**SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)**

Saint Eleutherius of Tournai, Bishop; Saint Jacinta Marto; Blessed Julia Rodzinska, Dominican Sister, martyr

1Sm 26:2,7-9,12-13,22-23; Ps 103; 1Cor 15:45-49; Lk 6:27-38

*The Lord is kind and merciful*

**COMMENTARY**

*Concrete love and mercy*

This Sunday’s Gospel is the continuation of Jesus’ “Discourse on the Plain” which began with the Beatitudes we heard last week. Thus, we come to the very heart of Jesus’ fundamental teaching to his disciples. It recommends particularly love for enemies and being merciful like God the Father. These two aspects are part of the unique Christian message of Love that has left a characteristic revolutionary mark in the history of humanity throughout the world. (So much so that when the missionaries began the work of evangelization in Vietnam, Christianity was called by the local population *Dao Yeu Thuong* as “the religion of Love”). However, dealing with such a well-known message, there is always the risk of remaining on the surface of the content, at the level of a “slogan,” and consequently of not truly understanding Jesus’ concrete recommendations to put them into practice. We must then (re)listen to the Word of God given to us today with more attention and, above all, with humility, simplicity and docility of heart, in order to (re)discover some fresh points for our life of faith.

1. *“Love your enemies”*

Jesus’ exhortation is clear and reaches the highest level of love. However, it represents a great challenge for those who want to practice it. In fact, someone might say, “Father, as Jesus taught us, I try to love my enemies, but I cannot feel in me that pinch of love for those who have always hated and mistreated me”. Yes, it is certainly very difficult, if not almost impossible, and I confess that I too have not yet reached that level. However, the very words of Jesus show us concrete explanations of what is meant by this recommended love, and therefore what concrete aspects are to be practiced in order to walk in the path of love. In fact, Jesus recommends three concrete actions: “do good to those who hate you,” “bless those who curse you,” “pray for those who mistreat you.”

“Doing good,” “blessing,” and “praying” are therefore the three pillars of love towards enemies, towards those who hate, curse, mistreat the disciples of Jesus. The point here is not to have some abstract or superhuman feeling, impossible to experience. These are simply concrete, “verifiable” and in some ways “feasible” actions, following the example of Jesus Himself who actually did good, blessed, and prayed on the cross for those who hated, cursed, and mistreated him.

This is a perennially relevant issue, especially for Jesus’ disciples, sent to proclaim the Gospel of God in the world, because they will always have to face those who hate, curse and persecute them, just as had happened with Jesus. The Lord made it quite clear, “No disciple is above his teacher […]. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more those of his household!” (Mt 10:24-25), and “if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (Jn 15:20). Then He assures, “In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world (Jn 16:33). With Him and in Him his faithful will also win through their faith, hope and Christian love. “And the victory that conquers the world is our faith” (1Jn 5:4).

2. *Merciful as the Father*

From concrete love for enemies, Jesus goes on to recommend to his disciples to be merciful to all, “just as your Father is merciful.” The mercy recommended here is revealed entirely “*theo*logical,” that is to say, it finds its ultimate reason (*logic*) in God. As already stated in the Jewish tradition, “Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in kindness” (Responsorial Psalm), so Jesus now exhorted his disciples to truly become “children of the Most High,” that is, merciful like Him.

On the other hand, once again, the recommended mercy does not mean a vague feeling, but implies four concrete actions, as Jesus indicated: two in negative form (“stop judging [literally Do Not judge]” and “stop condemning” [literally Do Not condemn]) and two in positive (“forgive” and “give”). They are extremely “simple,” “verifiable,” “feasible” indications, not because they are easy to carry out, but in the sense that they always help to begin (and start over) a path towards the perfection of divine mercy. In other words, if you want to be merciful, please do not judge others, and conversely, when you judge another person, you are not merciful. It should be emphasized that even in each of the concrete actions listed, God is always present (without being mentioned) as a point of reference in the grammatical construction of the so-called theological (or divine) passive, in which the implied agent is precisely God: “Stop judging and you will not be judged [by God],” “forgive and you will be forgiven [by God],” etc.

It would take many hours to deepen each of the aforementioned aspects of mercy and love, which develop the existing thoughts of the biblical-Jewish tradition, in particular the Wisdom tradition. Due to the limited time, let us focus only on the exhortation of forgiveness which Jesus Himself repeats several times in his teaching, to the point of binding God’s forgiveness to us with the forgiveness we give to others. In fact, this topic is present in the Our Father prayer, the only and fundamental prayer Jesus left to his followers: “and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Mt 6:12). And it is made explicit with a strong and provocative statement: “But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions” (Mt 6:15). If there is one thing that paralyzes God’s mercy and infinite love for you, it is your non-mercy to your neighbor, because in this way you close yourself in your little space to never open yourself to divine mercy.

At this point, someone might exclaim with sincerity and frustration, “Father, I try to forgive, but I can’t do it completely. What can I do?” For this, I leave to St. Francis of Assisi to answer with his beautiful commentary on the Our Father: “*As we forgive those who trespass against us*: and what we do not completely forgive*, make us, Lord, forgive completely* that we may truly love our enemies because of You, and we may fervently intercede for them before You, returning no one evil for evil and we may strive to help everyone in You.” This is a very fine thought. On the one hand, it recognizes human limits in forgiveness as a fact, and on the other, it indicates the way out: “make us, Lord, forgive completely,” as if it meant “help me, Lord!” or even in extreme cases: “You, O Lord, do it for me, in my place, because you are more capable and because actually you did it very well!” So, dear brother, dear sister in Christ, if you want to forgive and you still have difficulties, why don’t you start appealing to God of love and mercy, to Christ the face of the Father, to ask for this grace in sincere and incessant prayer? In your walking with Christ toward forgiveness, you are already forgiving in God.

3. *Like Christ, “heavenly man” and “wisdom from above”*

In the end, it should be strongly emphasized that today’s evangelical teaching on love and mercy in its detail must be interpreted not as a juridical instruction to be observed point by point, but as the Word of life, of spirit, of wisdom as a whole for constant meditation and intelligent application in various situations of Christian life. The mirror to look at will always be the person of Christ. The ideal will always be Jesus Christ, “the heavenly man,” to whom we, earthly men, are called to imitate (as the Second Reading reminds us). This is not to be a blind, mechanical, literal practice of each instruction with its sometimes Semitic exaggerated figurative language and formulations. Just reflect on the recommendation that “to the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well,” in the light of Christ’s response to the guard who struck Him during the trial before the high priest. In that moment, Christ answered with clarity and courage: “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” (Jn 18:23). (Even for love for enemies, it is always a question of love in truth, never something passive or any submission).

Let us then fix our gaze on Christ who is “wisdom from God” (cf. 1Cor 1:24-30), the wisdom from above which is “pure, peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity” (Jas 3:17). In Him we learn day by day, Sunday after Sunday, the wisdom of mercy and generous love, which is capable of breaking the chain of hatred, violence and evil. This will also be the humble mission of every Christian, missionary disciple of Christ, who thus boldly announces, in word and deed, the light of God’s Gospel throughout the world.

*Useful points to consider:*

Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, Rome, Saint Peter’s, 11 April 2015:

1. Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. The Father, “rich in mercy” (*Eph* 2:4), after having revealed his name to Moses as “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (*Ex* 34:6), has never ceased to show, in various ways throughout history, his divine nature. In the “fullness of time” (*Gal* 4:4), when everything had been arranged according to his plan of salvation, he sent his only Son into the world, born of the Virgin Mary, to reveal his love for us in a definitive way. Whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (cf. *Jn* 14:9). Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God.

2. We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.