

NOTES FOR CARDINALS / 2

Conclave: Returning to the true meaning of God's mercy

ECCLESIA

25_04_2025



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In view of the forthcoming conclave, we are publishing a series of in-depth articles inspired by the document signed by **Demos II** (an anonymous cardinal), which sets out the priorities for the next conclave to resolve the confusion and crisis caused by Francis'

pontificate.

God's mercy is the breath of the soul; without it no one is saved and no one can hope for salvation. "*Misericordias Domini in æternum cantabo*" (Ps 88:2): eternal life will be a perpetual hymn to the mercy of God, who did not leave us slaves to sin, but forgave us and renewed us with the shed blood of the Son of God and nourished us with the offered body of the Lord.

As John Paul II taught, the mystery of redemption is the mystery of justice, which springs from and leads to mercy: "In the passion and death of Christ - in the fact that the Father did not spare his Son, but "treated him as sin for us" - absolute justice is expressed, because Christ suffers the passion and the cross for the sins of humanity. This is even an "excess" of justice, because the sins of man are "compensated" by the sacrifice of the God-Man. However, this justice, which is truly 'tailor-made', comes entirely from love: from the love of the Father and of the Son, and bears fruit entirely in love" (Dives in misericordia, 7). The false opposition between mercy and justice is dissolved in that divine justice which "springs from love and is fulfilled in love", restoring mankind to that "fullness of life and holiness which comes from God" (*ibid.*) and "cauterising the very root of evil in human history" (*ibid.*, 8).

Thus we find both a reciprocal relationship between mercy and justice and a total opposition between mercy and evil, so that the work of divine mercy is not to excuse man's faults but to regenerate him to the life of grace. The whole life and activity of the Church is the proclamation and realisation of this merciful divine justice, or, if you prefer, of just mercy. Christ's passion and death proclaim God's universal will to save (cf. 1 Tim 2:4): no one, however great his sin, is excluded from this offer of forgiveness and regeneration. We can understand, then, how mercy does not destroy justice, but restores and perfects it; just as it does not merely declare the sinner who accepts it to be just, but makes him truly so.

In the constant teaching of the Church it has always been clear that this extraordinary truth is offered to man according to his nature, that is, with full respect for his freedom. The reason for this is very simple: the salvation of man is nothing other than "the love of God poured into our hearts" (Rom 5:5), which makes us capable of loving in return. And reciprocal love is not possible without freedom. Mankind has no other purpose than to love God with all his being, and salvation lies precisely in this recovered capacity to love, under the influence of divine grace and the concert of the theological and cardinal virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Grace, which moves, sustains, purifies and elevates, is always grace offered to mankind, who is called to

respond to these inner motions with his adherence: as is well known, grace does not take away nature, but purifies and perfects it.

During this Pontificate, we have repeatedly witnessed verbal and written expressions, sometimes ambiguous and sometimes decidedly erroneous, which have caused confusion among the faithful, leading them to think that salvation is the unilateral work of God and provoking a dangerous rapprochement with the Lutheran understanding of salvation in the twofold presupposition of *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. It is more necessary than ever to reaffirm the principle brilliantly summed up by St Augustine: "Without your will there will be no justice of God in you. Without doubt, the will is yours alone, the justice is God's alone. Without your will, God's justice can exist, but it cannot exist in you if you are opposed to it [...]. Therefore, he who formed you without you will not make you righteous without you" (Discourses, 169, 11. 13).

God always wants to forgive, but His forgiveness does not always reach people because of their resistance to repentance. Repentance is inspired by grace, but at the same time it is an act of mankind who rejects sin, recognises his guilt and turns to God's mercy. It brings with it the inseparable will not to sin again; without this will, sin continues to cling to the human heart. It is therefore a contradiction to believe that divine forgiveness can enter 'by force' into the heart of a person who, by his attachment to sin, keeps his heart closed to mercy; it would be like saying that divine mercy compels a person to the free act of love.

For this reason, there are ambiguities regarding the alleged duty of the confessor to always grant absolution, as well as the possibility of admitting to the Eucharist persons who continue to live *more uxorio*, according to the interpretation given to the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* by the letter of the Bishops of the Region of Buenos Aires of 5 September 2016, an interpretation that Pope Francis approved in his letter of the same day to Monsignor Sergio Alfredo Fenoy.

These are positions that mature on the erroneous assumption that forgiveness is a unilateral act of God, independent of the response of mankind, and that at the same time reveal an inconsistent and incomplete conception of the Church. They are based on a reduction of personal responsibility, on a possible lack of full awareness and conscious consent, which would diminish or even eliminate the responsibility of the person in a sinful act. This reduction of responsibility would lead, in certain cases, to the possibility of absolving and consequently admitting to Eucharistic Communion persons who continue to live in an objective situation of sin.

To go down this road is to distort the sense of the reality of the Church and of sacramental absolution. First of all, because the Church pronounces on what is manifest, insofar as it contradicts the law of God and the discipline of the Church. This is because Christians belong to the visible Church, with which they are called to be reconciled. Sacramental confession is not primarily the "place" where the relationship between personal conscience and God is played out; rather, the sacrament of Penance is the forum in which the penitent approaches God through the Church and as a member of the Church. The sacramental forum does not coincide with the forum of conscience, and this is why the Church leaves the latter to the infallible judgement of God - a forum which also includes the question of the degree of consciousness of the person in committing a morally reprehensible act - while reserving to herself the judgement of what is manifest.

Thus, if the penitent does not manifest a sincere will to detach himself from the sinful conduct, the confessor has the duty to withhold sacramental absolution, without implying a judgement on the degree of the person's consciousness. Likewise, the Church has the duty to deny the sacraments to those who live in a state of manifest public sin, precisely because it reveals an objective incompatibility between the person's public conduct and the commandments of God and the Church. To depart from this logic is necessarily to cease to understand the reality of the Church as a visible society, and to end up, among other things, in the presumption that one can know the inner situation of the penitent by "measuring" his consciousness.

It is therefore urgent and necessary to reaffirm these fundamental principles and to return to the measure of the Holy Gospel, which proclaims God's mercy together with the necessity of conversion and penance: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15).