

Mercy and Reconciliation

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning! Today I would like to reflect with you on an important aspect of mercy: reconciliation. God has never failed to offer his forgiveness to men and women: his mercy is felt from generation to generation. Often we believe that our sins distance the Lord from us. In reality, in sinning, we may distance ourselves from him, but, seeing us in danger, he tries all the harder to find us. God never gives in to the possibility that a person could stay estranged from his love, provided, however, that he find in him or her some sign of repentance for the evil done.

By our efforts alone, we cannot be reconciled to God. Sin truly is the expression of the rejection of his love, with the consequence of closing in on ourselves, deluding ourselves into thinking that we have found greater freedom and autonomy. Far from God we no longer have a destination, and we are transformed from pilgrims in this world to “wanderers”. To use a common expression: when we sin, we “turn away from God”. That’s just what we do; the sinner sees only himself and presumes in this way to be self-sufficient. Thus, sin continues to expand the distance between us and God, and this can become a chasm. However, Jesus comes to find us like a good shepherd who is not content until he has found the lost sheep, as we read in the Gospel (cf. Lk 15:4-6). He rebuilds the bridge that connects us to the Father and allows us to rediscover our dignity as children. By the offering of his life he has reconciled us to the Father and given us eternal life (cf. Jn 10:15).

Be reconciled to God!” (2 Cor 5:20): the cry that the Apostle Paul addressed to the early Christians in Corinth, today applies to us all with the same vigour and conviction. Let us be reconciled to God! This Jubilee of mercy is a time of reconciliation for everyone. Many people would like to be reconciled to God but they don’t know how to do it, or they don’t feel worthy, or they don’t want to admit it, not even to themselves. The Christian community can and must foster the sincere return to God for those who feel this yearning. Especially those who carry out the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) are called to be instruments docile to the Holy Spirit, for where one has abandoned sin mercy can abound (cf. Rm 5:20). No one should be separated from God because of obstacles put there by mankind! And — I want to underline this — that also goes for confessors. It’s valid for them: please, don’t put up obstacles for people who want to be reconciled to God. The confessor must be a father! He stands in the place of God the Father! The confessor must welcome those who come to him to be reconciled to God and help them on the journey to this reconciliation that we are making. It is a very beautiful ministry: not a torture chamber or an interrogation room. No. It is the place where the Father receives, welcomes and forgives this person. Let us be reconciled to God! All of us! May this Holy Year be a positive time to rediscover our need for the tenderness and closeness of the Father, to return to him with all our heart. The experience of reconciliation to God allows us to discover the necessity of other forms of reconciliation: in families, in interpersonal relationships, in ecclesial communities, as well as in social international relations. Someone recently said to me that in the world there are more enemies than friends, and I believe he is right. Instead, let us build bridges of reconciliation among us, beginning in the family. How many siblings have argued and become estranged over inheritance. This shouldn’t happen! This year is the year of reconciliation, with God and among us! Reconciliation is also a service to peace, solidarity and the welcome of all. Let us accept, therefore, the invitation to be reconciled to God, in order to become new creatures and to radiate his mercy among our brothers, among the people.

Greeting to participants in the Jubilee for the armed forces and law enforcement:

With joy I welcome the representatives of the armed forces and police, here from all over the world, on pilgrimage to Rome for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. Law enforcement — military and police — have the mission of ensuring a safe environment, so that each and every citizen can live in peace and serenity. In your families, in the various areas in which you operate, may you be instruments of reconciliation, builders of bridges and sowers of peace. Indeed, you are called not only to prevent, manage and put an end to conflicts, but also to contribute to the building of an order founded on truth, on justice, on love and on freedom, according to St John XXIII’s definition of peace in his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (nn. 18 ff.).

The affirmation of peace is not an easy task, especially because of war, which uproots hearts and augments violence and hatred. I urge you not to be discouraged. Continue on your journey of faith and open your hearts to God the merciful Father who never tires of forgiving us. Faced with the challenges of every day, be shining examples of Christian hope, which is the certitude of the victory of love over hate and of peace over war.

The Little Lost Sheep (cf Lk 15, 1:7)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning! We are all familiar with the image of the Good Shepherd with the little lost lamb on his shoulders. This icon has always been an expression of Jesus' care for sinners and of the mercy of God who never resigns himself to the loss of anyone. The parable is told by Jesus to make us understand that his closeness to sinners should not scandalize us, but on the contrary it should call us all to serious reflection on how we live our faith. The narrative sees, on the one hand, the sinners who approach Jesus in order to listen to him and, on the other, the suspicious doctors of the law and scribes who move away from him because of his behavior. They move away because Jesus approaches the sinners. These men were proud, arrogant, believed themselves to be just. Our parable unfolds around three characters: the shepherd, the lost sheep and the rest of the flock. The one who acts, however, is only the shepherd not the sheep. The Shepherd, then, is the only real protagonist and everything depends on him. The parable opens with a question: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?" (Lk 15:4). It is a paradox that arouses doubt about the action of the Shepherd: is it wise to abandon the ninety-nine for one single sheep? And what's more, not in the safety of a pen but in the desert? According to biblical tradition, the desert is a place of death where it is hard to find food and water, shelterless and where one is at the mercy of wild beasts and thieves. What are the ninety-nine defenseless sheep supposed to do? The paradox continues, in any case, saying that the shepherd, having found the sheep, "lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me'" (15:5-6). It seems then that the shepherd didn't go back to the desert to recover the rest of the flock! Reaching out to that single sheep he seems to forget the other ninety-nine. But it's not like that really. The lesson that Jesus wants us to learn is, rather, that not a single one of us can be lost. The Lord cannot accept the fact that a single person can be lost. God's action is that of one who goes out seeking his lost children and then rejoices and celebrates with everyone at their recovery. It is a burning desire: not even ninety-nine sheep could stop the shepherd and keep him enclosed in the fold. He might reason like this: "Let me do the sum: If I have ninety-nine of them, I have lost one, but that's no great loss". Nevertheless, he goes looking for that one, because every one is very important to him and that one is in the most need, is the most abandoned, most discarded; and he goes to look for it. We are all warned: mercy to sinners is the style with which God acts and to this mercy he is absolutely faithful: nothing and no one can distract him from his saving will. God does not share our current throw-away culture; it doesn't count to God. God throws no one away; God loves everyone, looks for everyone: one by one! He doesn't know what "throwing people away" means, because he is entirely love, entirely mercy.

The Lord's flock is always on the move: it does not possess the Lord, it cannot hope to imprison him in its structures and strategies. The Shepherd will be found wherever the lost sheep is. The Lord, then, should be sought precisely where he wants to find us, not where we presume to find him! There is no other way to reassemble the flock except by following the path outlined by the mercy of the shepherd. While he is looking for the lost sheep, he challenges the ninety-nine to participate in the reunification of the flock. Then, not only the lamb on his shoulders, but the whole flock will follow the shepherd to his home to celebrate with "friends and neighbors". We should reflect on this parable often, for in the Christian community there is always someone who is missing and if that person is gone, a place is left empty. Sometimes this is daunting and leads us to believe that a loss is inevitable, like an incurable disease. That is how we run the risk of shutting ourselves in the pen, where there won't be the odor of the sheep but the stench of enclosure! And Christians? We must not be closed in or we will smell like stale things. Never! We need to go forth, not close in on ourselves, in our little communities, in the parish, holding ourselves to be "righteous". This happens when there is a lack of the missionary zeal that leads us to encounter others. In Jesus' vision there are no sheep that are definitively lost, but only sheep that must be found again. We need to understand this well: to God no one is definitively lost. Never! To the last moment, God is searching for us. Think of the good thief; only in the eyes of Jesus no one is definitively lost. For his perspective is entirely dynamic, open, challenging and creative. It urges us to go forth in search of a path to brotherhood. No distance can keep the shepherd away; and no flock can renounce a brother. To find the one who is lost is the joy of the shepherd and of God, but it is also the joy of the flock as a whole! We are all sheep who have been retrieved and brought back by the mercy of the Lord, and we are called to gather the whole flock to the Lord!