

**How faith can create a merciful heart**  
*Attitudes of a believing person*

by

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Reflecting on mercy seems to be very appropriate during these Corona-Virus times. Frequently, discussions are heard on what could be the genuine contribution of the Church and its Gospel in relation to all who had to suffer under this pandemic. We often talk about the fact that after Covid, everything will be different and that we cannot go back to as it was before. If there is really an opportunity of conversion within this great challenge, how should the profile of a truly Christian-life be re-defined? This crisis has taught us that we still need to learn much more about compassion. How can this crisis influence and shape us to make us more merciful and how can it make mercy that unique characteristic of the Christian life? Allow me to begin my reflection on *'how faith can create a merciful heart that is open to the entire world'* with an observation and a memory of Rome that you are probably familiar with. From it, I will then try to develop and describe attitudes that make a merciful heart the distinguishing Christian mark that evidences how we Christians can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

When tourists and pilgrims come to Rome, we see them concentrated at special places. Where attractions are famous, they want to see personally – with their own eyes – what they know from pictures. Many can be seen in front of the *Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin* close to the bank of the Tiber River and the Circus Maximus. What attracts visitors to this site is not so much the history of art and the architecture and design of this house of God, but the furnishing of its vestibule with the world-famous *"Bocca della verità"* – the *Mouth of Truth*. This huge marble disc of a little more than five feet has the relief of a bearded male head and five holes for eyes, nose and mouth. It is unclear whether the more than two thousand-year-old disc once belonged to an altar of the neighboring Hercules-temple or whether it was a manhole cover that once made a watercourse accessible from above in honor of the pagan river-god Triton.

This *'mouth of truth'* can speak to us today through what people believed about it in late antiquity. Accordingly, if one was telling the truth under oath, one was able to place one's hand freely in the mouth of the disc. However, if what one said were a lie – according to tradition – the hand – would be stuck inside the mouth's opening and would not be released. What tourists want to try so cheerfully and carefree nowadays actually points to an ambiguous way of human communication. Do we say what we think? Do we also mean what we say of ourselves? How much communication – also in our Church – is disturbed by the fact, that honest exchange does not seem possible without taking over or excluding the 'opposing' camp?

Pope Francis' personal spirituality and ministry are centered and focused — as you know — on mercy. For him the category of mercy is linked directly to the ways in which communication among Christians and in our Church takes place. His recent initiative to lead the universal Church on a synodal path responds to his concern to listen first, to what the Holy Spirit is saying. After listening to the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to talk to each other guided by a communication shaped by a deeper sense and understanding of Holy Scripture. Within this horizon, this synodal path will renew the Church, I believe, by shaping her face with mercy.

We see mercy in action in the reply of Pope Francis to Cardinal Marx's resignation request. In his letter of June 10, 2021, Pope Francis agrees with the German cardinal that the Church is currently undergoing a severe crisis. However, in contrast to Cardinal Marx and all possible 'worldly' strategies offered as solutions, the Holy Father makes an important distinction. He differentiates between conflict and crisis. While people in conflict often harden their hearts and understand themselves in opposition to others, people in crisis are afforded opportunities of fundamental importance and meaning. Wherever crises are accepted, experienced and lived through, they harbor the possibility of an essential conversion and renewal. Actually, the core of our faith arises from the crisis of Good Friday resolved at Easter. Pope Francis writes in his letter, *"We are asked for a reform, which — in this case — does not consist in words but in attitudes that have the courage to face the crisis, to assume reality whatever the consequences may be. And every reform begins with oneself. The reform in the Church was made by men and women who were not afraid to enter into crisis and let themselves be reformed by the Lord. This is the only way, otherwise we will be nothing more than "ideologists of reform" who do not put their own flesh on the line. The Lord never agreed to do "the reformation" (allow me the expression) neither with the Pharisee project, nor with the Sadducee or Zealot or Essene one. But He did it with His life, with His story, with His flesh on the cross."*<sup>1</sup> — end of quote. Faced with a crisis, we must do the same.

Crisis teaches Christians mercy. Mercy is not creating projects or strategies. It is an attitude of our heart that is proved by patience, by enduring, and by suffering, knowing that the Good Fridays in life will be followed by the faith of Easter Sunday. In this respect, we can say that our faith is a great paschal miracle. Through this miracle, people who were previously strangers suddenly understand each other. Mercy is the gift of an understanding beyond words. We know it from our spiritual tradition and it is condensed in the Latin expression *"cor ad cor loquitur"* meaning, as we know, *"heart speaks to heart"*.

Pentecost in particular, as the beginning of the Church, is the birth of a language in which every first word inspires joy, like when a child begins to speak. Renewal in faith begins in the same manner as learning a language. There are sounds that become words and at some point the grammar is added so that whole sentences can arise. By looking at the mother's lips, the child is moved to imitate sounds, words, and sentences. Then, when the ability for self-expression

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-francis-rejects-cardinal-marx-resignation.html>. Accessed: 20 July 2021.

grows, the motivation to hear more and say more increases. Awe tones in faith as in life have the charm of being genuine. However, where the talk of reforms seems to consist more of pulling others to your side, this type of language or communication makes the other side mute.

For Christians the *“mouth of truth”*, the *“bocca della verità”* is not a hole into which one puts one’s hand to undergo a lie detector test, but rather it is the truth spoken at the beginning of the Church at Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that they all were empowered to speak, all were *“filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim”* (Acts 2: 4)<sup>2</sup>. Those listening to the Apostles were amazed and asked, *“Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? ...We hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God”* (Acts 2: 7, 8, 11)<sup>3</sup>. In this sense the *“mouth of truth”*, the *“bocca della verità”* is the voice of mercy that is immediately identified by those who are in need and longing for more. The Church is born out of prayer - the most honest language she speaks. It is not a cacophony of conflicting opinions, but a symphony of speaking and a harmony of themes in tones, that fit together to create powerful sounds or messages. The *“mouth of truth”* is not risking one’s hand but letting the heart speak. We speak with mercy and compassion, with a clear yet gentle voice, not counting the wrongs of others but enduring and supporting.

By using this metaphor of the *“bocca della verità”* allow me to explore five ways where communication reflects and mirrors the language of faith and does not depict political debates.

## **1. *Touching, what truth feels like***

Everybody knows: you cannot grasp the truth by magically putting one’s hand into a mouth opening. This amusing hocus-pocus as seen in front of the Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin cannot lead us to touch the truth. We all believe that we can easily recognize or feel the truth – at the latest, when and where we encounter it. It is less the hands and much more the heart that feels what is right. At times, one can even hear in a person’s voice the motives behind their words. Whoever wants to touch what truth feels like, must gain a sense for what is authentic. There is even an expression; truth is found when it is *“hidden in the wording, in line with the facts and therefore credible.”* Truth in communication cannot be forced and certainly not decreed. No external structures can support it rather it is a gift of an honest prayer.

With a clear theological reflection, Saint John Paul II spoke about the relationship between mercy and a spirituality of communion in his Apostolic Letter *“Novo millennio ineunte”*. In paragraph forty three of said letter the Holy Pope states, *“To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings. But what does this mean in practice? Here too, our thoughts could run immediately to the action to be undertaken, but that would not be the right impulse to follow. Before making practical plans,*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/acts/2>. Accessed: 20 July 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

*we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up. A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as "those who are a part of me". This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a "gift for me". A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to "make room" for our brothers and sisters, bearing "each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy. Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its means of expression and growth".<sup>4</sup> –end of quote.*

In this profound theological reflection, the horizon of Christian mercy is expressed, for there cannot be a spirituality of communion without mercy. We know that mercy embraces attitudes of cordiality. Reflecting on the meaning and sense of mercy promotes the motivation to act thus. Pope Benedict XVI has described it in a similar way when he speaks of the fact that Christian spirituality, which is revealing mercy to the other, is found in the experience of a communion of wills<sup>5</sup>. Wanting the same and not wanting the same thing is an expression of the old Roman friendship ideal of *"idem velle – idem nolle"*. To be unified in this spirit creates a new style of communication and belonging. In this sense God's Spirit causes communication, dialogue, that is and remains coherent- also and especially where many languages – as in music – create a harmonious symphony. Within this context, people can live, true mercy touches them and this is how the Church is born. Her Pentecost in the miracle of languages is not the desire for criticism that leads to confused situations or adversarial theology, but the spirit of a coherence that seeks and cares for what connects us all.

Perhaps in this sense, the well-known story of a student who comes excitedly to his philosophical teacher, Socrates, can highlight what has been given to the Church and how we are tempted to lose sight of it from time to time. The story goes something like this: *"One day a student met the great philosopher and said, "Do you know what I just heard about your friend?" "Hold on a minute," Socrates replied. "Before you talk to me about my friend, it might be good idea to take a moment and filter what you're going to say. That's why I call it the triple filter test. The first filter is Truth. Have you made absolutely sure that what you are about to tell me is true?" "Well, no," the disciple said, "actually I just heard about it and..." "All right," said Socrates. "So*

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20010106\\_novo-millennio-ineunte.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html). Accessed: 20 July 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See: [https://www.vatican.va/gp11/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/gp11/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html). Accessed: 20 July 2021.

*you don't really know if it's true or not. Now, let's try the second filter, the filter of Goodness. Is what you are about to tell me about my friend something good?" "Umm, no, on the contrary..." "So," Socrates continued, "you want to tell me something bad about my friend, but you're not certain it's true. You may still pass the test though, because there's one filter left—the filter of Usefulness. Is what you want to tell me about my friend going to be useful to me?" "No, not really." "Well," concluded Socrates, "if what you want to tell me is neither true, nor good, nor even useful, why tell it to me at all?"<sup>6</sup>*

Dear Missionaries, this wisdom is a guide to mercy. A synodal church in this path is a sifting church. Not the hand behind the back or hidden in a mouth, but rather a heart and an honest tongue that knows how to be silent to what is not true, good or necessary, and gives the necessary freedom to include a second dimension:

## **2. Hearing that which is expressed in silence**

I remember an incident that our spiritual director told us many years ago in the seminary. Visiting an ecclesial community, he was asked for his impression by those who had taken him there and wanted to introduce him to this group. His answer sounded sobering to us, he said, *"Loud faces, loud faces!"*

In the face of the noise, people and the Church experience in daily life, hearing loss, that is, being unable to listen, threatens to increase over time. Where in discussions about the future course of the Church one still wants to drown out the other, to silence the other, this does not mean that either one is right. True mercy enables true listening to what is hidden in silence; it finds that place where words lapse and seem futile. Every year in the passion of Holy Week I am extremely touched by this simple sentence of the Lord before the high priest: *"But Jesus kept silence!"* (Mt 26: 63). This silence, is more than the proverbial *"silence is golden!"* The silence of Jesus is listening to the inside, to the Spirit that expresses itself in works of tenderness and respect. Reading between the lines, believers – like Mary – keep in their heart the true *"thesaurus ecclesiae"*, the treasure of the Church. Silence therefore prevents redundancy and self-righteousness. Silence promotes a deep experience of faith that gives power to life. This aspect is already found in the Old Testament. We see this in the prophecy of God's servant found in the book of Isaiah that can shed light on Jesus' silent attitude where it says: *"For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: By waiting and by calm you shall be saved, in quiet and in trust shall be your strength. ...Truly, the LORD is waiting to be gracious to you, truly, he shall rise to show you mercy"* (Isaiah 30: 15, 18)<sup>7</sup>.

The miracle of languages or communication at the beginning of the Church comes from this contemplation in silence and it causes us to focus on what is essential in deeds of mercy: an intentional presence that listens and not so much a technical or a digital performance. Those who can hear in their mother tongue the many voices in life and of their faith experience silence and

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.alphahome.org/the-triple-filter-test/>. Accessed: 20 July 2021.

<sup>7</sup> <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/isaiah/30>. Accessed: 20 July 2021.

acquire God's Spirit. This indicates for me a third aspect of mercy: how faith can open us to the reality of God's love and care, enabling us, in turn, to find our response – to speak - according to the personal vocation we have received.

### **3. *Speaking, takes courage and gives courage***

Only those who really have something to say can step out of an eloquent silence. You can realize when they speak whether they come out of the silence of an affliction that has resulted in a trial. In this sense, what requires courage can give courage to others! It was in my semester of biblical studies when my Old Testament professor – an expert on the writings of the prophets – gave us the striking sentence: *“You study in order to be able to criticize the criticism.”*

How urgently the Church and the world need this sincerity and frankness at this time, not as a refusal to change but as freedom from outdated opinions! Saying what is required from a lived faith and from the Spirit does not entail a performance or doing well in the media or uttering already made opinions. Mercy gives the Church the sincerity the world needs in a context of linguistic confusion and in societies full of hate speech. Returning to that miracle of understanding caused by the Spirit at the very beginning of the Church is a remedy for today's cultural situation exhausted by this pandemic and embattled by wars of words.

In his recent social encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis writes about the need to shape communication with truth, a fact that requires courage and can give courage. The Holy Father states in paragraph two hundred and one, *“Indeed, the media's noisy potpourri of facts and opinions is often an obstacle to dialogue, since it lets everyone cling stubbornly to his or her own ideas, interests and choices, with the excuse that everyone else is wrong. It becomes easier to discredit and insult opponents from the outset than to open a respectful dialogue aimed at achieving agreement on a deeper level. Worse, this kind of language, usually drawn from media coverage of political campaigns, has become so widespread as to be part of daily conversation. Discussion is often manipulated by powerful special interests that seek to tilt public opinion unfairly in their favor”*.<sup>8</sup> –end of quote.

Where there is no courage to speak the truth, any dialogue ultimately becomes a monologue without mercy, without searching for the common good. The Holy Father highlights this fact further on in this encyclical where he states, *“Lack of dialogue means that in these individual sectors people are concerned not for the common good, but for the benefits of power or, at best, for ways to impose their own ideas. Round tables thus become mere negotiating sessions, in which individuals attempt to seize every possible advantage, rather than cooperating in the pursuit of the common good. The heroes of the future will be those who can break with this unhealthy mindset and determine respectfully to promote truthfulness, aside from personal*

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html). Accessed: 21 July 2021.

*interest. God willing, such heroes are quietly emerging, even now, in the midst of our society”<sup>9</sup>. – end of quote.*

The Holy Father’s analysis helps us understand that communication requires truth and mercy. The experience of truth and mercy needs to be contrasted with all other forms of social dialogue. In the same encyclical, Pope Francis calls on Christians to engage in an authentic social dialogue with these words, quote, *“Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other’s point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns. (...) Indeed in a true spirit of dialogue we grow in our ability to grasp the significance of what others say and do, even if we cannot accept it as our own conviction. In this way it becomes possible to be frank and open about our beliefs, while continuing to discuss, to seek points of contact and above all, to work and struggle together. Public discussion, if it truly makes room for everyone and does not manipulate or conceal information, is a constant stimulus to a better grasp of the truth, or at least its more effective expression”<sup>10</sup>* –end of quote.

Speaking with courage and encouraging others can only be done by those who speak with God themselves, by those who pray and thus enter a space of truth about themselves and about others. Prayer, union with God, is the origin of our faith and the decisive test of all church-communication. One quickly notices whether and how those who talk *about God* also *talk to God*. Prayer leads us to mercy and mercy leads us to prayer! This is first and last the litmus test of our evangelization. Prayer introduces us to a fourth way that opens us to realize and to respond to God’s mercy.

#### **4. Praying in loving (or merciful) attention**

In the Ignatian tradition, there exists the *“prayer of loving attention”*. It is a kind of daily review based on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius. It has three main goals. First, it is an intimate moment of personal prayer with God. Second, it is about honoring the day by looking back at its most important moments. Lastly, it is about discerning God’s presence in our experiences and being grateful for them. This *examen* or this *examination of conscience* or this *“prayer of loving attention”* can be done in several ways. One way of doing it is to place oneself in an atmosphere of silent meditation. One seeks to perceive one’s own state, one’s own emotions, feelings, thoughts and then one places oneself in the presence of God. Then, one looks back at one’s day, at what has taken place and seeks to recognize the truth about one’s own life and seeks to find the traces of the presence of God in the experiences of that day. One is paying loving attention to what has taken place within oneself, through oneself, and with oneself. We cannot let time, places, or the encounters that have taken place daily go by unnoticed. In this examen, it is important not to judge but to perceive and let what is true be true. We can say that this is the precondition and the content of the prayer to God. One then thanks God for what was good, beautiful and fruitful. Above all, one looks for those special surprising moments, for the unexpected, the gifts, those moments in which the heart was burning with God’s presence (cf. Lk

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* Number 202.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* Number 203.

24: 32). One also reviews all those moments where one experienced difficulties, hurts, worries, anger, sadness, or challenges, and one brings these also to God. During this time, we turn to God with all our miseries, (cf. Psalm 22), limits, weaknesses, failures, guilt, of which we are painfully aware and beg forgiveness and healing. Lastly, this review permits one to face the next day prepared, having prayed about one's prospects, worries, and future plans.

This spiritual review and practice - done faithfully with a true attentive attitude - can help us find God's mercy in our lives. Done faithfully it can train our sensibility in order to see with the eyes of God, in order to see everything with mercy. Mercy, then, becomes less about performing a single action or a good deed, but more about being in a state of a continuous attitude or prayer that shapes our mentality, our outlook. This process of ongoing conversion gives fruit to a different way of relating with one another, the way of mercy, which our society so urgently needs. I believe that the more this *prayer of loving attention* becomes our daily religious practice, the more we can respond to Pope Francis' call to fraternity and social friendship outlined in his encyclical "*Fratelli tutti*".

About thirty years ago, during my studies here in the United States – I was able to gain an important insight from the catechumenate. In our Catholic tradition conversion is not "*being born again*" but "*being born again and again and again ....*" This is the real and only school of mercy and it leads us to the fifth and last point of my presentation, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is the most valuable ministry of all the Missionaries of Mercy.

## **5. Guiding in and through the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

Guiding others in and through the Sacrament of Reconciliation is only possible for those who go to confession themselves. Only those who have personally experienced forgiveness and mercy can convey God's merciful vision towards the weaknesses that penitents are manifesting. In order to understand further, what it means to form others in and through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I am reminded of a story passed down from the Jewish Hasidic folklore by Martin Buber. We all know a lot about the theological meaning of repentance and I do not need to go into it any further here. However, to understand how we can lead people into the liberating space of healing, salvation and mercy and what helps them to emerge renewed from this sacrament allow me to recall this Hasidic tale about a holy rabbi and the call to become holy by becoming oneself. There are different versions of this tale with slight changes but one version goes like this: "*Before his death the old Rabbi Sussja spoke openly: 'in the world to come I will not be asked why haven't you been Moses! I will be asked a lot more why haven't you been Sussja! I will not be asked: Why haven't you reached the level of holiness of the greatest and most powerful prophet that has ever lived in our religion. Rather I'll be asked: Why haven't you fulfilled the measure that God has set for you personally? Why didn't you become what you should have been? Why haven't you been Sussja?'*"

This story highlights what should be the aim of the guidance provided in and through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Penitents are asked to have the necessary courage to face the measure that God has personally set for each of them. They have to see themselves as God sees



them, in harmony with God's mercy; and this vision brings consolation. This process of guiding penitents to truth, to silence, to a prayerful attention of their lives also requires an awareness of the reality of forgiveness. It might be beneficial now to recall part of what Pope Francis says about forgiveness in *"Fratelli tutti"*. In it, He states, *"Forgiving does not mean forgetting. Or better, in the face of a reality that can in no way be denied, relativized or concealed, forgiveness is still possible. In the face of an action that can never be tolerated, justified or excused, we can still forgive. In the face of something that cannot be forgotten for any reason, we can still forgive. Free and heartfelt forgiveness is something noble, a reflection of God's own infinite ability to forgive. If forgiveness is gratuitous, then it can be shown even to someone who resists repentance and is unable to beg pardon."*<sup>11</sup>—end of quote. Fostering this awareness of the need to forgive and the need to be forgiven is also part of the confessor's role in guiding others through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

### **Final outlook**

As I come to the end, allow me to turn once again to the image I used to introduce you to my reflection on mercy as an expression of truth. In addition to the mentioned Roman structure known as the *"bocca della verità"* there is also a proverbial wish in Italy that may sound somewhat strange and surprising to foreign ears: *"In bocca al lupo!"* This expression, used to wish someone good luck before exams or before special circumstances, literally means, *"to be in the mouth of a wolf"*. The person who is wished good luck responds, *"crepi il lupo"* which means 'may the wolf die'. These expressions of ancient origin do not signify what they once did, and seem vague, yet they are still used. In contrast, we can affirm that words require clear meanings so that they can bring about the truth. Talking around may seem more pleasant at times but it does not help us face the heart, the depths, of the person who is speaking. Mercy in gestures requires words of truth and deeds of silence. Real and compassionate mercy is truth in silence, hearing with confidence, speaking with certainty that there is more to be found in faith than in the unbridled *"mouths of truth"* of this world. Moreover, the daily practice of a *"prayer of loving attention"* leads to a ministry of penance in which those who are looking for mercy are able to see their lives under the gaze of a merciful God.

I have finished. Thank you for your patience.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* Number 250.