



JUBILEE OF MERCY MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION



Text of Catechesis of S.E. Mons. Robert Barron

I had the enormous privilege last week of addressing English-speaking priests from around the world who had gathered in Rome for a special Jubilee celebration of the Year of Mercy. I met fathers from the States, Canada, Australia, Latvia, Ghana, Cameroon, Ireland, Nigeria, and many other countries. During the communion at the Mass which followed my talk, I saw hundreds of priests in their albs coming to the altar to receive the Lord, and I thought of the passage from the book of Revelation concerning the white-robed army gathered around the throne of the Lamb.

As a basis for my presentation, I used the wonderful story from the fourth chapter of John's Gospel concerning Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well. From this encounter, I derived four principles regarding the divine mercy. First, I argued, God's mercy is relentless. Customarily, pious Jews of the first century would have assiduously avoided Samaria, a nation, in their minds, of apostates and half-breeds. Yet Jesus, journeying from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, moves right through Samaria. Moreover, he speaks to a woman in public (something that men simply didn't do) and he consorts with someone known to be a sinner. In all of this, Jesus embodies the love of God, which crosses barriers, mocks taboos, and overcomes all of the boundaries that we set for it. Thomas Merton spoke of the Promethean problem in religion, by which he meant the stubborn assumption that God is a distant rival, jealous and protective of his prerogatives. In point of fact, the true God is filled with *hesed* (tender mercy) and delights in lifting up human beings: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

And this conduces neatly to my second point, namely, that the divine mercy is divinizing. At times, we have the impression that God's mercy serves a reparative or healing purpose alone, that it solely binds up the wounds of our sin and suffering. That God's love heals is obviously true, but this tells but part of the story. Jesus asks the woman at the well for a drink, thereby inviting her to generosity. When she balks, citing the customary taboos, Jesus says, "If you knew who was asking you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would give you living water." This, I told the priests in Rome, is a pithy expression of the central principle of spiritual physics, what St. John Paul II called "the law of the gift." As St. Augustine knew, we are all wired for God, hungry for absolute reality. But God, as St. John knew, *is love*. Therefore, to be filled with God is to be filled with love, which is to say, self-emptying. The moment we receive something of the divine grace, we should make of it a gift and then we will receive more of the divine grace. In a word, our being will increase in the measure that we give it away. This is the "water welling up to eternal life" that Jesus speaks of. God wants not merely to bind up our wounds; he wants to marry us, to make us "partakers of the divine nature."

The third principle I identified is that the divine mercy is demanding. I told the fathers gathered in Rome that we tend to understand the proclamation of the divine mercy according to a zero-sum logic, whereby the more we say about mercy, the less we should say about moral demand, and vice versa. But this is repugnant to the peculiar both/and logic of the Christian gospel. As Chesterton saw so clearly, the Church loves "red and white and has always had a healthy hatred of pink!" It likes both colors strongly expressed side by side, and it has an abhorrence of compromises and half-way measures. Thus, you can't overstate the power of the divine mercy, and you can't overstate the demand that it makes upon us. Jesus tells the woman that she comes daily to the well and gets thirsty again, but that he wants to give her the water that will permanently quench her thirst. St. Augustine accordingly saw the well as expressive of concupiscent or errant desire, the manner in which we seek to satisfy the deepest hunger of the heart with creaturely goods, with wealth and power, pleasure and honor. But such a strategy leads only to frustration and addiction and hence must be challenged. Indeed, Jesus shows that the woman exhibits this obsessive, addictive quality of desire in regard to her relationships: when she says that she has no husband, Jesus bluntly states, "yes, you've had five, and the one you have now is not your husband." This is not the voice of a wishy-washy relativist,

an anything-goes peddler of pseudo-mercy and cheap grace. Rather, it is the commanding voice of one who knows that extreme mercy awakens extreme demand.

Finally, the divine mercy, I told the priests, is a summons to mission. As soon as she realizes who Jesus is and what he means, the woman puts down the water jar and goes into town to proclaim the Lord. The jar symbolizes the rhythm of concupiscent desire, her daily return to worldly goods in a vain attempt to assuage her spiritual hunger. How wonderful that, having met the source of living water, she is able to set aside her addictions and to become, herself, a vehicle of healing for others. The very best definition of evangelization that I've heard is this: one starving person telling another starving person where to find bread. We will be ineffective in our evangelizing work if we simply talk, however correctly, about Jesus in the abstract. Our words of proclamation will catch fire precisely in the measure that we have been liberated and transformed by Christ.

Could I ask all who read these words to pray for the priests who gathered in Rome this past week? Beg the Lord that we might all become bearers of the divine mercy.