

To visit the sick and the imprisoned

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning! Jesus' life, especially during the three years of his public ministry, was a continual encounter with people. Among them, the sick had a special place. How many pages of the Gospel tell of these encounters! The paralytic, the blind man, the leper, the possessed man, the epileptic, and the countless people suffering from illnesses of every kind.... Jesus made himself close to each of them, and cured them with his presence and his healing power. Therefore, among the works of mercy, we cannot fail to visit and assist those who are sick.

Together with this, we can also include being close to those who are in prison. Indeed, both the sick and the imprisoned live in conditions which limit their freedom. It is precisely when we lack [freedom] that we realize how precious it is! Jesus has given us the possibility of being free regardless of the limitations of illness and of restrictions. And he offers us the freedom which comes from an encounter with him, and the new sense which this brings to our personal conditions.

With this work of mercy, the Lord invites us to make an act of great humanity: *sharing*. Let us remember this word: sharing. Those who are sick often feel alone. We cannot hide the fact that, especially in our days, in sickness one experiences greater loneliness than at other times in life. A visit can make a person who is sick feel less alone, and a little companionship is great medicine! A smile, a caress, a handshake are simple gestures, but they are very important for those who feel abandoned. How many people dedicate themselves to visiting the sick in hospitals or in their homes! It is a priceless voluntary work. When it is done in the Lord's name, moreover, it also becomes an *eloquent and effective expression of mercy*. Let us not leave the sick alone! Let us not prevent them from finding consolation, or ourselves from being enriched by our closeness to those who suffer. Hospitals are true "cathedrals of suffering" where, however, the power of supportive and compassionate charity is also made evident.

In the same way, I think of those who are locked up in prison. Jesus has not forgotten them either. By including the act of visiting of those in prison among the works of mercy, he wanted first and foremost to invite us to judge no one. Of course, if someone is in prison it is because he has done wrong, and did not respect the law or civil harmony. Therefore, in prison, he is serving his sentence. However, whatever a detainee may have done, he remains always beloved by God. Who is able to enter the depths of [an inmate's] conscience to understand what he is experiencing? Who can understand his suffering and remorse? It is too easy to wash our hands, declaring that he has done wrong. A Christian is called, above all, to assume responsibility, so that whoever has done wrong understands the evil he has carried out, and returns to his senses. The absence of freedom is, without a doubt, one of the hardest pills for a human being to swallow. Add this to degradation arising from the conditions which are often devoid of humanity in which these persons live, it is then truly the case in which a Christian is motivated to do everything to restore his dignity.

Visiting people in prison is a work of mercy which, especially today, takes on a particular value due to the various forms of "justicialism" to which we are exposed. Therefore, let no one point a finger at another. Instead, let us all be instruments of mercy, and have attitudes of sharing and respect. I often think about detainees... I think of them often, I carry them in my heart. I wonder what led them to delinquency, and how they managed to succumb to various forms of evil. Yet, along with these thoughts, I feel that they all need closeness and tenderness, because God's mercy works wonders. How many tears I have seen shed on the cheeks of prisoners who had perhaps never wept before in their lives; and this is only because they feel welcomed and loved.

And let us not forget that even Jesus and his Apostles experienced imprisonment. In the account of the Passion, we know of the suffering which the Lord endured: captured, dragged about like a criminal, derided, scourged, crowned with thorns.... He, the sole Innocent! And even Saint Peter and Saint Paul were in prison (cf. Acts 12:5; Phil 1:12-17). Last Sunday afternoon — which was the Sunday of the Jubilee for Prisoners — a group of detainees from Padua came to visit me. I asked them what they were going to do the following day, before returning to Padua. They told me: "We will go to the Mamertine prison to share the experience of Saint Paul". It was beautiful; hearing this did me good. These detainees wanted to find the imprisoned Paul. It was a beautiful thing, and it did me good. And even there, in prison, [Saints Peter and Paul] prayed and evangelized. The page from the Acts of the Apostles, which recounts Paul's imprisonment, is moving: he felt alone, and wished that some of his friends would pay him a visit (cf. 2 Tim 4:9-15). He felt alone because the vast majority had left him alone... the great Paul.

These works of mercy, as you can see, are age-old, yet ever timely. Jesus left what he was doing to go and visit Peter's mother-in-law; an age-old work of charity. Jesus did it.

Let us not fall into indifference, but become instruments of God's mercy. All of us can be instruments of God's mercy, and this will do more good to us than to others because mercy passes through a gesture, a word, a visit, and this mercy is an act of restoring the joy and dignity which has been lost.

Mercy and inclusion

Dear brothers and sisters, Good morning!

In this last Saturday Jubilee Audience, I would like to present an important aspect of mercy: *inclusion*. Indeed, God, in his design of love, does not want to *exclude* anyone, but wants to *include* everyone. For example, through Baptism, he makes us his children in Christ, members of his Body which is the Church. And we Christians are invited to use the same criteria: mercy is the way one acts, that style, with which we try to *include* others in our lives, and avoid closing in on ourselves and our selfish securities.

In the passage from the Gospel of Matthew that we have just heard, Jesus addresses a truly universal invitation: "Come to me, *all* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (11:28). No one is excluded from this call, because Jesus' mission is to reveal the Father's love to everyone. Our task is to open our hearts, to trust in Jesus and accept this message of love, which makes us enter into the mystery of salvation.

This aspect of mercy, inclusion, is manifested in opening one's arms wide to welcome, without excluding; without labeling others according to their social status, language, race, culture or religion: there is, before us, only a *person to be loved as God loves them*. The person whom I find at my work, in my neighbourhood, is a person to love, as God loves. "But he is from that country, or that other country, or of this religion, or another... He is a person whom God loves and I have to love him". This is to *include*, and this is *inclusion*.

We encounter so many weary and oppressed people today! In the street, in public offices, in medical practices... Jesus' gaze rests on each one of those faces, even through our eyes. And how is our heart? Is it merciful? And our way of thinking and acting, is it *inclusive*? The Gospel calls us to recognize, in the history of humanity, the design of a *great work of inclusion*, which fully respects the freedom of every person, every community, every nation, and calls everyone to form a family of brothers and sisters, in justice, solidarity and peace, and to be part of the Church, which is the Body of Christ.

How true are Jesus' words, which invite those who are tired and weary to come to Him to find rest! His arms outstretched on the cross show that no one is excluded from his love and his mercy, not even the greatest sinner: no one! We are all included in his love and in his mercy. The most immediate expression with which we feel welcomed and included in him is that of forgiveness. We all need to be forgiven by God. And we all need to encounter brothers and sisters who help us to go to Jesus, to open ourselves to the gift he has given us on the cross. Let us not hinder each other! Let us not exclude anyone! Rather, with humility and simplicity let us become instruments of the Father's inclusive mercy. The inclusive mercy of the Father: it is like this. The Holy Mother Church prolongs in the world the great embrace of Christ who died and rose. Also this Square, with its colonnade, expresses this embrace. Let us engage in this movement of including others, to be witnesses of the mercy with which God has accepted and welcomed each one of us.