

THE PRIEST – AN INSTRUMENT OF THE DIVINE MERCY

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ABSTRACT: *The Priest – An Instrument of the Divine Mercy.* For the Year of Mercy, the suggested theme: "The priest – An Instrument of Divine Mercy", needs to be understood from both consecrated and Christian life point of view, since we are all part of the priesthood of Christ, both the sacramental or ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood or the priesthood of the faithful.

When proclaiming the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis explained how it is possible for any of us to receive and offer mercy. Therefore, I shall try to present some aspects of mercy that the clergy must be aware of, must live and put into practice.

Thus, the priest is first called to make known the Word of God, and only when the Word of God becomes a spiritual food for him he may begin the new evangelization of those who knew Him or of those who have forgotten what it means to be a Christian.

Secondly, one needs to consider the practicality of the teachings of the Word of God, the priest must find ways to put into practice the material and spiritual acts of mercy, and thus the Gospel becomes "operative through charity".

Last but not least, one needs to seek the Mercy of God in the sacrament of Reconciliation, where the priest finds himself to be the first penitent who received the Divine love, forgiveness and mercy, and then in turn he can provide the forgiveness of God to others, becoming a "channel" for the descent of the Mercy of God.

These three ways are found in the documents of the Catholic Church, i.e. *Misericordiae vultus*, *Dives in misericordia* and *Misericordia Dei*, inviting us to receive and live out the Divine mercy at the true value of the love and forgiveness of the Heavenly Father.

Key words: priest, mercy, word of God, sacrament of reconciliation, material and spiritual acts of mercy

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REZUMAT: Preotul, instrument al milostivirii divine. Fiind în acest An al milostivirii, această temă propusă „Preotul, instrument al milostivirii divine” trebuie înțeleasă atât din punct de vedere al persoanei consacrate cât și al creștinului, deoarece cu toții facem parte din preoția lui Hristos, atât preoția sacramentală sau ministerială, cât și preoția comună sau a credincioșilor.

Papa Francisc atunci când a declarat Anul milostivirii, a explicat cum fiecare dintre noi poate să primească dar și să dăruiască milostivirea. Astfel în cele ce urmează am încercat să prezint câteva puncte ale milostivirii pe care preoții trebuie să le cunoască, să le trăiască și să le practice.

Astfel, în primul rând preotul este chemat de a face cunoscut Cuvântul lui Dumnezeu, după ce acesta devine o hrană spirituală pentru el, apoi să se facă o nouă evanghelizare acelor care nu l-au cunoscut sau pentru cei care au uitat ce înseamnă a fi creștin. În al doilea rând este aplicabilitatea învățăturilor Cuvântului lui Dumnezeu, a pune în practică faptele milosteniei trupești și sufletești, astfel Evanghelia devenind „operantă prin caritate”. Și nu în ultimul rând, a căuta milostivirea lui Dumnezeu, în sacramentul reconcilierii, unde preotul trebuie să fie primul penitent care primește iubirea, iertarea și milostivirea divină, pentru ca apoi la rândul său acesta (preotul) să poată oferi iertarea lui Dumnezeu, preotul fiind „canalul” prin care coboară milostivirea Tatălui.

Aceste trei căi numerate se regăsesc în documentele Bisericii Catolice, *Misericordiae vultus*, *Dives in Misericordia* și *Misericordia Dei*, care ne cheamă la a primi și a trăi milostivirea divină la adevărata valoare a iubirii și a iertării Tatălui Ceresc.

Cuvinte cheie: preot, milostivire, cuvântul lui Dumnezeu, sacramentul reconcilierii, mila trupească și sufletească

The Divine Mercy is God's concrete action of love, which comes to meet every sinner, forgiving, transforming and changing everyone's life. It is transmitted from generation to generation, and constitutes the very life and existence of the Church, and makes visible the profound truth of the gospel, embracing every person who trusts in God.

Also in *Misericordiae vultus*, Pope Francis presents the *Divine Mercy* as “the supreme and ultimate act by which God comes to meet us”, and like a “fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life, the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness”¹.

¹ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, Iași 2015, 2.

God, “Father of all mercy” approaches the man, especially when suffering, and the human being, lead by faith, approaches the Divine Mercy of the Father. In this context in which the man seeks the mercy, the Church, continuing the mission entrusted by Jesus to His apostles, has to be concerned with the fundamental values, an asset of the Christian, human and cultural morals.

The Church does not represent the community of perfect persons, but of people on the road of life, following the Redeemer, admitting they are sinners in need of His forgiveness. Therefore, the Christian life is a school of humility that opens us to grace. The crucified Christ must be the Model for us.

The Holy Father John Paul II says that “the Church lives an authentic life when confesses and proclaims the mercy, bringing people closer to the springs of mercy”².

To be an apostle of mercy means to take care of the wounds that are present even today in the bodies and souls of so many faithful. Taking care of these wounds we confess Jesus, we make Him present and alive; we allow others to experience His mercy, to accept Him as “Lord and God”.

The Gospel of Mercy remains an open book containing the signs of the followers of Christ, gestures of love, the best testimonial of mercy. We all are invited to become bearers of the Good News to every person living today.

Christ is the One and Great Priest of the New Testament and in Him there was created a sacerdotal people, the holy people of God³. Out of all His disciples, the Lord wanted to particularly choose some to continue His mission, as teachers, priests and shepherds, and, in His Name, to publicly perform the sacerdotal mission to all mankind. In order to fulfil this mission, He gives them the power He received from the Father: “All power was given to Me in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and teach every nation, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all I have commanded you. And I shall be with you every day, to the end of the world” (Mt 28, 18-20).

He sends the twelve to proclaim the Kingdom and call to penance and conversion, “metanoia” (Mc 6, 12). Through the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Church continues the proclamation of the Gospel, inviting to repentance and offering the Sacrament of the forgiveness of sins, so that every repenting faithful shall obtain the reconciliation with God and the Church.

² Pope John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*, Traian 1980, 13.

³*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, București 1993, 1539.

The calling and sending of the priests is always present, every time having a special meaning. This is why even today the priests are called to a new mission of evangelisation, or, as the Church calls it, the “new evangelisation”, by **living** and **giving** the Divine Mercy. We are not speaking about un-Christianised places where the teaching about Jesus Christ did not reach yet, we are speaking about Christian places where those baptised are moving away from Christ, living a lifestyle dominated by relativism. Unfortunately, the Christian faith is reduced to a mere cultural factor, irrelevant for our society and human life.

We have to rediscover the vivid faith of the first centuries of Christianity, and the Christian message of Salvation must have that capacity to attract today as it did in the beginning, yet today using the modern tools.

Therefore, the priest remains a disciple of Christ, continuing the work of proclaiming the Word, to sanctify every faithful, leading to eternal happiness all entrusted to his care in a permanently changing society. He needs to go towards holiness in order to meet the grace that made him able to represent the person of Christ, head and shepherd, a living instrument for the work of Salvation⁴. He has to search for the simplest solutions and ways to reach the home and soul of every Christian in order to restore in him the dignity of a son of God, in order to give testimony about Christ: “while I was in the world, I kept them safe in Your Name. I kept safe those You gave to me and no one perished...” (Jn 17, 12).

By exercising the ministry of the sacred doctrine, the priests are partakers to the mission of Christ, the Lord. Christ himself entrusts them this mission by saying: “go and proclaim the Gospel to every being” (Mc 16, 15). They have to make known to everyone the **Word of God**, the word they have read, meditated and received with joy in order to live in faith, to constitute and enlarge the community of God’s people. The priest is the minister of the evangelising word, inviting everyone to repentance and holiness.

In order to be a „minister of the word” the priest must feed himself with the “Word”, i.e. the Holy Scriptures. By meditating the word of God and by means of personal prayer, the priest will have to give the testimony of life, leading to the discovery of the love and mercy of God, towards conversion and holiness, thus his word becomes persuasive. Through the Word of God, the priest has to rediscover and make known the mercy of God to all Christians living in the nowadays culture and mentality⁵.

⁴ CV II, PO, 12.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, 12.

A new evangelisation is needed, able to light up the enthusiasm of the apostolic preaching that has followed the Pentecost. As St. Paul stated: “woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor. 9, 16). It is a ministry of the word with a clear theological, spiritual, liturgical and moral content, paying attention to the human needs. A new apostolic enthusiasm is needed, respecting the diverse itinerary of every person, paying attention to the different cultures where the Christian message is to be brought in.

Pope Francis said: “In the present day, as the Church is entrusted with the task of the new evangelization, the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action”⁶, because “the contemporary mentality..., seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy”⁷. The Word of Christ must be addressed to adults, families, youth, children, coming to meet everyone according to their sensibility.

Knowing and meditating the Word of God the conscience must be awakened to follow the example of Christ, the One acting for those in need of help. We shall not forget that “the poor are the privileged of the Divine Mercy”⁸.

Therefore, in order to answer to the call to share the Divine Mercy, the priest and the faithful must practice the **material and spiritual acts of mercy**, a real Christian lifestyle⁹. Through these simple and powerful gestures, sometimes even invisible, we may visit those in need, bringing the mercy and comfort of God.

In the people in need, there is a special presence of the Son of God, requiring the Church to make the step towards those in spiritual and material need, thus confessing the love and mercy of God. The priest must be close to those who suffer, so his helping hand should be perceived as a fraternal communion and not humiliating alms.

Today more than ever the priests are called to listen to the cry of those willing to meet God. The priest is the shepherd that has **to know the faithful and live its own mission**, looking for the faithful, visiting families, sharing their needs and joys. He has to prudently correct, to take care of the sick, old, poor, and dying. He has to struggle to correct those living in error, to herald the freedom for those prisoners of the new slavery of the modern society and to favour the development of the Christian life inside families.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, 12.

⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*, 2.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, 15.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, 15.

The Gospel becomes operational through charity, which is the sign of fidelity to Christ. By its nature, the charity opens towards the universal ministry, living an active love for any human being. If we start from the contemplation of the face of Jesus, we have to discover Him especially in the face of those He wanted to identify with (Mt 25, 35-36).

The ministry is a ministry of accompanying because the encounter with God should be personal and intimate, and the heart should be able to honestly and fearlessly open to the Saviour. We shall not forget that God Himself acts in every person.

In the Gospels He is the one seeking and stopping by the sick ones. He is the One that orders to have the sick brought to Him; He is the one listening and healing those in need.

The priests have been chosen too, in order **to awaken the desire to convert**, to be instruments that ease up this encounter, to stretch the hand and untie, making visible and active His mercy.

The Divine Mercy can freely reach those invoking it. In fact, the possibility of forgiveness is open to everyone, largely open, like the greatest of the “holy gate” because it coincides with the desire of the Father’s Heart, the One who loves and waits for his children, especially those that have sinned and are far away from Him¹⁰.

The Mercy of the Father can reach every person in various ways: by openness of a *sincere conscience*, by reading the *Word of God* that converts the heart; by *meeting* a merciful brother or sister who talk to us about wounds, sin, forgiveness and mercy.

When the priests go to the confessional, as confessors, to approach the brothers and sisters, they have to always remember that they are instruments of the mercy of God; therefore, they should not obstruct this gift of redemption. The confessor is himself a sinner, a person that constantly needs forgiveness; he is the first that cannot deprive himself of the mercy of God, the One that “chose” and “constituted” him (Jn. 15,16) for this great mission. Therefore, he has to have a humble, faithful and generous attitude, wishing that every faithful should experience the love of the Father.

Entering the confessional, we should always remember that it is Christ who receives, it is Christ who listens, it is Christ who forgives, it is Christ who gives peace. The priests are only his servants and the first in need of His forgiveness. In what concerns the attitude towards the penitents, the confessor has to have in mind the example of the Saviour, “able to lean on the prodigal son, on any moral

¹⁰*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1432.

disorder, on sin”, has to help and encourage the penitent to reach the penance that helps him regret all his sins, to offer the advices needed to go forward on the way to holiness. The priest has to identify himself with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, has to assume the attitude of Christ, has to know to lean on with mercy, like the Good Samaritan on the wounded mankind, underlining the Christian novelty of the medical dimension of penance, the one that brings healing and forgiveness¹¹.

This is why, no matter who the sinful penitent is, every confessor is called to remember his own sinful existence, to humbly become a “channel” of the mercy of God. Pope John Paul II, in *Novo millennio ineunte*, is asking that the priests should regain and propose the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a convincing and efficient manner. They have to be endowed with a greater trust, creativity and perseverance in presenting and giving value to the infinite love and mercy of the Father. They have to put in all the efforts to overtake the crisis of the “reality of sin” present in the contemporary culture, and they have to rediscover Christ in which God shows us His compassionate heart and reconciles us to Himself¹².

The confessor has the opportunity to enlighten the conscience of the penitent with a word that suites his situation, thus helping his personal orientation towards conversion, having a deep influence on his spiritual development. In this way the confession can be lived as a moment of **spiritual direction**. In order to bring his contribution to the continuous road towards holiness, the priest should never cease to carry on his mission in spiritual direction, as a benefit for the Church and the Christian faithful. The advice and the personal practice of the priest should show the action and the cooperation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the life of the faithful.

The mercy we receive from the Father is not given to us as a private consolation but it makes us instruments for others to receive the same gift. There is a circular relationship between mercy and mission. Living the mercy of God makes us missionaries of mercy, and as missionaries of Christ the mission itself allows us to grow up in the mercy of God. Therefore, let us seriously consider our reality as Christians, let us engage ourselves to live as people of faith. Only in this way the Gospel can touch the hearts of the people, open them to receive the gift of love, to receive this great mercy of God that receives everybody.

The good will and love from the altar is spread towards the pulpit, the confessional, the school, houses and streets, in transport media and social mass-media, wherever the priest has the possibility to fulfil his mission as shepherd¹³.

¹¹ Congregation for Clergy, *Directory for the Mission and Life of the Clergy*, Iași 2013, 155.

¹² Pope John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, Iași 2001, 37.

¹³ Congregation for Clergy, *The Priest, Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Shepherd of the Community for the 3rd Christian Millennium*, Iași 2000, 80.

The Holy Father Pope Francis, addressing the clergy in one of his homilies, said: “Imitate what you celebrate so that by participating in the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord, you shall carry the death of Christ in your bodies and walk with Him into the novelty of life. You will never find the real Jesus without the cross; and a cross without Christ is senseless.”

Saint John Paul II said: “the Church lives and authentic life when it proclaims and witnesses the mercy and approaches people to the springs of mercy”¹⁴. Being Christians, we have the responsibility to be missionaries of the Gospel. When we receive the good news or when we live a nice experience, it is natural to feel the need to share our experience with others. We feel inside the impulse to share the joy, we want to spread it. By its nature, the awakened joy determines us to communicate it forward. It should be the same when we encounter God: the joy of this encounter with His mercy. We should communicate the mercy of God.

This does not mean we “are making proselytes”, this means offering a gift: I give you what gives me joy. Reading the Gospel, we can see this was the experience of the first disciples: after meeting Jesus, Andrew went right away to tell Peter (Jn. 1, 40-42) and so did Phillip with Nathanael (Jn. 1, 45-46). Meeting Jesus means meeting His love. His love transforms us, makes us able to give others the force given to us. In a way we can say that from the day of the Baptism each of us receives a new name, added to the one given by the parents, and this name is Christophorus: we all are Christophorus. What does this mean? “Carriers of Christ”. It is the name of our attitude, an attitude of the carriers of the joy of Christ, of the Divine Mercy.

To be missionaries of mercy, it means primarily to be open to receive the divine mercy and love, and then we too can give it to others and live it by the corporal and spiritual works of charity, to stretch our hand to those who are abandoned and poor, to lean towards those who need our help, towards those who are in a form of spiritual poverty and seek to know and follow the path of the Divine Word, the Gospel of Christ, which needs to be lived and witnessed to every person, so that he in turn to become a missionary of the divine mercy and love.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*, 13.