



## **Our Suffering Has Not Been Useless**

EDITOR'S NOTE: On [\*the second day\*](#) of the Third World Apostolic Congress on Mercy last August in Colombia, Cardinal Ruben Salazar, archbishop of Bogota, Colombia, delivered a stemwinder — an address on Colombia's need for Divine Mercy and its capacity to be transformed by it.

*Though his focus was mainly on Colombia, the talk has a universal appeal and earned a standing ovation from delegates around the world. Father Seraphim Michalenko, MIC, a world-renowned expert on the Divine Mercy message and devotion, called it one of the best and most complete explanations of Divine Mercy he had ever heard. We share below the translated talk in its entirety:*

**By Cardinal Ruben Salazar (Aug. 16, 2014)**

If man is capable of [knowing] God, as St. Pope John Paul II says in the Preface of the *Catechism*, then man is capable of love, and if he is capable of love, it is because his heart is capable of mercy and has been transformed by grace into a heart of flesh. As Pope Francis affirms, "a heart capable of compassion is the heart of Christ." I invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit to infer, then, that Colombia is capable of mercy.

Man is capable of God precisely thanks to the Incarnation of Christ, that He took on in His own flesh every possible type of human suffering. It is a mystery. It is madness; As St. Paul says, "He made Him to be sin who did not know sin" (2 Cor 5:21) when He took upon Himself the entire reality of sin itself in order to be able to destroy it and give to man the possibility of beginning to live a new life, of being resurrected with Him.

And so that we may be capable of receiving and bestowing His Mercy, we must begin by coming to know ourselves in our misery, in our sin, in our pain, in our weakness, in our fragility and confusion. We can do nothing, nothing at all without Him. The words of Jesus to the Polish mystic St. Faustina Kowalska echo today for Colombia: "My daughter, you have not offered Me that which is really yours. ... Daughter, give Me your misery, because it is your exclusive property" (*Diary*, 1318).

I am grateful that God has cast His eyes upon the extreme suffering that we Colombians have endured, that with love He has embraced our still-raw wounds by choosing us as hosts of the Third World Apostolic Congress on Mercy. It is a sign that brings us a message of hope and tells us that our suffering has not been useless, it has not been in vain, that that immense deluge — which has torn us apart through decades of conflict and which has left 6.5-million human beings victimized — by the work of His Grace, will be the seed that yields reconciliation as its fruit.

All of our suffering — past, present and future — and also all of our sins: Today we leave them all at the foot of the Cross, we unite them to the suffering of Christ, which is to say the suffering of God with us and for our sake. Only in this way does it acquire all of its redemptive and salvific power: When God takes it through the mediation of Christ, His Son made man. He accepts our offering and takes it on [Himself]. In that moment, the pain through love acquires all of its redemptive power, as a pain transformed by grace into love-mercy. It is not suffering itself that redeems us, but rather love. A suffering that we offer today for all those who have caused us so much pain, those who have spilled the blood of their brothers, so that He may transform them and have compassion on their hearts of stone as well as on our own hearts, hardened by decades of violence.

### **Forgive, Even If It Hurts**

Some people will be asking themselves, "Why start the Congress asking for (mercy) for the murderers of Colombia? For those who have refused to ask for forgiveness and to show any repentance for their atrocious acts?" It is precisely they who — behind their apparent inhumanity — are the most wounded; they who have the greatest thirst for God, although they may not know Him, although they may not yet know that they, too, are His children; they are the ones most in need of His Divine Mercy and who most need to reach it, precisely through our intercessory prayer, by offering up our pain, and by offering our forgiveness. "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," prayed Christ while on the Cross (see Lk 23:34), and so we ask ourselves, "Even if they don't ask for our forgiveness?" Yes, even if they don't ask for our forgiveness. And yes, I know that by human logic, this mystery remains completely undecipherable. And it hurts, it hurts a lot!

Courage and heroism are necessary, just before making ourselves docile to the logic of love, docile enough to experience the grace of forgiving with His forgiveness — a love that cleanses. And justice? The Divine One? In His hands. So then does mercy imply renouncing justice? It's not a renunciation. It's a letting go, an abandonment and utter trust in Him, in His justice. To more trust, more mercy. Mercy is the most perfect

expression of Divine Justice.

Theresa of Jesus [St. Theresa of Avila], in her Autobiography, which she had originally entitled "On the Mercies of God," leads us, by some of its lines, to intuit the dimension of this mystery of love, the mystery which she reached not by way of the intellect but rather by way of experiencing it:

The time will come, Lord, in which we will have to give ourselves over to understanding Your justice, and if it is equal to mercy (12.5 158).

May your mercy shine among such enormous evil! (8.3 154)

One need not fear, but rather hope in His mercy, which must be found to be the truth of everything (284.2 177).

And Divine Mercy brings her — today a saint and a Doctor of the Church — to gaze upon herself in the first place, to recognize herself in her smallness as a sinner, needy of His mercy:

The Mercy of God gives me surety — for it has pulled me away from so many sins — that it will not wish to let go of me so that I am lost (38.7 33).

Blessed be such mercy, and rightfully will those be damned who would not wish to take advantage of it and would thus lose this Lord (4.9 115).

### **Where was God?**

At the beginning of Lent, [Pope Francis asked 3,000 priests of the Diocese of Rome](#), "Do you struggle with the Lord? Do you argue with the Lord as Moses did?" As the pastor of a divided flock — both facing and needful of the embrace of God to heal its wounds — I want to share with all of you those moments of distrust, weakness, moments of questions without answers and hopelessness in which we have, from the depths of our misery, cross-examined God Himself.

I put myself in Bojayá. A guerrilla fighter facing paramilitary soldiers tosses a pipe-bomb over the church in which dozens of families with children are taking shelter. The bomb's deafening noise is a prelude to the mangled bodies of those who only seconds earlier were desperately clinging to life. Where was God? Why didn't He shelter those fragile bodies in His mighty arms, at the very least those of the smallest children there? Why didn't God have compassion on those who ran terrified into His house looking for protection? Why didn't He have mercy on the parish pastor, Fr. Antún Ramos, who saw 12 of his 15 parishioners' bodies torn to pieces and flung across the church structure, parishioners who had been there lending help to the 400 people who had taken shelter in their church?

I move to another scene: soldiers and policemen with lifeless gazes, abductees looking past the wire cages inside which they spent their days and nights, some for as long as 14 years. The chains hanging from their necks weighed less than their tears. The darkness within them grew to become even darker than the lack of sunlight in their prison. Why is it that even now the pain remains, frozen in the souls of those who have been unable to bring their mourning to an end?

Why forgive those who haven't asked for forgiveness? Why be merciful to those jailers who stole away the precious gift of freedom and kept soldiers and policemen caged like prisoners in a concentration camp?

Machuca, 1998: A guerrilla group blows up an aqueduct that runs through the tiny village, the resulting fire spreads out of control, and 89 human beings — among them children, teens and adults — die tragically, burned to ashes. Why did God let María Cecilia Mosquera live, having watched her husband and three children perish in agony among the flames?

Where was God when an inconsolable mother received the defenseless corpse of her mentally handicapped son, who — to make matters worse — had died like a rebel combatant?

He was on the Cross. Yes, crucified, suffering in His own ravaged and torn flesh the pain of those who had taken refuge in the church in Bojayá. He lives today in the heart of Fr. Antún, who survived to reflect the joy of the presence of God in his life. He was next to the wives and mothers who, like María, were hoping against hope to be able to embrace once more the cold corpses of their children, even for just a moment; like Mrs. Mery Moreno, mother of the police sergeant Álvaro Moreno, on whom she waited, at the foot of the Cross, for 11 years, 9 months and 29 days, all while a thousand and one rosary beads helped her to count her prayers. He was in Machuca embracing the heart of María Cecilia, which hasn't ceased beating out of love for Him, not even for a moment, since that tragic day. He was at our side in the moments of our greatest despair, asking, "Father, why have You abandoned Me?" He was there in the sweetness with which Pastora Mira attended to the wounds of her own son's killer. He was there on His knees, next to María Teresa de Mendieta, setting her heart ablaze with hope for the return of her beloved husband.

And where was God the Father? I turn to St. Augustine: "God, who made you without your help cannot save you without your cooperation." God — who loves us immensely, who gave His only Son over to death on the Cross to redeem our sins — endowed man with free will, the gift of freedom even to turn away from Him, to have no desire to receive Him, to cause Him the pain of being rejected. That is the sin against the Holy Spirit of which the Gospels speak.

The love of God respects freedom; it is not coercive; it does not intrude upon the inner sanctum of the responsibility of the other person; that love allows — precisely because it is love — the other person to bear full responsibility for his acts. But even he who rejects God, through his dignity as a child of God, retains its outlines in the depths of his soul, where He waits patiently and with arms wide open in blessing, to be able to satiate the thirst of His creature for resurrection, through divine grace.

### **What About the Victims?**

So if God respected the freedom of the killers, why didn't He consider the fiat of the victims in order to protect them? Out of love for His Son in us, who did not get down

from the Cross. The pain of the Father, out of love.

Was God in the midst of the hurricane, in the earthquake, in the spread of the fire? No. He could be found with His children in the intimacy of their souls, in the whisper of a soft breeze, as happened to the prophet Elijah. In the solitude and abandonment of the creature, there He was. "Then the LORD said. 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD; the LORD will pass by.' There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD — but the LORD was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake — but the LORD was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire — but the LORD was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave" (1 Kgs 19:11-13).

The Divine Mercy is unfathomable. It is the mystery of the love of God that, as mankind, we cannot manage to unveil, but that through His grace we can receive in order to bestow it in abundance. "Be merciful as I am merciful" (see Lk 6:36).

Because by way of reason and in a country that has suffered the rigors of confrontation and has gone through a Via Crucis of pain, like Colombia, it seems incomprehensible that our God waits in the doorway of His house for the return of His sons the murderers, like in the beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son. For these reasons let us invoke the light of the Holy Spirit so that, through prayer, we receive and bestow the mercy that becomes love and redemption for this suffering Colombia.

And so God offers His mercy equally to both victims and killers, to every tired, grieving man. "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Even the repentant sinner, he who has committed the "most scarlet sins," has preferential access to it. Even those who threw the pipe-bomb into the church in Bojayá? Yes. And those who held captive, like slaves, other human beings, for as long as 14 years? Yes. And those who shot dead 11 defenseless legislators, after having held them captive for five-and-a-half years? Yes. There will also be mercy for them. And for those who blew up the Machuca aqueduct where 89 human beings burned to death? And also for those who assassinated the handicapped in Soacha and made them pass for guerrillas? For those who massacred entire towns? Yes, yes, and yes! God's offer is broad and generous.

But it requires our "fiat," our "yes" to God, our sincere repentance and our firm intention to do better.

### **The Limit Imposed on Evil**

As John Paul II wrote in his final book *Memory and Identity*, "The limit imposed on evil is, ultimately, Divine Mercy." And in a letter written to his would-be assassin, Alí Agca, who shot him on May 13, 1981, and who even today has yet to ask for forgiveness, John Paul II told him, "It's important that not even an episode like that which happened on May 13 may be able to open an abyss between two people, to create a silence that means the breakdown of communication. Christ — the Word Incarnate — has taught us words regarding this truth, which never stops producing contact between people, in

spite of the distance that events may be able to provoke, events that sometimes pit some people against others."

John Paul II was a living homily, he was a victim, like Jesus! As Cardinal Walter Kasper describes him in his book *Mercy*, "The witness of his suffering was a homily more eloquent than the many homilies he preached and the numerous documents written during his long pontificate."

To address the topic of mercy from the victims' perspective, we must look at Christ as victim. Because if Christ is not seen as victim, then what the role of the victim is cannot be understood. What was Christ's role as victim? It was to accept pain. The Lord did not refuse when faced with pain. He did not try to escape from pain, to avoid it. No, the Lord accepted the pain, looked face-forward at the pain, and upon making it His own, permitted that His heart be filled with love towards those who were causing that pain.

Therein lies the step in the right direction: I am truly capable of forgiving a person when I see him with other eyes. Not when I see him with the eyes of the murderer, but rather when I see him with the eyes of a brother of mine who also deserves love, and who in Christ has been redeemed, who in Christ has been transformed by the love of God. And so, therefore, I begin to look at the murderer with the same eyes of Christ, who loved His enemies, who prayed for His enemies, "Father, forgive them because they know not what they do." At no time did He adopt an attitude of vengeance, at no time did He try to destroy His enemy; rather, on the contrary, He offered Himself up for him.

And rightfully, by man's reasoning, the victims present in this auditorium could cross-examine me, saying, "But we're not like Christ, we are not as good as He is, we've gone through periods of rage, of pain, of enormous sadness, hopelessness and loneliness. And now they're asking us to forgive, like Christ, those murderers who are unrepentant and have no intention of doing better?"

### **What Forgiveness Takes Away**

Mercy on the part of the victim is called forgiveness, and forgiveness cleanses first and foremost him who grants it. It frees him from the ties to which senseless suffering condemn him; it takes away from the murderer the power to keep his victim psychologically bound, and most importantly, it turns over to God, humbly, the fate of the oppressor. Trust in divine justice operates like the balm of abandonment — it is like the loving hand that stops the hemorrhaging of the soul, closes up our wounds, and caresses our scars.

And indeed you may still insist, "Christ was capable of that, but I am not!" And I return to the beginning of my talk to reiterate: If man is capable of God, then man is capable of love. And if he is capable of love, then he is capable of mercy, which in the victim acquires the beautiful name of forgiveness.

Gazing upon Christ, one may, as a victim, donate his pain. That is to say, offer it up. And as for the explanation of this difficult reality, we find it in the New Testament, in the Letter to the Hebrews. It is an extraordinary letter that helps us to understand: The Son,

as Son, wanted to learn obedience through suffering. That is to say that the Son wished to take on all suffering to offer it up to His Father on behalf of the disobedient ones, human beings. Then, upon offering to God His suffering on behalf of the disobedient, immediately He makes it so that all of the love and mercy of God in Christ is bestowed upon the disobedient one.

In this way we understand that victims are called to [do] something active, not simply something passive. It is not the attitude of the one who suffers overwhelmed by suffering, of the one who suffers without finding meaning in the suffering, but rather it is precisely [the attitude] of him who suffers, taking the suffering in his hands and offering it up on behalf of the one who hurt him in the first place, for that person who caused him pain, so that that very person can discover the love and mercy of God.

And so where do we begin? By shutting reason off and, on our knees, imploring the grace to forgive with His forgiveness, to donate oneself with His donation, to look with His gaze of love and to trust with His trust: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my Spirit!" "Father, into Thy hands, I commend Colombia!"

### **His Revolutionary Message**

The vast majority of victims in Colombia have a vocation to forgiveness and reconciliation. They have walked with Christ on the periphery of pain, loneliness, and also of hope. But whenever I listen to some of them saying, for example, "I am incapable of forgiving my son's killer," or "I don't forgive the man who left me handicapped by a landmine," then I ask God to show us how His Son, Jesus Christ, took upon Himself all pain, all suffering, all injustice, and still forgave His murderers in order that God could grant us, through Christ Jesus, forgiveness and the capacity to forgive. That's why we insist upon asking Him to make us capable of forgiveness, to make us capable of restorative justice, that He make us capable of reconciliation. And that this process of victims and killers drawing closer to one another, which is being seen nowadays in Havana, be supported by our prayer. That means becoming aware that our heart is a weak heart, a fragile heart, a selfish heart, a stingy heart that needs God's heart to be able to forgive, to be able to receive and to give mercy.

The message of Jesus is a revolutionary one — to go out today, right now, and tell Colombian murderers that they, too, can receive redemption. So then, where must that murderous human being begin? Where should the men and women of FARC, of the ELN, of the paramilitary groups, or agents of the State begin, those who have spilled Colombian blood?

By recognizing themselves in their woundedness, in their misery, in their thirst for God. The murderer — precisely in order to move from his identity as a killer to that of someone worthy of mercy — has to undergo a complete interior process, completely a process of the heart. Because if we begin with the principle that his mind, his will, and his heart are bewildered, then he must necessarily undertake a process of finding the truth in freedom. It is not an automatic process. This can be clearly demonstrated upon observing the difficulty that the guerrillas currently have in accepting that they are indeed murderers.

### **God Is Thirsty for Their Fiat**

Now I address the militants of [the armed guerilla groups] FARC and the ELN, [telling them all] to undertake that process of discovering the truth about themselves. Let them stop covering up their crimes with lies. May they be capable of discovering the reality of crime, the reality of the offense they have committed. In the process of conversion, one must always start from the principle that one must come to recognize the nature of sin and the reality of sin, the examination of conscience. That is the first step. May they be able to set aside all of the lies that have been told during this whole time, and therefore, may they discover the whole truth, little by little. And in light of that truth that they discover, may they be able to realize the enormity of the crime [they] committed and the pain caused to the dignity of other human beings.

The second step is that, upon taking stock of their sin, may they be able to ask for penance. They may realize that they have caused real harm, that they have committed a crime, and that therefore they repent of having done it. And upon feeling sorry, may they be capable of asking for pardon, which is the next step of confession. And may they promise never to do it again, with a firm purpose of amendment and temporal satisfaction for the wrongs committed. Therefore, let them be capable of entering into processes of reparation for the hurts they caused. Without this process of confession, through which they make themselves an object of God's mercy, there is no conversion possible for that heart.

I call them to conversion, and I pray for them so that they come across the freedom and the truth that lie in the depth of their hearts as children of God.

Thousands of them were born in Catholic homes, and they have their parents down on their knees, interceding for them, imploring their return. God is thirsty for their fiat, and He will have compassion for them, just like He promised Sr. Faustina in the "Conversation of the Merciful God with a Sinful Soul":

My mercy is greater than your sins and those of the entire world. Who can measure the extent of my goodness? For you I descended from heaven to earth; for you I allowed myself to be nailed to the cross; for you I let my Sacred Heart be pierced with a lance, thus opening wide the source of mercy for you. Come, then, with trust to draw graces from this fountain. I never reject a contrite heart. Your misery has disappeared in the depths of My mercy. Do not argue with Me about your wretchedness. You will give me pleasure if you hand over to me all your troubles and griefs. I shall heap upon you the treasures of My grace (*Diary*, 1485).

And together with the prayers our grandmothers said, we invoke Mary through the most perfect expression of the infinite love of God for man:

"Mary, Mother of Grace and Mercy: In life and in death protect us, Our Mother!"