

# acts

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## MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER

### *Jubilee Year Salesian Letter*

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Rome, 15 July 2016

### 1. THE EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE OF MERCY

“The person who does not consider your mercies should be silent about your praises”.<sup>1</sup> This assertion of Saint Augustine is an invitation to keep silent and not to praise God if at the same time we do not acknowledge his mercy. In the language of today the theologian and Cardinal Walter Kasper writes: “If we are not capable of proclaiming in a new way the message of the divine mercy to people who are suffering from corporal and spiritual ills, then we ought to keep quiet about God”.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis has offered to the Universal Church the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy as “a special time for the Church, a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective”.<sup>3</sup> The Holy Year opened on 8 December 2015,

<sup>1</sup> AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *The Confessions*, VI 7,12.

<sup>2</sup> W. KASPER, *La Misericordia, Chiave del Vangelo e della Vita Cristiana*. Sal Terrae, Santander 2013, 4<sup>a</sup> ediz, citato da J.J. BARTOLOMÉ, *Jesús Compasivo, Jesús de Nazareth, testigo de la misericordia del Padre*, CCS, Madrid 2016, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV), 3.

the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and will end on the liturgical Solemnity of Christ the Universal King on 20 November 2016. In the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee the Pope points out that we always have need to contemplate the mystery of mercy, because it is “a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace”; because “we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives. For this reason I have proclaimed the *Jubilee of Mercy*”.<sup>4</sup>

This proposal is in harmony with the tradition of Vatican Council II which inaugurated a new age in the life of the Church. At the opening of the Council Pope John XXIII, today a Saint, indicated the path to be followed, at a time when the Church “the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity”.<sup>5</sup> It was along the same lines that Pope Paul VI, today Blessed, at the end of the Council, said: “all this rich teaching is channelled in one direction: the service of mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need”.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore everything would seem to suggest that we are at a very favourable time in the pastoral life of the Church, a time in which the words in the quotation from St Augustine seem to have been written with today in mind with all the challenging power of the divine mercy which forces us to make a choice: either acknowledge the mercy of God or remain silent. It would seem that there is no other way for every man and woman to come close to the Gospel and to Jesus Christ himself nor any other path to explore. This is the only way: the *Divine Mercy is the essential element of the message about God*.

With this conviction and certainty one can understand perfectly why Pope Francis had this to say at the beginning of his message: “How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman,

<sup>4</sup> Cf. MV, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> MV 4, quoting the *Opening Speech for Vat II*, ‘*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*’ 11 October 1962, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> MV 4, quoting the *Address at the final public session*, 7 December 1965.

bringing the goodness and tenderness of God! May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst!”<sup>7</sup>

The title chosen in the light of the Word of God “*Merciful like the Father*” fully expresses the fact that what the Lord Jesus taught us about the Father: “be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” (Lk 6,36) has for every Christian the character of a real plan of life. Therefore, this Holy Year is a splendid occasion to discover in the most vital and practical way possible, the mercy that has always been offered to us by the Father. It is a marvellous opportunity for us “to let ourselves be surprised by God”.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. MERCY: KEY WORD IN THE PONTIFICATE OF POPE FRANCIS

“The name of God is mercy” is the title of a book containing an interview given by Pope Francis.<sup>9</sup> In it the Pope replies to a large number of questions about the Holy Year and what led him to proclaim it. In reply to the question: for the Pope what is mercy? He replies: “Mercy is the identity card of our God, God of mercy, the merciful God”.<sup>10</sup>

Many authors have referred to the fact that the Pope has chosen *mercy* as the key word of his pontificate, the word that most frequently occurs<sup>11</sup> in his talks and speeches, in his pastoral messages and in his homilies, but also in his gestures because – as we well know – Pope Francis communicates a great deal through his gestures.

<sup>7</sup> MV 5.

<sup>8</sup> MV 25.

<sup>9</sup> FRANCESCO, *Il nome di Dio è misericordia. Una conversazione con Andrea Tornielli*, Piemme, Milano 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A. GRÜN, *Le sette opere di Misericordia*, Queriniana, Brescia, 2016<sup>2</sup>, 5; CH. ALBINI, *L'arte della Misericordia*, Qiqajon, Magnano (BI) 2015, 93; G. BUONO, *Misericordia, missione della Chiesa*, Libreria Editrice Redenzione, Marigliano 2016, 5.

In a complex world and with societies so diverse in many of which there is the danger that the face of God is disfigured and not recognised, the Pope wants to convey the message that no one can be excluded from the mercy of God. And this has a special force because Mercy is the very identity of God; and because the fragile man or woman that each one of us is has a profound need to feel that this mercy can reach out to our own fragility as persons as we happily recognise that ‘the logic of God’ is not our logic.

When in the revelation in the Old Testament God ‘presents himself’, in addition to revealing himself as “I am who I am” (Ex 3,1), he also introduces himself as “JHWH JHWH, a God of tenderness and compassion”:<sup>12</sup> words that are the nucleus of the revelation of God. It is in mercy that the sovereignty of God shines out the Synod Fathers declare in the final Report of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly, so that subsequently the Pope in the concluding Mass could go on to say that “today is the time of mercy”. And since the Church believes and trusts in this mercy, this jubilee year is above all an invitation to every individual and to the whole Church to conversion of heart and mind. It is a change of ‘logic’. The ‘logic’ that Pope Francis speaks about is the logic of God: his way of seeing the world, history, humanity, and every human being. In one of his homilies considered programmatic for his Pontificate, the Pope expressed this logic with strong conviction and described it as “the logic of love that is not based on fear but on freedom... The fear of losing those saved and the desire to save the lost. Even today it sometimes happens that we find ourselves at a meeting point of these two logics: that of the doctors of the Law, fleeing from danger by ostracizing the infected person; and the logic of God who in his mercy embraces and welcomes, reinstating and transforming evil into good, condemnation into salvation and exclusion into proclamation. These two logics can be found throughout the history of the Church: “to sideline” and “to reinstate”.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ex 34,6 in G. BARBIERO, *Misericordia è il nome di Dio*, in *Consacrazione e Servizio*, 3 (2016), 33.

<sup>13</sup> FRANCIS, *Homily*, 13 March 2015.

Undoubtedly with these strong and firm convictions one can see with great clarity the reason for this time of the grace of jubilee that the Pope has chosen to present as a gift for all believers and an invitation to all men and women of good will so that they may feel that these words reach their hearts.

### 3. GOD RICH IN MERCY

Someone knows God who has had experience of his mercy – many exegetes unanimously write reflecting on the reality of the Divine Mercy – and in many researches on the Word of God (Old and New Testament), *mercy* appears *par excellence* as the attribute proper to God. “His tender mercy defines him as authentic God. (Ex 20,5.6; Dt 5,9.10; 2 Chron 30,9; Neh 9,17.31; Jonah 4,2; Joel 2,13; Is 55,7; Psal 145,8.9)”<sup>14</sup> Jesus does not teach any doctrine without communicating his own experience of the Father, an experience that is translated into the commandment addressed to us: “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” (Lk 6,36), which is an invitation to experience the mercy of God himself, an invitation to allow ourselves to be conquered by mercy, to let ourselves be converted by the mercy of God.

#### 3.1. “My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender”

The letter of the Rector Major is not an academic treatise in which to sum up all the treasures that have been found in the many exegetical studies undertaken in the past and present on this subject of Mercy – especially this year. It is appropriate, however, taking advantage of such abundance to mention for example how in Genesis the mercy of God is presented above all

<sup>14</sup> J.J. BARTOLOMÉ, o.c. 14.

as of the Creator and Saviour and it is the way in which God carries out his plan of Love which saves his creatures and the whole of creation in a relationship of a gratuitous covenant with his People.<sup>15</sup>

In the Exodus, the mercy of God is above all an experience of liberation from slavery and guidance through the desert. The People of the Covenant continually experience this Presence of God among them; it is an experience of freedom.

In the writings of the Prophets the mercy of God is proclaimed so that the chosen People might eventually grow into a fraternal and just society. Nevertheless, God cannot be shut up in any scheme, in any human logic, because his love and his forgiveness go beyond any human imagining. The mercy revealed in the Sacred Scriptures is the great attribute of the God of Israel, which distinguishes him from any other divinity or idol (Cf. Wisdom 9,1).

Divine mercy revealed in the Old Testament goes beyond all boundaries especially those of human justice. Many authors agree in saying that the summit of the revelation of the divine mercy is to be found in the book of the Prophet Hosea. This genuine revelation of the “foolish” love for his People is well-known. This People has betrayed the Covenant and has become a prostitute and God decides to no longer show her his compassion (Hosea 1,6-9). Everything appears to be brought to an end with the accusation of this betrayal and this sin, but instead God full of concern for the fate of his people of his Spouse exclaims: “My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender” (Hosea 11,8) and he pardons his People (Hosea 14). It is beautiful to realise that God is rich in mercy (Psalm 51,3; 69,17; Psalm 9,1; 2 Cor 1,3; Eph 2,4; 1 Pet 1,3). This has consequences as far as our image of God is concerned. At last our eyes and our hearts can recognise him in depth and in truth as sensitive, gentle, vulnerable. His affection, with the tenderness of a mother (Is 49,14-15), leads him to be moved “to have compassion”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R. GONZÁLEZ PONCE, *Dio è misericordia*, in <http://www.comboni.org/es/contenuti/107647-apropi-ndonos-la-utop-a-de-papa-francisco>.

<sup>16</sup> J.J. BARTOLOMÉ, *o.c.* 14.

### 3.2. Jesus Christ, the Face of the Father's Mercy

With this stupendous and radical affirmation the proclamation of the year of mercy in *Misericordiae Vultus* begins: "These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God".<sup>17</sup>

If in what has gone before I have expressed briefly how God had revealed himself as merciful in the whole History of Salvation, in Jesus this mercy is shown in all its brilliance. The mercy proclaimed by Jesus has something new about it in comparison with the Old Testament: it is for everyone,<sup>18</sup> no matter their state of life. And this because it always comes from the depth of the heart of God: *compassion*.

Already in the Old Testament God reveals himself as compassionate. Nevertheless, it is only in the Gospel accounts that we contemplate God who, in Jesus of Nazareth, acts because "touched", moved by a profound compassion. This is how Jesus feels when faced with the leper (Cf. Mk 1,41), the good Samaritan finding the injured man (Cf. Lk 10,33). Compassion is what Jesus experiences in the presence of the multitudes that are following him, tired and like sheep without a shepherd (Cf. Mt 9,36). It is compassion that moves him to cure the sick who are brought to him (Cf. Mt 14,14). He is filled and moved with compassion by the tears of the mother taking to his burial her only son and whom he restores to life (Cf. Lk 7,15).

In the parables dedicated to mercy Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never accepts defeat until with compassion and mercy he has absolved sin. In these parables Jesus presents God as a Father happy to have been able to forgive. This really is the nucleus of the Gospel and of our faith because here mercy is presented as the force that overcomes everything, that

<sup>17</sup> MV, 1.

<sup>18</sup> W. KASPER, *Misericordia. Concetto fondamentale del Vangelo-Chiave della vita Cristiana*, Queriniana (= Giornale di teologia 361), Brescia 2015<sup>o</sup>, 103.

fills the heart with love and which brings consolation through forgiveness.<sup>19</sup>

In short, the parables of Jesus show that the action of God on behalf of his sons and daughters is characterised by the fact of *its being immeasurable in the gratuitousness* he shows towards us. His shows that the attitude of Jesus while revealing the face of God is always related to life and is personal; even though this is not accepted by the “pious” and by those who are strict and rigorists in the observance of the law and in its fulfilment.

And while it is most certain that among the attributes of God there are also holiness and justice which we human beings separate, as we also do in the case of the relationship between mercy and justice considering mercy as that which can be a corrective to justice, in Jesus of Nazareth we make the happy discovery that for God it is not like that. In fact, mercy is understood as the specific justice of God and as his holiness; that mercy is above all the visible and effective aspect, even to the extent of being the outward expression of the essence of God that is Love (1 Jn 4,8.16).<sup>20</sup> From this one can come to the conclusion that mercy is one of the names of the Love of God. We could say that it is the *divine name of Love*.

#### **4. DON BOSCO, EVANGELIZER AND EDUCATOR SENSITIVE TO THE MERCY OF GOD**

With this letter I want to emphasise the importance that this Year of the Grace of Mercy (Jubilee Year) is having in our Salesian world. As it would have been for Don Bosco, this year is an opportunity to seize upon with real filial joy, this initiative of the Pope for the whole Church, and we the Salesian Family are and feel ourselves to be a vital part of this Church of ours. In the same way as happened with Don Bosco in his times we welcome

<sup>19</sup> Cf. MV, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. W. KASPER, o.c. 26, 34,70,86.137.155 e 136.

this gift of God that comes to us from the hands of Pope Francis today.

A second aim is to underline some points and to offer some practical Salesian applications to our being educators and pastors of the young. It is with the greatest pleasure that I turn to look at Don Bosco to see how he conducted himself as the pastor and educator of his boys. Above every thing else Don Bosco was a priest with his heart full of God; with the heart of an educator who always sought to evoke in his boys the sense of God and confidence in him. Naturally we cannot imagine a Don Bosco outside his own times, nor of the religious and theological views of that period. In any case it is certain that the understanding and presentation of God that Don Bosco arrived at in his mature years as a priest and educator was the fruit of the long journey he undertook.

We know from our Salesian history<sup>21</sup> that in his infancy an image of a severe God predominated. Mamma Margaret, a genuine catechist, inculcated in little John the sense of the presence of God everywhere and of his rigorous justice. “*God sees you* was the watchword that she constantly brought to her son’s attention”.<sup>22</sup> At the same time she gave him a sense of gratitude to God the creator, the all powerful one, who gave the good things of the harvest but also the storms and the loss of the harvest. When they lost the crops through a hailstorm or other natural phenomena Mamma Margaret used to say to her family at home: “The Lord gave it to us, the Lord took it away. He is the master of the harvest. He knows best, but remember that the wicked will be punished and no one can mock God”.<sup>23</sup>

This same conviction is present in Don Bosco during the years of the seminary in Chieri, especially on the occasion of the sickness and death of his friend Luigi Comollo. On the lips of the young man near to death, the words attributed to him by Don

<sup>21</sup> Cf. E. ALBURQUERQUE, *Don Bosco y la Misericordia de Dios*, CCS, Madrid 2016, 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> *BM I*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> *BM I*, 45.

Bosco give a fearful view of God, who can be implacable in his judgement. "It is not physical illness that concerns me – the sick Comollo says to his friend – but having to present myself before the judgement of God (...) I am not worried nor nervous about it, its just that I think about having to appear before that great judgement against which there is no appeal, and this is what disturbs me" (...) Every time I visited him he always said the same thing: "The time is approaching when I have to present myself before the judgement seat of God".<sup>24</sup>

In some meditations in the work *The Companion of Youth* Don Bosco makes reference to how terrible the judgement of God can be. Therefore the soul will have recourse to the mercy of God, finding that death is the end of the road in which to experience the mercy of God.<sup>25</sup>

Without doubt this is not the only view nor the only source in the formation of Don Bosco. In the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* Don Bosco will learn how to be an assistant priest under the guidance of Don Cafasso and Don Guala with a moral theology, inspired by Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, who was more balanced and inclined to go beyond the rigourism of the period. The young priest Don Bosco learns that the way to bring souls closer to God especially his boys, is not rigour but kindness, kindliness and compassion/mercy.

It is with this conviction that he wrote the work *Esercizio della Misericordia di Dio*, in 1846, after recovering from an illness and a period of convalescence. It was at the beginning of the work of the oratory in Valdocco, and shortly after he left the works of the Marchesa Giulia di Barolo.

The history of this work is interesting.<sup>26</sup> The Marchesa di Barolo had very much at heart the spreading of the devotion to divine mercy. In the charitable works under her patronage and where Don Bosco had undertaken his ministry in the early years,

<sup>24</sup> *Rasos biográficos del clérigo Luis Comollo*, in J. CANALS (dir.) *San Juan Bosco. Obras Fundamentales*, BAC, Madrid 1978, 96-97, citato da E. ALBURQUERQUE, o.c. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *The Companion of Youth*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. E. ALBURQUERQUE, o.c. 16-17.

there was a seven day devotional practice of imploring the divine mercy. The Marchesa wanted it to become a regular devotion in all the parishes and public churches, but the Archbishop of Turin did not want to authorise it without the blessing of the Holy See. So the Marchesa approached Pope Gregory XVI directly and he gave permission together with a plenary indulgence for all those who took part in this devout practice.

The second part of this story concerns the writing of a booklet. The Marchesa wanted some skilled theologian to write something on the Mercy of God so that it might be used in the devotion. Her Secretary Silvio Pellico suggested to her the name of Don Bosco; but she immediately dismissed the idea. However, Silvio Pellico, a great friend of Don Bosco, convinced that he was the right man followed the matter up. Don Bosco accepted at once. He published the work paying to have it printed himself and –it is said – out of respect and courtesy towards the Marchesa did not want his name to appear as the author. He published it as an anonymous work. Once it was printed he gave a copy to every girl in the hostel and then consigned the rest of the copies to the Superior of the educational establishment. The Marchesa read and approved the book but never allowed it to be said in her presence that it had been written by Don Bosco.

### **The God Don Bosco showed to his boys**

As has been mentioned Don Bosco was a man of his time and was familiar with a theology in which the severity of judgement and the fear of eternal damnation were very common. In various writings Don Bosco says how terrible the judgement of God can be. However he also writes and on many occasions tells his boys that God is above all the Creator and Lord and that wherever they may look they will see his blessings.

For his boys God is very frequently called the Lord: “The Lord tells you that if you begin to be good from childhood, you will be so as long as you live in this world, and then you will receive the

reward of your good deeds with eternal happiness”;<sup>27</sup> “the Lord assures us that he distributes his gifts to the good and to sinners alike”;<sup>28</sup> “At the first sign of tears, at the first stammering murmur of repentance, the Lord is immediately moved to mercy”.<sup>29</sup>

The life of Don Bosco, his writings and what is said about him in the Biographical Memoirs, are full of indications about his educational and pastoral view of things, with the constant invitation to trust in the Lord and to abandon oneself to Him and to his Mercy. It would be possible to gather together hundreds of quotations. But just looking at some of them it can be seen how he understood this mercy and divine protection, in the Salesian Congregation and in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and also how the presence of Jesus in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist and in Confession, were the fundamental pillars of education.

Referring to the first element, we read: “I have been able to know with certainty that the Lord exercises great mercy towards us”<sup>30</sup> and “the time is coming when the good and the wicked will be surprised by the marvels that will take place so very quickly; it is all about mercy, and all will be consoled”.<sup>31</sup>

With reference to the specific aspects of the sacraments we can read in Don Bosco some well known expressions: “You can say what you like about the different kinds of education, but I have never come across any sure foundation other than frequent reception of the sacraments of confession and communion, and I believe I am not exaggerating in saying that if these are omitted morality goes out of the window”.<sup>32</sup>

We can say that in this view of education, with the purpose of guiding his boys along the path of faith and of Christian piety, in

<sup>27</sup> *The Companion of Youth*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Esercizio di devozione*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> *Esercizio*, 71 In *Ibidem*

<sup>30</sup> “Dream of the 10 diamonds”, in *BM XV*, 147., quoted by E. Albuquerque, *o.c.* 24

<sup>31</sup> “Dream of Lanzo and of the Salesian Garden” in *BM XV*, 171 quoted by Albuquerque, *Ibidem*

<sup>32</sup> *Il pastorello delle Alpi o vita del giovane Besucco di Argentera*, in *Vidas de jóvenes*, Editorial CCS, Albuquerque, *o.c.* 27.

Don Bosco there are no contradictions. He softens and lightens the view and the representation of God as the executioner and tries to lead his boys to the contemplation of a God who loves them, and who is merciful. However, he does expect from them an authentic Christian life: “God is merciful and just. He is merciful towards those who want to benefit from his mercy, but he unleashes the rigour of his justice on anyone who does not want to profit from his mercy”.<sup>33</sup>

I conclude this short section referring to Don Bosco by recalling once again that for him the sacraments were channels of divine mercy, and Mary was the preferred channel for the grace and the mercy of God. Any educational or pastoral activity of Don Bosco without reference to the presence of Mary the Immaculate Help of Christians would be unthinkable.

## **5. MERCY IN THE SALESIAN HOUSE**

Some may perhaps find a little surprising the title I have given to this part of the letter. It is because I want to draw attention as far as possible to the message of this jubilee year and to see it as a Church event addressed also to us and to the charism that we safeguard and bring to life. I should like to prevent this year of mercy becoming merely some sort of ‘slogan’ that many talk about but which then passes by leaving little trace. We cannot allow that to happen. On the contrary it is and must be a strong call to conversion and to authenticity.

### **5.1. The proclamation of the Mercy of God in a climate of suffering**

In the current social situation in which we are faced with a climate of suffering never imagined, this reminder from the

<sup>33</sup> *Il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS.ma ad uso del popolo*, Torino 1858, giorno 20, pag. 131. In E. ALBUQUERQUE, o.c. 27

Church about mercy takes on a strong evangelical tone. As the Church, in this climate it is necessary to take up with serene and sincere self-criticism, what Pope Francis says: “Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy... The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters”.<sup>34</sup>

We know that reading the signs of the times is not easy, but in the light of the discernment undertaken under the guidance of the Holy Spirit it is possible and necessary. For this reason we have to ask ourselves what this proclamation of Mercy means and how do we carry it out in the Salesian houses in which we find ourselves around the world; in places where there is killing in the name of God, and in his name bombs are planted and violent attacks launched; in the Salesian centres close to where there is war and where there are large numbers of refugees; but also in those parts of the world where racist and xenophobic attitudes proliferate.

In the face of situations like this can we be neutral or look away as though all this had nothing to do with us? Certainly not! There can never be any ‘Salesian neutrality’ in the face of such situations and our responses cannot be anything other than those of the Gospel with a commitment to live according to the invitation of Pope Francis seeking to live the Mercy of God with all its implications, a commitment that is not short-term but constant and continuous for the long-term. The Pope invites us to listen to the words of Jesus who “has made mercy an ideal of life and a criterion for the credibility of our faith: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy» (*Mt 5,7*) ... As the Father loves, so do his children”,<sup>35</sup> says the Pope.

There is a desire to try to live the mercy of God on our part and that of Salesian centres around the world in this climate of suffering; to open our hearts to the many people who are living

<sup>34</sup> MV, 10.

<sup>35</sup> MV, 9.

in precarious situations and are suffering; to be close to those who have no voice to bring them the justice they deserve, to cure life's wounds with fraternity and solidarity, and to stay far away from that indifference which besides not helping humiliates.

“Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity!”<sup>36</sup> May their cry become ours and in every house of Don Bosco may the proclamation of mercy be heard through practical action on behalf of the poorest.

## 5.2. Living the personal experience of the Mercy of God

Thinking how to live in our Salesian centres in a way full of mercy in this special year and in the future, does not primarily mean seeing what we can do to make others feel at home and to serve them better. This too, certainly, but in the first place it means putting ourselves in the position of accepting and wanting to live ourselves the experience of mercy.

On the occasion of the new millennium in 2000 and of the jubilee proclaimed by Pope John Paul II, who presented that Holy Year as an occasion for a call to conversion, given the nature of the Jubilee Year, Fr Vecchi wrote a letter on reconciliation, in which he wrote: “For us too it provides an unusual opportunity to relive the experience of Reconciliation as consecrated Salesians, linking together the theological dimension and those which are human and educative”.<sup>37</sup>

For myself and for all of us I repeat this reminder. Before going out to meet someone who might have need of us, let us have this profound experience of the mercy of God for ourselves.

<sup>36</sup> MV, 15.

<sup>37</sup> J.E. VECCHI, AGC 369, 4.

We run the risk of being ‘functionaries’ if we are not the first to respond humbly yet deeply to this gift that is being offered to us.

The invitation of the Jubilee of 2000 is being renewed today for us with the words of Pope Francis who tells us that “wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy”.<sup>38</sup>

In the context of this invitation to reconciliation and the merciful encounter with the Father, the Gospel offers us many encounters of forgiveness and they are always on the initiative of Jesus. It is not the man or the woman who encounters Jesus, nor he or she who asks for forgiveness, but it is Jesus himself who offers it. These people are sometimes the victims of social prejudice or are sick or bearing the weight of an offence. Jesus touches their heart and produces a change of lifestyle. It is like this with Levi, with Zachaeus, with the paralytic, with Peter who denies him, ...

Very different, however, is his relationship with Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7,44b-47) and with so many others. In his case, while being a religious man who knows the teaching of Sacred Scripture he does not recognise the look of forgiveness that Jesus gives him, and precisely on this account he does not manage to love nor to recognise love. He knows about religion and the law and is scrupulous in observing it, irreproachably orthodox, yet quite definitely he does not know God.

On the contrary, the experience of forgiveness found in the Gospel is a grace experience that is overflowing; it is an experience of joy; it is a great feast in heaven for the one who repents, one that scandalizes the people who consider themselves good and justified. It is a banquet to which all are invited and those who consider themselves “people in good standing” are disgusted. In the light of the revelation that Jesus gives us about the Father, “mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. In short, we

<sup>38</sup> MV 12.

are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us.<sup>39</sup>

## **Reconciled and creators of educational environments that reconcile**

This seems to me to be very important. I have said on previous occasions that as educators of young people we are not functionaries or service providers. We are above all believers, and we need to feel that we ourselves have been reconciled, having experienced the Mercy of God. As we look at Don Bosco identifying his educative and pastoral model and seeing him as an evangelizer we are led to reaffirm in the first place in the education of young people the great importance of sacramental reconciliation. From personal experience he considered it a fundamental element for human and Christian development.

The uninterrupted experience of Don Bosco from his earliest years as a teenager, then as a seminarian, later as a young priest and finally as the Don Bosco we all know is presented by Fr Eugenio Ceria in these words: "Don Bosco grew fond of confession from his tenderest years, and no change of circumstances could weaken him in his loving frequent use of it... When he was a student at Chieri and quite free to make his own arrangements he thought immediately of finding a regular confessor... As a priest at Turin he made his weekly confession to Blessed Cafasso, and after the death of the latter he had recourse to the ministry of a holy priest who had been one of his fellow-students and who went every Monday morning to hear confessions in the sacristy of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, and who afterwards asked Don Bosco to hear his own confession.

When he was travelling and his usual confessor was not available, he remained faithful to his custom, having recourse to a Salesian or others as opportunity offered. During his stay in Rome,

<sup>39</sup> MV 9.

for instance, for a period of two months in 1867, he made his weekly confession to Fr Vasco, a Jesuit he had known at Turin.

His sons were at first hesitant to do so, but he replied: “Come now; please do Don Bosco this kindness and let him make his confession”.<sup>40</sup>

All of this tells us how he understood what can bring peace and inner joy to a boy and how he could speak about the fatherly and unconditional welcome of God. It was possible because he himself had experienced it and for him it had become something more important than “an occasional practice of piety or a priestly service. It was a new area in which is set the whole of life, all that Jesus meant when he said “be converted”. This is also true in our own case. Through the grace of unity, personal experience of Reconciliation and pedagogical and pastoral practice mutually strengthen each other. Reconciled ourselves we become craftsmen and mediators of reconciliation”,<sup>41</sup> and so we put ourselves to work, or better still take up the educational challenge of putting young people in contact with a *circuit of grace*.

### **5.3. Mercy means having the ‘Heart of the Good Shepherd’**

A distinguishing feature of our being Salesians is sensitivity to the idea of Christ the Good Shepherd (Jn 10,3-4), given that the Salesian spirit finds its model and its source in the heart of Christ himself, Apostle of the Father, in whom the role as the Good Shepherd stands out.

With this model of the Lord Jesus we really believe that love is the most appropriate way to serve the young – which we do with an “untiring affection” and with “familiarity” – Salesian names for love applied to young people”.<sup>42</sup>

In this ecclesial and spiritual setting Mercy needs to take very practical forms so as to express to the utmost degree those fea-

<sup>40</sup> E. CERIA, *Don Bosco with God*. Quoted in VECCHI J.E., AGC 369, 38-39.

<sup>41</sup> J. E. VECCHI, *o.c.* 44.

<sup>42</sup> SGC, 93.

tures that are our special characteristics from a charismatic point of view. Sharing in the fatherhood of God, the signs of this fatherhood need to be the same as those so clearly manifested by Jesus: gratitude to the Father for the gift of a divine vocation offered to all his sons and daughters, predilection for the little ones and the poor, zeal in preaching, healing and saving, likewise his gentleness and self-giving,<sup>43</sup> and also the features of Don Bosco, such as his gestures of kindness, the affection that the sons feel, an affection and kindness inspired by the love of God and by the gentleness of Christ. His goodness is that of someone who seeks the happiness of others. His affection, loving kindness, and warm welcome are the result of the right combination of affection and a sense of responsibility: a loving and understanding kindness, and at the same time with a sense of responsibility that is challenging in the lives of his boys. And because in his kindness he feels himself a father to his boys he wants to draw them to the mystery of God and put them in contact with Him for all eternity.<sup>44</sup>

Living the mercy of God in our centres with this understanding should mean that we believe that even today as with Jesus in the Gospel (Lk 7,50; Mt 9,22; Mk 5,34; Lk 8,48), it is a matter of having real experiences of human love that alleviate the burdens of life, and that lift people up from the dust. To be able to experience the Mercy of God through human contacts and through faith, even through our mediations poor and human though they may be, is a real and genuine experience of healing much deeper than that of physical health. It is to have the experience that we are loved and that we can love in spite of everything. It is in this that being Christians really consists, in believing in God's love for us. (Cf. 1 Jn 4,16).

So when a boy, a girl, a young person has the experience of meeting a true educator who offers them a life, and is devoting their own life every day fully committed to their service, they have an experience of how God loves them in a special and unique

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Const. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. J. E. VECCHI, *Spiritualità salesiana*. Elle Di Ci, Torino, 2001, 175-177.

way. This is what it means to incarnate the heart of Christ the Good Shepherd, to the point where should anyone want to harm “the sheep of the flock” they would first have to deal with the one who is guiding them with the love of an educator, a brother, a sister a friend. ... Interesting in this regard is the comment of an exegete who gives a modern example of the shepherd who lies down to sleep across the gateway so that he is both shepherd and door-keeper for the animals. We could put into the shepherd’s mouth and also on the lips of Don Bosco, the words: “If they want to reach my sheep they will first have to get past me”.<sup>45</sup>

#### **5.4. Mercy means that spiritual and educational experience called the “Preventive System”**

The spiritual and educational experience lived by Don Bosco with the boys of the first oratory, which he called the Preventive System, was for him a love that is given gratuitously, inspired by the love of God. Received from Don Bosco, it is for us the way of living and of working in order to communicate the Gospel and to save the young, with them and through them.<sup>46</sup>

Don Bosco’s way of living with the boys of the first oratory, undertaken in joy and in a family style is the centre of the Salesian spirit, in which “kindness (‘the fourth vow’, linked to the Salesian name) is nothing other than the practice of the preventive system lived with the young people and which is not only ‘the system of kindness’ but ‘the kindness of the system’”.<sup>47</sup>

Naturally I refer to the Preventive System, intimately linked to the Salesian spirit (given that this is put into practice and incarnated in a unique way in the former), not to undertake any kind a pedagogical study of it, but to remind ourselves that in the Sale-

<sup>45</sup> Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, AGC n° 384, 2003, 26-27

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Const. 20

<sup>47</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *La pedagogia di Don nBosco*, Rom, 1935, 14-15. Cf. ACS n° 290, 1978, quoted in *El Proyecto devida de los salesianos de Don Bosco*, Marid, CCS 1987, 253. Cf. *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference*. Chapter IV, *The preventive system, a spiritual and educational experience*, Rome 2014, 83-111.

sian spirit and in its expression, we have so very many elements and characteristic features that, lived with conviction and authenticity, make mercy a reality in every Salesian house in the world. These elements and aspects of mercy that we need to live are:

- an educative presence that is persuasive and creates trust;
- a way of acting that, guided by the heart, seeks only what is best for the boy, the girl, the teenager, the young person;
- a love that gives itself freely without seeking recompense;
- the constant exercise of a love that makes a person love because love builds up the individual;
- an educative presence that is open, cordial, that takes the first step in welcoming always with kindness, respect and patience;
- a preferential option for the young since this is an article of the “Salesian creed: ‘we really believe that God loves the young’”;
- “a language of the heart that means accepting them as they are, spending time with them, showing that you want to share their tastes and interests and enjoy doing so, demonstrating trust, tolerance and forgiveness”.<sup>48</sup>

It is for this reason that I believe we should never grow tired of studying, understanding and appreciating more and more this aspect of the Salesian spirit which takes practical form in the way we act and live our lives according to a system that Don Bosco himself in a letter to James Costamagna, Provincial in Argentina, on 10 August 1885 wrote about: “I should like to have at my side all my sons and the sisters in America... I should like to give them all a talk about the Salesian spirit which ought to nourish and guide our activities and everything we say. May our system be the preventive system... may our lessons be guided by the word gentleness, love, patience... May every Salesian become the friend of all, and never seek revenge; being ready to forgive without ever calling to mind the things he has already forgiven... Gentleness in speaking, in acting and in admonishing achieves everything and wins over everyone”.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, AGC n 400, 2007, 14.

<sup>49</sup> E. CERIA, *Epistolario IV*, Torino 1959, 332, quoted in *Project of life...* 256.

Finally I have to admit that I cannot let pass the opportunity to recall for those who knew it and to tell others about this valuable testimony of P. Duvallet, for twenty years the collaborator of Abbé Pierre in the apostolate of the re-education of young people. In it he speaks about the most precious treasure that we have in connection with our educational and evangelizing spirit and practice. He said: "You have works, colleges, oratories for the young but you have only one treasure: *the pedagogy of Don Bosco*. In a world in which the young are betrayed, exploited, crushed and taken advantage of the Lord has placed in your hands a pedagogy in which reigns respect for the young person, his greatness and fragility, his dignity as a son of God. Preserve it, renew it, rejuvenate it and adapt it to these young people of the XXth century and to their dramatic situations, which Don Bosco could not have known about. But please, preserve it. Change everything, if necessary lose your houses but preserve this treasure, so that thousands of hearts may learn the way of loving and saving young people that is Don Bosco's heritage".<sup>50</sup>

### **5.5. A mercy that is expressed in justice**

I will expand on the title of this section. It is a question of mercy that takes practical form in *justice* in our Salesian centres around the world because the mercy that we receive from God in this jubilee year, and always, also has for us a Salesian interpretation of the justice that is lived and that is and must be found in our houses.

For us the Mercy of God must be translated principally into the justice that we must seek, practise and also demand, especially in regard to those people who in some way "depend" on us.

<sup>50</sup> AA.VV. *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco tra pedagogia antica e nuova*, documents of the Salesian European Congress on the educational system of Don Bosco. Elledici, Turin, 1974, 314.

<sup>51</sup> Synod of Bishops: *Justice in the world*. Vatican City 1971. Quoted in SGC, 67.

The Synod of Bishops in 1971 had already stated: "The problem of justice in the world is one of the most vast, grave and urgent of contemporary society. It is the central problem of world society today".<sup>51</sup> We know very well that this continues to be one of the great issues in our world. Pope Francis, in the text of the proclamation of the jubilee year calling all to conversion in an encounter with the Lord speaks about the evil committed, even serious crimes, and calls for all to "listen to the cry of innocent people who are deprived of their property, their dignity, their feelings, and even their very lives".<sup>52</sup>

This situation of suffering demands of us, with the sensitivity of the sons and daughters of Don Bosco and as consecrated persons, that we continue to remain at the side of the poor in the face of every kind of injustice, working to reawaken our own consciences and those of others, before every kind of poverty and need, including the evangelical virtue of a commitment to justice. It is up to us in this situation to receive and to offer mercy, to act in such a way that *the practice of justice be a distinctive feature of our Salesian houses around the world*, facing up to the issues of justice or injustice with a real 'scrutinium', asking ourselves whether this really is for us an indispensable foundation and principle.

This comes down to some very simple but at the same time decisive matters, as for example, ensuring that there are work contracts which are observed so that the rights of people are defended. It means that in our centres just wages are paid; it means that we are always correct in the management of money especially when it is a matter of paying people; it means that we select people for the various services and positions in our centres according to the criteria of their preparation, their suitability and background, and never for under-the-counter reasons of 'friendship' or an exchange of favours; it means that we are prepared to deal with the situations that arise day by day, even if they are inconvenient if what is involved is justice and the rights

<sup>52</sup> MV, 19.

of others, especially if they are under age and therefore more weak and less protected.

All of this and much more is the expression and the manifestation of the Mercy of God for these people, once again through our humble mediation. This very practical approach which I want everyone to adopt has in itself serious theological connotations. When I seek justice this makes me love with God's own love and leads me at the same time to love God because justice has God as its ultimate goal. To recognise the rights of another person is to recognise the rights of God who reveals himself in the face of the other (1 Cor 11,7); it is to recognise "the rights of Christ who makes demands through the sacrament of the brother... so that the Lord considers as referred to himself all the concern that we have shown with regard to our brother (Cf. Mt 25,34-40). It is for this reason that "injustice nowadays in its various forms, denying the dignity of the rights of men the image of God and the brother of Christ, constitutes a *practical atheism*, a denial of God".<sup>53</sup>

## **5.6. Mary, Mother of Mercy**

The Pope concludes the document 'Misericordiae Vultus' turning his thoughts to Mary the Mother of Mercy, with the hope that for us the sweetness of her maternal face may be with us in this Holy Year so that we may discover once again the joy of the tenderness of God.

Mary is recognised as The One who has experienced the Mercy of God from the beginning of her life; a mercy lived in the depth of her heart, as she recognises the total gift of her life, of her being chosen, and of the constant protection of God who 'covers her with his shadow' in spite of the fact that she considered herself to be a true pilgrim in the faith,

<sup>53</sup> XXXII General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, *Decree IV*, n. 29, quoted in the *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Morale*, Paoline, Milano, 1990, 510.

“No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh. The Mother of the Crucified and Risen One has entered the sanctuary of divine mercy because she participated intimately in the mystery of His love”.<sup>54</sup>

We are invited to discover and to recognise the Mercy of God in our lives and to be grateful for it. We are invited to realise that everything in us is a gift from God and that his Love for us is totally gratuitous and in no way ‘in response to our merits.’ This requires from us simplicity and humility so that we give up our potential arrogance and like Mary continue to pursue a genuine journey of faith which means accepting God into our lives without reservation and discovering, little by little, very often without understanding it, how his will and his Mercy have accompanied and blessed our life.

So it was for Mary and “it could be said that only in the bright light of the resurrection was Mary able to fully accept the Mystery of her Son even though she had already said yes to the Father’s plan and had allowed herself to be led by the Spirit”.<sup>55</sup>

I finish this letter entrusting to Mary the Mother of Mercy this suffering world as it is a pilgrim Church which has to follow in the footsteps of the Lord, and in a special way recommending to our Mother the whole Salesian Family which seeks to undertake a journey of Mercy and fidelity.

O Mother of infinite Mercy,  
 who deigned to come to our aid,  
 help us to be free from all that could imprison us.

Strengthen our faith,  
 so that we may also be Merciful  
 as you were  
 and we may follow the call received from the Lord.

<sup>54</sup> MV 24.

<sup>55</sup> CHÁVEZ P., *Witnesses of the living God*, LEV, Rome 2012, 328.

Protect day and night  
our steps along the way  
and free us from all evil!

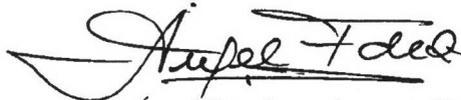
Care for our families and communities,  
for our Salesian Family  
and the young people you have entrusted to us.

O Mother of infinite Mercy,  
may your presence  
be born again in our hearts.

May your Motherly loving gaze  
guide the inner journey we have to make.

May your blessed hands bless  
the Mission that we have to undertake.

O Mother of infinite Mercy,  
may Your Heart unite us  
with the Heart of Christ,  
and may nothing separate us from Him and from You.  
Amen.



**Fr Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, sdb**  
*Rector Major*