



# The Holy See

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EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE OF MERCY

***SPIRITUAL RETREAT GIVEN BY HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE JUBILEE FOR PRIESTS***

**FIRST MEDITATION**

*Basilica of Saint John Lateran - Thursday, 2 June 2016*

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**[Multimedia]**

**RETREAT FOR PRIESTS 2016**

**INTRODUCTION AND FIRST MEDITATION**

*Good morning dear priests,*

Let us begin this day of spiritual retreat. I think it will benefit us to pray for one another, in communion. A retreat, but all of us in communion! I have chosen the theme of mercy. First, a short introduction for the entire retreat.

Mercy, seen in feminine terms, is the tender love of a mother who, touched by the frailty of her newborn baby, takes the child into her arms and provides everything it needs to live and grow (*rahamim*). In masculine terms, mercy is the steadfast fidelity of a father who constantly supports, forgives and encourages his children to grow. Mercy is the fruit of a covenant; that is why God is said to remember his covenant of mercy (*hesed*). At the same time, it is an utterly free act of kindness and goodness (*eleos*) rising up from the depths of our being and finding outward expression in charity. This all-embracing character means that everyone can appreciate what it means to be merciful, to feel compassion for those who suffer, sympathy for those in need,

visceral indignation in the face of patent injustice and a desire to respond with loving respect by attempting to set things right. If we reflect on this natural feeling of mercy, we begin to see how God himself can be understood in terms of this defining attribute by which Jesus wished to reveal him to us. God's name is mercy.

When we meditate on mercy, something special happens. The dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises takes on new power. Mercy helps us to see that the three ways of classical mysticism – the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive – are not successive stages that, once experienced, can then be put behind us. We never cease to be in need of renewed conversion, deeper contemplation and greater love. These three phases intertwine e recur. Nothing unites us to God more than an act of mercy – and this is not an exaggeration: nothing unites us to God more than an act of mercy – for it is by mercy that the Lord forgives our sins and gives us the grace to practise acts of mercy in his name. Nothing strengthens our faith more than being cleansed of our sins. Nothing can be clearer than the teaching of Matthew 25 and the Beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (*Mt* 5:7), for our understanding of God's will and the mission he has entrusted to us. We can apply to mercy the Lord's statement that “the measure you give will be the measure you receive” (*Mt* 7:2). If you will allow me, I am thinking of all those impatient confessors who “beat down” penitents, scolding them. But this is how God will treat them! If only for this reason, please don't act in such a way. Mercy makes us pass from the recognition that we have received mercy to a desire to show mercy to others. We can feel within us a healthy tension between sorrow for our sins and the dignity that the Lord has bestowed on us. Without further ado, we can pass from estrangement to embrace, as in the parable of the prodigal son, and see how God uses our own sinfulness as the vessel of his mercy. I want to repeat this, which is the key to the first meditation: using our sinfulness itself as the vessel of his mercy. Mercy impels us to pass from personal to the communal. We see this in the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, a miracle born of Jesus' compassion for his people and for others. Something similar happens when we act mercifully: the bread of mercy multiplies as it is shared.

### THREE SUGGESTIONS

I have three suggestions for this day of retreat. The free and joyful familiarity that comes about at every level between those who treat one another with mercy – the familiarity of the Kingdom of God as Jesus describes it in his parables – leads me to offer three suggestions for your personal prayer today.

The first has to do with two practical counsels that Saint Ignatius gives and I apologise for the “in house” advertising. He tells us that “it is not great knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the ability to feel and savour the things of God interiorly” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 2). Saint Ignatius adds that whenever we encounter and savour something we desire, we should pray in peace, “without being anxious to move forward as long as I am satisfied” (*ibid.*, 76). So too, in these meditations on mercy we can begin with what we savour most and linger there, for surely one

work of mercy will lead us to others. If we start by thanking the Lord for having wondrously created us and for even more wondrously redeemed us, surely this will lead us to a sense of sorrow for our sins. If we start by feeling compassion for the poor and the outcast, surely we will come to realize that we ourselves stand in need of mercy.

My second suggestion for your prayer has to do with the way we speak about mercy. By now you have realized that in Spanish I like to use “mercy” as a verb: We have to ‘show mercy’ [*misericordiar* in Spanish – *to mercify*: we have to stretch the language a little] in order to ‘receive mercy’ [*ser misericordiado* – *to be mercified*]. “But Father, this is not a real word!” – “True, but it is the form I have found useful to grasp this reality: to show mercy, *misericordiar* and receive mercy, *ser misericordiado*”. Mercy joins a human need to the heart of God, and this leads to immediate action. We cannot meditate on mercy without it turning into action. In prayer, it doesn’t help to intellectualize things. With the help of grace, our dialogue with the Lord has to focus straightaway on that sin for which I most need the Lord’s mercy, the one of which I am most ashamed, the one for which I most desire to make reparation. From the outset, too, we have to speak of what most moves us, of all those faces that make us want to do something to satisfy their hunger and thirst for God, for justice, for tenderness. Mercy is contemplated in action, but in a kind of action that is all-inclusive. Mercy engages our whole being – our feelings and our spirit – and all other beings as well.

My last suggestion for today’s retreat has to do with the fruit of these Exercises, namely the grace that we ask to receive. It is, in a word, the grace to become priests ever more ready to “receive mercy” (*misericordiado*) and to “show mercy” (*misericordioso*). One of the most beautiful things, and which moves me, is a priest’s confession: it is something great, beautiful, because this man who comes to confess his own sins is the same who will listen to the heart of other penitents who come to confess their sins. We can concentrate on mercy because it is what is most essential and definitive. By the stairway of mercy (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 77), we can descend to the depths of our human condition – including our frailty and sin – and ascend to the heights of divine perfection: “Be merciful (perfect) as your Father is merciful”. But always for the sake of “reaping” even greater mercy. This fruit should also be seen in a conversion of our institutional mindset: unless our structures are vibrant and aimed at making us more open to God’s mercy and more merciful to others, they can turn into something very bizarre and eventually counterproductive. This area is dealt with often in some documents of the Church and addresses of various Popes: institutional conversion, pastoral conversion.

This retreat, then, will follow the path of that “evangelical simplicity” which sees and does all things in the key of mercy. That mercy is dynamic, not so much a noun with a fixed and definite meaning, or a descriptive adjective, but rather a verb – “to show mercy” and “to receive mercy” [*misericordiar* and *ser misericordiado*]. This spurs us to action in this world. Even more, it is a mercy that is “ever greater” (*magis*), a mercy that grows and expands, passing from good to better and from less to more. For the model that Jesus sets before us is that of the Father, who is ever greater –

*Deus semper maior* – and whose infinite mercy in some sense constantly “grows”. His mercy has no roof or walls, because it is born of his sovereign freedom.

## FIRST MEDITATION: FROM ESTRANGEMENT TO CELEBRATION

Now we turn to the first meditation. I have entitled it “From estrangement to celebration”. If, as we said, the Gospel presents mercy as an excess of God’s love, the first thing we have to do is to see where today’s world, and every person in it, most needs this kind of overflow of love. We have to ask ourselves how such mercy is to be received. On what barren and parched land must this flood of living water surge? What are the wounds that need this precious balm? What is the sense of abandonment that cries out for loving attention? What is the sense of estrangement that so thirsts for embrace and encounter?

The parable which I would now propose for your meditation is that of the merciful Father (cf. *Lk* 15:11-31). We find ourselves before the mystery of the Father. I think we should begin with the moment when the prodigal son stands in the middle of the pigsty, in that inferno of selfishness where, having done everything he wanted to do, now, instead of being free, he feels enslaved. He looks at the pigs as they eat their husks... and he envies them. He feels homesick. Homesick: a crucial word. He longs for the fresh baked bread that the servants in his house, his father’s house, eat for breakfast. Homesickness, nostalgia is a powerful emotion. Like mercy, it expands the soul. It makes us think back to our first experience of goodness – the homeland from which we went forth – and it awakens in us the hope of returning there. It is the *nostos algos*. Against this vast horizon of nostalgia, the young man – as the Gospel tells us – came to his senses and realized that he was miserable. Each one of us can come to, or be led to, the point of feeling greater misery. Each one of us has his or her hidden misery... we need to beg for the grace to find it.

Without dwelling on that misery of his, let us move on to the other moment, once his Father had embraced him and kissed him. He finds himself still dirty, yet dressed for a banquet. For his father does not say: “Go and have a shower and then come here”. No. He is dirty and dressed for a banquet. He fingers the ring he has been given, which is just like his father’s. He has new sandals on his feet. He is in the middle of a party, in the midst of a crowd of people. A bit like ourselves, if ever we have gone to confession before Mass and then all of a sudden found ourselves vested and in the middle of a ceremony. It is a state of embarrassed dignity.

## AN EMBARRASSED DIGNITY

Let us think for a moment about the “embarrassed dignity” of this prodigal yet beloved son. If we can serenely keep our heart balanced between those two extremes – dignity and embarrassment – without letting go of either of them, perhaps we can feel how the heart of our Father beats with love for us. It was a heart beating with worry, as he went up onto the roof to look out. What was he looking at? The possible return of his son... In that moment, in that place where dignity and

embarrassment exist side by side, we can perceive how our Father's heart beats. We can imagine that mercy wells up in it like blood. He goes out to seek us sinners. He draws us to himself, purifies us and sends us forth, new and renewed, to every periphery, to bring mercy to all. That blood is the blood of Christ, the blood of the new and eternal covenant of mercy, poured out for us and for all, for the forgiveness of sins. We contemplate that blood by going in and out of his heart and the heart of the Father. That is our sole treasure, the only thing we have to give to the world: the blood that purifies and brings peace to every reality and all people. The blood of the Lord that forgives sins. The blood that is true drink, for it reawakens and revives what was dead from sin.

In our serene prayer, which wavers between embarrassment and dignity, dignity and embarrassment, both together, let us ask for the grace to sense that mercy as giving meaning to our entire life, the grace to feel how the heart of the Father beats as one with our own. It is not enough to think of that grace as something God offers us from time to time, whenever he forgives some big sin of ours, so that then we can go off to do the rest by ourselves, alone. It is not enough.

Saint Ignatius offers us an image drawn from the courtly culture of his time, but since loyalty among friends is a perennial value, it can also help us. He says that, in order to feel "embarrassment and shame" for our sins (but without forgetting God's mercy), we can use the example of "a knight who finds himself before his king and his entire court, ashamed and embarrassed for having gravely wronged him, after having received from him many gifts and many favours" (*Spiritual Exercises*, 74). We can imagine this scene. But like the prodigal son who finds himself in the middle of a banquet, this knight, who ought to feel ashamed before everyone, suddenly sees the King take him by the hand and restore his dignity. Indeed, not only does the King ask him to follow him into battle, but he puts him at the head of his peers. With what humility and loyalty this knight will serve him henceforth! This makes me think of the last part of Chapter 16 of the Book of Ezekiel.

Whether we see ourselves as the prodigal son in the midst of the banquet, or the disloyal knight restored and promoted, the important thing is that each of us feel that fruitful tension born of the Lord's mercy: we are at one and the same time sinners pardoned and sinners restored to dignity. The Lord not only cleanses us, but crowns us, giving us dignity.

Simon Peter represents the ministerial aspect of this healthy tension. At every step along the way, the Lord trains him to be both Simon and Peter. Simon, the ordinary man with all his faults and inconsistencies, and Peter, the bearer of the keys who leads the others. When Andrew brings Simon, fresh from his nets, to Christ, the Lord gives him the name Peter, "Rock". Yet immediately after praising Peter's confession of faith, which comes from the Father, Jesus sternly reproves him for being tempted to heed the evil spirit telling him to flee the cross. Jesus will go on to invite Peter to walk on the water; he will let him sink into his own fear, only then to stretch out his hand and raise him up. No sooner does Peter confess that he is a sinner than the Lord makes him a fisher of

men. He will question Peter at length about his love, instilling in him sorrow and shame for his disloyalty and cowardice, but he will also thrice entrust to him the care of his sheep. These two opposites always go together.

That is how we have to see ourselves: poised between our utter shame and our sublime dignity. What do we feel when people kiss our hands, when we are honoured by the People of God, as we look at our own depths of misery? There is another circumstance which helps us understand. Contrast is always present. We must place ourselves into that context, that place wherein our most shameful misery and highest dignity exist side by side. In that same place. Dirty, impure, mean, vain – the sin of priests, vanity – and selfish yet at the same time, with feet washed, called and chosen to distribute the Lord's multiplied loaves, blessed by our people, loved and cared for. Only mercy makes this situation bearable. Without it, either we believe in our own righteousness like the Pharisees, or we shrink back like those who feel unworthy. In either case, our hearts grow hardened: when we feel righteous like the Pharisees or when we distance ourselves like those who feel unworthy. I do not feel worthy, but I must not distance myself: I must have an embarrassed dignity, both go together.

Let us look a little more closely at this, and ask why this tension is so fruitful between misery and dignity, between estrangement and celebration? The reason, I would say, is that it is the result of a free decision. The Lord acts mainly through our freedom, even though his help never fails us. Mercy is a matter of freedom. As a feeling, it wells up spontaneously. When we say that it is visceral, it might seem that it is synonymous with "animal". But animals do not experience "moral" mercy, even though some of them may experience something akin to compassion, like the faithful dog keeping watch at the side of his ailing master. Mercy is a visceral emotion but it can also be the fruit of an acute intellectual insight – startling as a bolt of lightning but no less complex for its simplicity. We intuit many things when we feel mercy. We understand, for example that another person is in a desperate state, a limit situation; something is going on that is greater than his or her sins and failings. We also realize that the other person is our peer, that we could well be standing in his or her shoes. Or that evil is such an immense and devastating thing that it can't simply be fixed by justice... Deep down, we realize that what is needed is an infinite mercy, like that of the heart of Christ, to remedy all the evil and suffering we see in the lives of human beings... If mercy is anything less than this, it is not enough. We can understand so many things simply by seeing someone barefoot in the street on a cold morning, or by contemplating the Lord nailed to the cross – for me!

Moreover, mercy can be freely accepted and nurtured, or freely rejected. If we accept it, one thing leads to another. If we choose to ignore it, our heart grows cold. Mercy makes us experience our freedom and, as a result, the freedom of God himself, who, as he said to Moses, is "merciful with whom he is merciful" (cf. *Dt* 5:10). By his mercy the Lord expresses his freedom. And we, our own.

We can "do without" the Lord's mercy for a long time. In other words, we can go through life

without thinking about it consciously or explicitly asking for it. Then one day we realize that “all is mercy” and we weep bitterly for not having known it earlier, when we needed it most!

This feeling is a kind of moral misery. It is the entirely personal realization that at a certain point in my life I decided to go it alone: I made my choice and I chose badly. Such are the depths we have to reach in order to feel sorrow for our sins and true repentance. Otherwise, we lack the freedom to see that sin affects our entire life. We don't recognize our misery, and thus we miss out on mercy, which only acts on that condition. People don't go to a pharmacy and ask for an aspirin out of mercy. Out of mercy we ask for morphine, to administer to a person who is terminally ill and racked with pain. All or nothing. If we do not go into this deeply, we will fail to understand.

The heart that God joins to this moral misery of ours is the heart of Christ, his beloved Son, which beats as one with that of the Father and the Spirit. I remember when Pius XII completed his Encyclical on the Sacred Heart, someone commented: “Why an Encyclical on this? This is for religious sisters...”. The heart of Jesus is the centre, the very centre of mercy. Perhaps sisters understand this better than we do, because they are mothers in the Church, icons of the Church, of the Blessed Mother. But the centre is the heart of Jesus. We would do well to read this week or tomorrow *Haurietis aquas*... “But it is preconciliar!” – true, but it helps me! Reading it can help us! The heart of Jesus is a heart that chooses the fastest route and takes it. Mercy gets its hands dirty. It touches, it gets involved, it gets caught up with others, *it gets personal*. It does not approach “cases” but persons and their pain. Let us examine our use of words. How many times, without realizing it, do we say: “I have this case...”. Stop right there! Say, instead: “I have this person who...”. This is very clerical: “I have this case...”, “I've come across a case...”. It happens to me often. There is some clericalism: to reduce the concreteness of God's love, that love which God gives us and that of persons, to a “case”. In this way I distance myself and am not affected. In this way I don't dirty my hands; I am able to carry out a pastoral work that is clean, elegant, and in which I risk nothing. And in which – don't be scandalized – I am not able to sin shamefully. Mercy exceeds justice; it brings knowledge and compassion; it leads to involvement. By the dignity it brings – and this is crucial, not to be forgotten: mercy brings dignity – mercy raises up the one over whom another has stooped to bring help. The one who shows mercy and the one to whom mercy is shown become equals. Like the sinful woman in the Gospel (*Lk 7:36-50*), who was forgiven much, because she loved much and had sinned much.

That is why the Father needed to celebrate, so that *everything could be restored at once*, and his son could regain his lost dignity. This realization makes it possible to look to the future in a different way. It is not that mercy overlooks the objective harm brought about by evil. Rather, *it takes away evil's power over the future*, and this is the power of mercy: it takes away the power of evil over life, which then goes on. Mercy is the genuine expression of life that counters death, the bitter fruit of sin. As such, it is completely lucid and in no way naïve. It is not that it is blind to evil; rather, it sees how short life is and all the good still to be done. That is why it is so important to forgive completely, so that others can look to the future without wasting time on self-recrimination

and self-pity over their past mistakes. In starting to care for others, we will examine our own consciences, and to the extent that we help others, we will make reparation for the wrong we ourselves have done. Mercy is always tinged with hope. Mercy is the mother of hope.

To let ourselves to be drawn to and sent by the beating heart of the Father is to remain in this healthy tension of embarrassed dignity. Letting ourselves be drawn into his heart, like blood which has been sullied on its way to give life to the extremities, so that the Lord can purify us and wash our feet. Letting ourselves be sent, full of the oxygen of the Spirit, to revive the whole body, especially those members who are most distant, frail and hurting.

A priest, and this really happened, once told me about a street person who ended up living in a hospice. He was consumed by bitterness and did not interact with others. He was an educated person, as they later found out. Sometime thereafter, this man was hospitalized for a terminal illness. He told the priest that while he was there, feeling empty and disillusioned, the man in the next bed asked him to remove his bed pan and empty it. That request from someone truly in need, someone worse off than he was, opened his eyes and his heart to a powerful sense of humanity, a desire to help another person and to let himself be helped by God. He confessed his sins. A simple act of mercy put him in touch with infinite mercy. It led him to help someone else and, in doing so, to be helped himself. He died after making a good confession, and at peace. This is the mystery of mercy.

So I leave you with the parable of the merciful Father, now that we have we have entered into the situation of the son who feels dirty and dressed up, a dignified sinner, ashamed of himself yet proud of his father. The sign that we have entered into it is that we ourselves now desire be merciful to all. This is the fire Jesus came to bring to the earth, a fire that lights other fires. If the spark does not take, it is because one of the poles cannot make contact. Either excessive shame, which fails to strip the wires and, instead of freely confessing “I did this or that”, stays covered; or excessive dignity, which touches things with gloves.

## **AN EXCESS OF MERCY**

A few words to conclude on the excesses of mercy. The only way for us to be “excessive” in responding to God’s excessive mercy is to be completely open to receiving it and to sharing it with others. The Gospel gives us many touching examples of people who went to excess in order to receive his mercy. There is the paralytic whose friends let him down from the roof into the place where the Lord was preaching – they exaggerate somewhat. Or the leper who left his nine companions to come back, glorifying and thanking God in a loud voice, to kneel at the Lord’s feet. Or the blind Bartimaeus whose outcry made Jesus halt before him – and even gets through the “priests’ custom controls” to reach the Lord. Or the woman suffering from a haemorrhage who timidly approached the Lord and touched his robe; as the Gospel tells us, Jesus felt power – *dynamis* – “go forth” from him... All these are examples of that contact that lights a fire and



unleashes the positive force of mercy. Then too, we can think of the sinful woman, who washed the Lord's feet with her tears and dried them with her hair; Jesus saw her excessive display of love as a sign of her having received great mercy. Mercy is always excessive! Ordinary people – sinners, the infirm and those possessed by demons – are immediately raised up by the Lord. He makes them pass from exclusion to full inclusion, from estrangement to celebration. And it can only be understood in the key of hope, in an apostolic key, in the key of knowing mercy and then showing mercy.

Let us conclude by praying the *Magnificat* of mercy, *Psalm 50* by King David, which we pray each Friday at Morning Prayer. It is the *Magnificat* of “a humble and contrite heart” capable of confessing its sin before the God who, in his fidelity, is greater than any of our sins. God is greater than our sins! If we put ourselves in the place of the prodigal son, at the moment when, expecting his Father's reproof, he discovers instead that his Father has thrown a party, we can imagine him praying Psalm 50. We can pray it antiphonally with him, we and the prodigal son together. We can hear him saying: “Have mercy on me, O God, in your kindness; in your compassion blot out my offence” ... And ourselves continuing: “My offences, truly I (too) know them; my sin is always before me”. And together: “Against you, Father, against you, you alone, have I sinned”.

May our prayer rise up from that interior tension which kindles mercy, that tension between the shame that says: “From my sins turn away your face, and blot out all my guilt”, and the confidence that says, “O purify me, then I shall be clean; O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow”. A confidence that becomes apostolic: “Give me again the joy of your help; with the spirit of fervour sustain me, that I may teach transgressors your ways, and sinners may return to you”.