

A careful reading of the Old Testament confirms that God is the protagonist of the whole narrative; a God who overcame self-referentiality to become a pilgrim among mankind, among his people. Let us note some significant moments:

a. - when humanity was forced to leave Paradise, when evil seemed to have prevailed, God the Creator was present in history in the form of a promise in order to curb evil and achieve the restoration of *all* things. At that crossroads "God did not wish to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 3);

b. - when the tribes that gave rise to Israel were suffering in Egypt, Yahweh *took steps* to deliver them from slavery by opening the way to freedom;

c. - in the harshness of the desert Yahweh advanced with them: "I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling", *living as a nomad* like the Israelites, without complaint or regret (II Sam 7:6 ff);

d. - when the stalwart sons of the people were exiled to a foreign land, Yahweh himself left the Temple *to walk* in the pain of exile, sharing the anguish of his children, and *raising hopes* of a return to the homeland.

The Son and the Spirit: missionaries of the Father

The God who goes forth, itinerant and missionary, did not hesitate to send the Son and the Spirit, from that time the commitment of God became more radical, more consistent. Rightly, theology has spoken of the missions of the Son and Spirit. These missions must be seen in their concrete and historical sense, so that they are not reduced (as has sometimes happened in traditional theology) to a play on matching concepts. It is a *mission, motivated by mercy*, which reaches out to humanity in dramatic situations in order *to face and overcome evil*, and re-create the human being and the whole of reality.

The Son is sent in to the world to the point of taking on human flesh, "in the likeness of those subject to the sinful human condition" (Rom 8:3), i.e., he had to be like his brothers, in order to be the "High Priest faithful to God" (Heb 2:17). Francis says Mercy is the engine that underpins the whole of Jesus' activity, which is defined as a messianic mission. When he forgives sinners, when he heals the sick, when he feeds the hungry, when he restores sight to the blind, when offering solidarity to the poor ... he is showing *the power of mercy*; that is, because he never steps aside, because he does not hesitate to pass through evil, he is actually fulfilling the original plan of God and the meaning of the Jubilee he proclaims. The Holy Spirit too is sent as an expression of mercy. So it acts as the protagonist in the messianic mission of Jesus. In fact Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, because he has been anointed by the Spirit to carry out his mission, as already indicated. From the Spirit proceeds the power with which Jesus confronts the anti-Christ.

The Paschal Mystery, height of mercy and missionary dynamism

The merciful action of the Trinity reached its climax in the Resurrection of Jesus. It is the definitive proof that God in His love is not overcome by evil, because he has always exercised a *greater power* that has enabled him to overcome it in order to transform the whole of reality.

The death of Jesus is the effective rejection of God. The One who proclaimed the Kingdom has been killed: the Son sent - the very incarnation of mercy. It marks the ultimate distance between the grace of God and human freedom, between the opening of God and the closure of the world, the Father reacts by resurrecting the Son as the guarantee of salvation, as life-giving Spirit, as the irreversible commitment of God to human frailty. This is the revelatory event *par excellence*

because it makes clear how strong the power of love, that is mercy, is. Mercy, contrary to popular belief, is not a sign of weakness, but *the ultimate expression of divine omnipotence*.

Thus, this presupposition, which is crucial to our theme, has two aspects: a) God's definitive intervention has absolutely universal scope, the saving action of the Trinity embraces humanity and the whole of reality;

b) in this universal horizon, infectious joy springs from that announcement which spreads to the ends of the earth, overcoming all barriers, crossing all restraints.

Easter joy, which has its source in the heart of the Risen Christ, leads to missionary dynamism: The Apostles were filled with joy when they encountered Jesus again. The Gospel Accounts bear consistent witness to this and recent Popes have repeated it frequently. Francis takes Easter joy as the starting point (and content) of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Therefore, he appeals: "Let us not flee from the Resurrection of Jesus, let us never give up, come what will!" (n. 3). "Keep your missionary fervour alive" (cf. n. 280). "Do not be robbed of your missionary enthusiasm!" (cf., n. 101).

What must be emphasized (although it is not usually done) is that *Easter joy springs from mercy*: the confirmation of divine mercy, the truth of God's love. Without the mercy of God the Resurrection would not have taken place, nor the dynamism of missionary joy. Francis expressed this dual link at the very beginning of his pontificate: "Jesus, on the Cross feels the whole weight of the evil, and with the force of God's love he conquers it, he defeats it with his Resurrection. This is the good that Jesus does for us on the throne of the Cross" (*Palm Sunday*, 24 March 2013, 28th World Youth Day, n. 2).

God's victory over the vicissitudes of history must be proclaimed throughout the world, because it affects humanity as a whole. The proclamation cannot be confined to words alone. It must be achieved in practise through reconciliation between human beings and between ethnic groups, in anticipation of the renewed creation. It is coming about through the action of the Spirit, which transforms those who confess Jesus as Lord and impels churches to leave the Upper Room, to cross borders, to overcome barriers; thanks to this churches are emerging in all cultural and geographical contexts. In those churches of Christ there can be no segregation between men and women, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. Communion among the churches recreates the unity of the human family because it eliminates the hatred that divides races. What happened at Babel explains the suffering that misunderstanding generates between peoples. Pentecost is the answer of the Spirit: the Church must constantly move towards the others, to be born among others, as an act of mercy that facilitates the encounter between peoples and races.

The Church is born of mercy as a missionary disciple

"Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life". Every believer lives the faith as an experience of God's mercy; therefore mercy becomes the criterion for "discerning what is truly of God" (n. 119), the truth of faith and ecclesial identity (*Misericordiae Vultus*, nn. 9-10). "All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing of her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy". If mercy consists in assuming as its own the needs and suffering of others, it is logical to define the Church as a "missionary disciple". The Pope explains that: "we no longer say that we are 'disciples' and 'missionaries', but rather that we are 'missionary disciples'" (n. 120) to express more clearly that discipleship is intrinsically missionary.

This implies, on the one hand, that one should reflect Easter joy in all one's actions. This irradiation is an essential component of the first proclamation. Francis uses very expressive images to stress

this aspect: do not wear a funereal or sour expression, do not live one's charism devoid of Easter joy, do not be enclosed in cold and outdated praxis, do not become a museum exhibit....

On the other hand, one should follow in the footsteps of Jesus who, moved by mercy, wants to go to meet his brothers who are far away or in need. Revelation gives a particularly meaningful interpretation: "I am at the door and knock" (cf. 3:20) quoted at the Consistory before the Conclave in which Francis was elected Pope. He repeated it at his first meeting with the Ecclesial Movements: "Jesus stands at the door and knocks, knocks to be let into our heart" (cf. Rev 3:20) (*Prayer Vigil of Pentecost* for the World Day for Movements, New Communities, Associations and Lay Groups, 18 May 2013). It is not that Jesus is coming from outside to enter the precincts of the Church. It is rather the reverse perspective: Jesus, who feels trapped in the Church, wants to be free of all restrictions to go out to meet those who live in the various existential peripheries.

This logic and approach of mission-centred mercy requires that the Church overcome any temptation to fall into ecclesio-centrism or ecclesial self-referentiality. The Church springs from the dynamic of mercy that impels it to go beyond itself. If this logic is captured as the *raison d'être* of the Church, the key criterion of the pastoral and missionary transformation Francis proposed as the aim of his Pontificate will have been achieved.

III. MISSION: EXERCISE OF MERCY

In light of the above it is clear that "mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life" (n.10) as a Church on mission, which goes forth to the *miseri*. This implies that the mission of the Church reflects and makes it possible to experience the mercy of God and the messianic mission of Jesus. This perspective can enrich current missiology. Below, we highlight some particularly significant aspects.

The Last shall be First

God's experience as deity shows that he had a preference for the poor: "God shows the poor 'his first mercy'" (*EG*, n. 198). His option for the poor cannot be regarded merely as a sociological category since it has authentic theological and divine rank and become *the category par excellence*.

Francis' deep sensitivity is shown by the criteria with which he evaluates and analyzes the current situation and the difficulties faced by evangelization. Many Church leaders and pastoral workers consider the main obstacles to be: secularization, disbelief, atheism, distance from the Church, the closure implicit in immanence or pleasure.... Francis, however affirms clearly and directly, with the strong conviction of the prophets: that it is "an economy of exclusion" (*EG*, n. 53ff) because it generates victims: the excluded, marginalized, exploited, outcast, discarded, "left-overs" ... Given this situation the Living God, the God of Life, cannot remain impassive or indifferent, he manifests himself as merciful: "God's heart has a special place for the poor ... God has a special place for them in his heart" (*EG*, n. 197). Consequently, it is logical that the preferential option for the poor should not only have acquired theological rank, as one category among others, but: "this is the first category, because our God, the Son of God, abased himself, he made himself poor" (*Prayer Vigil of Pentecost* for the World Day for Movements, New Communities, Associations and Lay Groups, on Saturday, 18/05/2013). Thus the primacy of the poor is justified Christologically: the poor are the flesh of Christ because Christ has taken on their flesh; in the light of Christ "poverty is learned by touching the flesh of the poor Christ" (19th Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General, 8 May 2013. So it is shown in a concrete way that "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 1).

It is striking how Francis always mentions the poor when he speaks of God and always refers to God when talking about the poor. God feels a stirring in his gut on seeing the poor and cannot wait to listen and respond to their cry; the poor person is the one who always has God on his side because God continually shows the poor “his first mercy”.

The poor are mentioned in their real historical situation. Francis does not attempt to offer a neutral phenomenology of poverty. He has before his eyes the circumstances that cause the suffering of the poor: the population in the urban peripheries and in the rural areas, the homeless, landless, those lacking bread, with ill health, drug-addicts, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are often lonely, migrants, unborn children, those who die of cold because they live on the streets, every living creature whose life is threatened, the planet that is being exploited and manipulated by human beings.... All this occurs because of perverse or iniquitous mechanisms that favour or increase it. *First*, in such circumstances, we must “mobilize ... an attentiveness which considers the other ‘*in a certain sense as one with ourselves*’” (EG, n. 199). In this way the poor become the recipients and criterion of merciful action.

The theological relevance of the poor is shown on another level. They are not simply recipients of our mercy, they are not passive objects of other people's mercy, *they become the protagonists who address us*; indeed, one might say, they are *a form of God's mercy toward us*. “We become fully human when ... we let God take us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being” (n. 8), to let us manifest what is most divine in us. “True love is always contemplative” and permits us to discover the beauty of the other “above and beyond mere appearances ... appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith” (EG, n. 199). That beauty and goodness, that sensitivity to the faith must teach us and evangelize us:

So “This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (EG, n. 198).

The *least* are always those who urge us *to go further*, to the most distant, more difficult, more risky peripheries. The Pope himself has drawn attention to them with his symbolic and prophetic gestures. His trip to Lampedusa showed that situations such as that at Lampedusa are not met only in southern Italy but exist in all the margins caused by the globalization of indifference. His journey to Bangui to inaugurate the Year of Mercy by opening the Holy Door there showed that the Church has its heart in a forgotten poverty-stricken country, afflicted by war and terrorist violence, bereft of hope.... Precisely in such geographically and anthropologically distant places mercy begins to transform hearts and reality.

Proclamation is based on the essential: the kerygma and human experience

The originality of the Christian Message depends on the personal encounter with the Risen One. This is logical, in light of what we are saying, and its centrality should be stressed as Francis does. Do not put the emphasis on secondary issues that hinder the understanding of the Christian proclamation. Moral questions, for example, are only acceptable and credible from the presupposition from which they arise. On this point especially one has to apply the criterion of the hierarchy of truths, in the logic of the original experience of the Church.

Since the core of the Christian message is easily comprehensible to all human beings, no matter how far they may be from the Christian sphere. The Church should not act as one that sets conditions for outsiders to enter it but must act as a mother who welcomes and embraces all. Likewise the Church should serve as a field hospital ready to heal the wounds of those who suffer.

This universal opening is carried out by approaching people with affectionate warmth that makes the harmony of the Gospel resonate. This gives one the key to understand the "Good evening" (*buona sera*) Francis addressed to those present in St Peter's Square on the evening of his Election and to the millions of television viewers (13 March 2013). It was a way of instilling in everyone a receptive attitude to dialogue, encounter.

From another perspective the same concern is reflected in *Laudato Si'*, whose objective is to develop integral ecology as a new paradigm of justice. A global dialogue is proposed to make the Christian proclamation resonate in the common experience of all human beings: all are interconnected, because all come from the "dust of the earth"; and all are threatened by, and responsible for, the exploitation and manipulation that is affecting "our common home".

In mission mercy becomes prophecy

Mission is an exercise of mercy, and precisely for that reason it has a prophetic dimension. The Jubilee, as we saw, like the prophetic and messianic mission of Jesus, cannot fail to recognize the structural mechanisms that cause injustice or poverty. Observing this reality implies confronting it and dealing with its problematic situations. Francis himself says: "conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 226). Indeed, he told the Assembly of Superiors General: "We need to caress conflict" (Conversation entitled: "Wake Up the World", held at the *Salesianum*, Rome, from 27 to 29 November 2013). Obviously it must be tackled in a humble, simple way, free from the dynamics of violence. However, conflict must be faced willingly head on in order to "resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process" (*EG*, n. 227): to transform reality.

In the perspective of universal mission, in line with Francis' style, prophecy must address three basic levels or spheres: the current civilization as a whole, the sensitivity of those who inhabit this *scenario*, the Church itself.

Mercy calls into question our current civilization because the globalized world is being dominated by an anonymous, impersonal paradigm that is insensitive to the negative consequences it has on many people, especially the weakest. The techno-scientific paradigm, especially when it is allied with the economy, seeks above all to dominate and control reality for profit.

It would be irresponsible not to recognize the positive aspects of technological development. But it would be even more irresponsible to fail to denounce the perverse logic that is spawning: "evil crystallized in unjust social structures" (*EG*, n. 59) and excludes as unwanted those who neither consume nor produce. This dynamism affects real individuals, but also entire countries and continents. So Francis warns, quoting John Paul II, "the present-day mentality... tends to exclude ... from the human heart the very idea of mercy" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 11).

This mentality contributes to a homogeneous one-dimensional human being (*Laudato Si'*, n. 106ff), both in its modern form and its postmodern form. According to the former, man adopts a Promethean attitude which only seeks material progress, relying on technology to solve all the problems and on the earth's inexhaustible resources. In its postmodern form it may fall into a practical relativism which only seeks to satisfy its own desires and needs. In each case a pitiless

attitude is taking hold: to live as if the other did not exist, placing oneself at the center, consuming and exploiting the planet's resources beyond measure, rejecting the inclusion of all.... So the globalization of indifference spreads, which ignores the suffering of others, and blocks outreach to the needy.

Mercy is also a prophetic challenge to the Church. The Church could risk falling into complacency like many institutions: seeking safety above all in means and appearances. Likewise, each Christian and each Church minister might come to accept worldly values and thus seek opulence, money and power. It is the Church closing in on herself. In the face of this temptation the Pope prefers "a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty", because he has been along the streets and met real people; "rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (EG. n. 49).

Inter gentes and Ad Gentes

Traditionally mission was understood as going out *ad gentes* to people. In this way the Church recognized the words of the Risen Lord in the mission mandate. This concept encapsulated and sustained mission in modern times: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations", to the people who are far away in foreign countries. The symbols and the imagination of Western Christians were fueled by this perspective.

Recently a corrected or alternative proposal has been muted: people speak of mission *inter gentes*. The reason is clear: the mission *ad gentes* bears all the negative connotations of colonialism and the cultural ethnocentrism of the Western Christian world. *Ad gentes* cannot reflect the logic of mercy but of arrogance and domination.

The mission *inter gentes* has a different style: one of closeness, solidarity, dialogue and joy; the missionary does not come from elsewhere with a strange message but shares in the actual conditions of those who live in that place. It is therefore easier to be in sympathy with the needs and expectations of one's neighbor; entering into a friendly relationship with the local cultural and its religious traditions, which makes possible the emergence of vital local churches....

Neither mercy nor the missionary tradition of the Church can justify a sharp contrast between the two models. Each of them possesses a nucleus of truth that must be maintained and integrated. To live *inter gentes* is certainly an exercise of mercy. However it is no longer the mission *ad gentes*: it implies a going forth, an act of generosity, humility, openness of heart (it cannot be denied that at times there has been an ethnocentric attitude, but this should not affect its original genuine meaning).

Orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos

These three terms express some of the tensions underlying current missiology (and consequently of missionary praxis). *Orthodoxy* synthesizes the traditional model of mission: the great concern to defend right doctrine, and therefore it focuses on doctrine and worship. Thus catechesis and the sacraments became priority objectives (without knowledge of the fundamental truths of faith and without receiving Baptism salvation would be impossible).

This model has been questioned by modern sensibilities, which place praxis at the centre: the important point being - not knowledge of doctrine but - to change reality through appropriate action: *orthopraxis*. Doctrine does not address the social reality in its complexity, and therefore does not commit itself to transforming the world. This is because it could be accused of complicity

with the unjust ruling system. This debate, as is known, strongly marked ecclesial life for decades. Now that the difficulties presented by some controversial aspects have been surmounted, ecclesial sensitivity is acquiring a dynamic and fruitful balance.

It is not our intention to enter into that debate but simply to mention the importance that the third of the concepts is acquiring: *orthopathos*, to be appropriately touched by the suffering of others. The contrast between orthodoxy and orthopraxis is thus enriched and made fruitful by *orthopathos*, which is ultimately a manifestation of mercy, an expression of mercy.