

MERCY IN HERMENEUTIC OF CONTINUITY: JOHN XXIII, JOHN PAUL II, AND FRANCIS

In *Misericordiae vultus*, the papal bull which announced the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis proclaims, „The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy – the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer”¹. Here and throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has revealed his desire for the Church to be more deeply imbued with mercy so she can vibrantly continue the mission of Christ, i.e., the reconciliation of the world with God the Father².

This mercy has become a frequent theme in the pontificate of Pope Francis, earning him the title, the Pope of Mercy. This is an apt title, but some modern observers mistakenly view Pope Francis’ emphasis on mercy as a point of departure from his predecessors. These observers believe Pope Francis’ emphasis on mercy has trivialized sin. Because God is so merciful, sin is less grave and easier to excuse.

In truth, Pope Francis is intentionally developing a sense of mercy which has been vibrant for the past several decades. He is proclaiming a theme which his predecessors, most especially Popes St. John XXIII and St. John Paul II, explicitly set before the Church. In the first place, Pope John XXIII recommends that the Church best leads the world to the truth of Christ not by condemnation, but by „demonstrating the validity of her teaching.” In this way, the „Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of

¹ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, 11, citing Pope John Paul II’s *Dives in misericordia*, 13.

² Cf. Jn 3:16-17; „That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn 17:21); „We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world” (1 Jn 4:14). All Biblical translations are from the RSV.

mercy rather than that of severity”³. In the wake of this admonition, the Church has „opened wide her doors” and approaches the world with the loving gaze of Christ, who beckons the rich man to „follow me” (cf. Mk 10: 17-22)⁴. Pope Francis also refers extensively to Pope St. John Paul II’s encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, which develops the theme of divine mercy more thoroughly than perhaps any other magisterial document.

An examination of the teachings and pastoral examples of recent pontiffs, most especially Pope St. John XXIII and Pope St. John Paul II, demonstrate the continuity of the theme of mercy in recent history. In a way, Pope Francis’s emphasis on mercy is the culmination of a dynamism that has existed in the Church for decades⁵. Although the present limited space prohibits an extensive analysis of the shades of nuance which distinguish the various recent pontiffs from each other, it is possible to trace a common trajectory of teaching on mercy that is present in all of them. Pope Francis’ personal witness and message of mercy is profound not because it differs from the message of his predecessors, but precisely because it continues Christ’s central mission of reconciling the world with the Father in a way that encapsulates the messages of Pope St. John XXIII and Pope St. John Paul II.

1. Pope St. John XXIII

1.1. *The Example of John XXIII*

Pope St. John XXIII’s personal example and teaching revived the theme of mercy in a way which then seemed unprecedented, much like Pope Francis’ contemporary emphasis on mercy

³ John XXIII, *Opening Speech to the Vatican II Council* (11 October 1962), accessed 14 July 2015, <http://www.creighton.edu/vaticanii/openingspeechtothecouncil/>.

⁴ Certainly, Pope John XXIII did not deny that moral and doctrinal dangers must still be confronted, but he believed the unchanging truth of Christ would clearly outshine the „foggy” and „fallacious” teachings of modernity over time.

⁵ Pope Francis also cites Pope Benedict XVI when teaching about mercy and conversion. See Pope Francis’ *Address to Participants in the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome* (Vatican 17 June 2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130617_convegno-diocesano-roma.html.

also appears unparalleled. The noted philosopher Hannah Arendt considered John XXIII to be a „Christian pope” – a pope who ostensibly prioritized imitating Christ over and above any pomp associated with the successor of Peter⁶. John XXIII was characterized by humility and a gospel simplicity which imbued his entire pontificate and teaching.

Angelo Roncalli (1881-1963), the future John XXIII, was a first generation Italian born after the collapse of the Papal States. As a seminarian, Roncalli wrote that he viewed Pope Leo XIII „more like a father than a sovereign” who reached out his hand to „caress and bless” his sons and daughters⁷. This familiar paternal model would shape Roncalli’s future episcopal ministry so that when he was elected Pope John XXIII, he quickly reassumed the title Bishop of Rome, which had long fallen into disuse⁸. This title emphasized his desire to rekindle the pastoral mission of shepherding his Roman flock.

John XXIII’s eagerness to live with his flock led him to become the first pontiff to travel publically outside of Vatican City since the collapse of the Papal States in 1870⁹. Besides visiting the various parishes in the Diocese of Rome and occasionally adventuring through Rome itself at night¹⁰, John XXIII was eager to practice corporal and spiritual works of mercy. He visited the pediatric hospital, which neighbors the Vatican, multiple times throughout his pontificate. He also visited Rome’s *Regina Coeli* prison, which he named „my Father’s house,” to be with the

⁶ This is from Arendt’s book review of John XXIII’s posthumously published autobiography, *Journal of a Soul*. „The Christian Pope”, *The New York Review of Books* (17 June, 1965), accessed 1 October 2015. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1965/jun/17/the-christian-pope/>.

⁷ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, trans. Dorothy White (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980), 120.

⁸ Cf. Massimo Faggioli, *John XXIII: The Medicine of Mercy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 24.

⁹ However, with the Lateran Treaty of 1929, the Roman Pontiff was permitted to travel to Castel Gondolfo. Otherwise, the Holy Father did not officially travel outside of the Vatican territories until John XXIII.

¹⁰ Peter Weber, *A Short History of Popes Sneaking out of the Vatican*, *The Week*, 4 December, 2013, accessed 2 October, 2015, <http://theweek.com/articles/455105/short-history-popes-sneaking-vatican>

„captives” and „to preach good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18)¹¹. When addressing the faithful publically, it was not uncommon for him to express affectionate familiarity: „My own person counts as nothing—it is a brother who speaks to you, became a father by the will of our Lord”¹². Undoubtedly, John XXIII’s pastoral heart foreshadows the admonition of Pope Francis for presbyters to „be shepherds, with the odor of the sheep”¹³.

1.2. *The Teaching of John XXIII*

The acts of mercy witnessed in the life Pope John XXIII correspond to his explicit teaching, which once again reveal the path of mercy for the Church as a whole. He explicitly set the theme of mercy before the whole Church in his monumental address to open the Second Vatican Council. In the following passage, he explains how he hopes to woo the world to Christ instead of simply condemning it as opposed to Christ. Now, he writes:

„(...) the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy (*placet misericordiae medicinam adhibere*) rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations. Not, certainly, that there is a lack of fallacious teaching, opinions, and dangerous concepts to be guarded against and dissipated.... That being so, the Catholic Church, raising the torch of religious truth by means of this Ecumenical Council, desires to show herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward the brethren who are separated from her.... She distributes to them the goods of divine grace which, raising men to the dignity of sons of God, are the most efficacious safeguards and aids toward a more human life. She

¹¹ Faggioli, 109-110.

¹² John XXIII, during an impromptu address to those outside his apartment window on the night of the opening of Vatican II, October 11, 1962. Faggioli, 127.

¹³ Pope Francis, Homily at Holy Thursday Chrism Mass (Vatican City, 28 March 2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html.

opens the fountain of her life-giving doctrine which allows men, enlightened by the light of Christ, to understand well what they really are, what their lofty dignity and their purpose are, and, finally, through her children, she spreads everywhere the fullness of Christian charity, than which nothing is more effective in eradicating the seeds of discord, nothing more efficacious in promoting concord, just peace, and the brotherly unity of all"¹⁴.

It is not expedient here to wade deep into the debates surrounding the broader intentions of what John XXIII hoped to accomplish through the Council, however, several important attributes of mercy can be glimpsed in this brief, yet rich declaration. First, John XXIII explicitly calls upon the Church to approach the world with a new disposition than had been customary, but this does not mean changing the teachings or demands of the truth of Christ and man. Massimo Faggioli comments, „Roncalli, first as a cleric and then as a pope, captured the deep need for the medicine of mercy, without ever thinking that the real Christian character of Catholicism could be at risk because of the use of the medicine of mercy"¹⁵. Second, it is possible to detect the seeds here of a doctrine of mercy which incorporates personalism. Within twenty years, John Paul II would show how divine mercy restores the relationship of the human person with Christ and consequently with other persons and even creation itself. In retrospect, it is clear that Pope John XXIII's prophetic address at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council sowed the seeds of many later doctrinal developments, including how mercy pursues the implementation of justice¹⁶ and full human development¹⁷. Of course, each of these

¹⁴ John XXIII, *Inauguration Address at the Second Vatican Council* (Vatican, 11 October, 1962), <http://www.creighton.edu/vaticanii/openingspeechtothecouncil/>.

¹⁵ Faggioli, 135.

¹⁶ John Paul II develops this theme extensively in *Dives in misericordiae* (hereafter DM): „True mercy is, so to speak, the most profound source of justice.” (DM 14)

¹⁷ While hardly speaking about mercy as such, Paul VI's *Populorum progressio* presents an extensive outline for how to implement mercy concretely:

doctrines is already prevalent in Scripture, but John XXIII still saw it necessary to reemphasize them.

Given John XXIII's emphasis on renewal and development, it is not uncommon to find proponents who claimed that he represented a chasm between the pre-Vatican II Church and the post-Vatican II Church. However, the extensive journals and writings of John XXIII clearly demonstrate that he never discarded the perpetual truths of Christ and his Church. This is especially apparent in regards to his teachings about mercy.

It is in John XXIII's forgotten second encyclical, *Sacerdotii nostri primordia* that one discovers the late pontiff's strong sense of the tradition. John XXIII wrote this encyclical in order to reinvigorate the clergy of the Church by reminding them of the heroic life of St. John Marie Vianney (1786-1859). He writes, „St. John M. Vianney always had ‘poor sinners,’ as he called them, in his mind and before his eyes, with the constant hope of seeing them turn back to God and weep for the sins they had committed. This was the object of all his thoughts and cares, and of the work that took up almost all his time and efforts”¹⁸.

John XXIII asserts that the sacrament of Confession is so important because the weight of sin is so oppressive. He quotes St. John Vianney, who lamented the prevalence of sin he encountered: „So many crimes against God are committed that they sometimes incline us to ask God to end this world!... You have to come to the town of Ars if you really want to learn what an infinite multitude of serious sins there are. Alas, we do not know what to do, we think that there is nothing else to do than weep and pray to God”¹⁹. It was precisely this realization that sin is a travesty which led the Cure of Ars to spare „no effort to become a minister of divine mercy”²⁰. St. John Vianney eventually became famous for bestowing mercy upon post-Revolutionary France through administering the sacrament of Confession. By the time of his death, he was hearing confessions up to eighteen hours a day from more

„The ultimate goal is a full-bodied humanism. And does this not mean the fulfillment of the whole man and of every man?” (*Populorum progressio*, 42).

¹⁸ *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia* (hereafter *SNP*), 90.

¹⁹ *SNP*, 88.

²⁰ *SNP*, 93.

than 20,000 penitents who traveled to Ars each year²¹. John XXIII concludes that the sacrament of Confession is an indispensable part of the Church's mission of mercy because „it is here most of all that divine mercy finally triumphs over human malice and that men have their sins wiped away and are reconciled to God”²². In this reflection upon the gravity of sin and the need to administer mercy through the sacrament of Confession, John XXIII demonstrates that his teaching on mercy remains in continuity with the Tradition.

1.3. Conclusion

Why did John XXIII appear so novel when his teaching, like those of his predecessors, was in such continuity with Scripture and the Tradition? Why was he, instead of other saintly pontiffs, popularly called *il papa buono*? Fundamentally, the pontificate of John XXIII sought to renew the perennial message of the Gospel and implement it pastorally. His journal records his personal sense of his *munus* as pontiff:

„The sublime work, holy and divine, which the pope must do for the whole Church, and which the Bishops must do each in his own diocese, is to preach the Gospel and guide men to their eternal salvation...The Bishop must apply the balm of sweetness to the wounds of mankind..., yet at the same time always ready to point out what is good and what is evil, with the help of sacred doctrine and without vehemence”²³.

John XXIII initiated a renewed evangelical dialogue with the nations and other separated brethren which would be characterized by mercy and would never compromise the truth. It is precisely this mercy-in-continuity which would be a model for the pontificates of Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Francis.

²¹ Susan Tracy Otten, *St. Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney*, in: *The Catholic Encyclopedia* vol. 8. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), accessed 12 June 2015, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08326c.htm>.

²² SNP, 94.

²³ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, 13 August, 1961, 330-1.

2. Pope St. John Paul II

2.1. Mercy as Guide of John Paul II's Pontificate

The example and teachings of John Paul II, which are evocative of the teachings of John XXIII, introduce several specific themes that are further developed in the example and teaching of Pope Francis. Although the theme of divine mercy had been a prominent theme for John Paul II from the beginning of his pontificate, the assault that nearly took his life on May 13, 1981 was a watershed moment in his papacy which prioritized the message of divine mercy. Some time after he had regained his health, John Paul II famously visited Mehmet Ali Agca, his attempted-assassin. Upon meeting Ali Agca, John Paul II began, „Today we meet as men. No, as brothers”²⁴. John Paul II offered forgiveness, but Ali Agca was perplexed that his bullet was not fatal and „never once” uttered the words „forgive me”²⁵. The meeting with Mehmet Ali Agca is only one example that illustrates how the Holy Father was eager to restore sinners to their full human dignity, even as God the Father frequently bestowed mercy upon Karol Wojtyła himself²⁶.

John Paul II's first destination outside of Rome after his recovery was a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Merciful Love in Collevalenza, Italy. This shrine was the home of a religious order, the Sons of Merciful Love, who were founded by Blessed Mother Speranza of Jesus in 1951 to serve and catechize the poor and destitute²⁷. He chose a nearby location devoted to divine mercy precisely because of „*le mie esperienze personali di quest'anno, collegate con gli avvenimenti del 13 maggio*”²⁸. It was during his

²⁴ Stanislaw Cardinal Dziwisz, *A Life with Karol: My Forty-Year Friendship with the Man Who Became Pope*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 137.

²⁵ Dziwisz, 138.

²⁶ Besides God preserving his life, John Paul II was also a recipient of Confession weekly. He „was in love with God. He lived on God.” Dziwisz, 88.

²⁷ The themes enveloped in devotion to the merciful love of Christ are extremely similar to those presented by St. Faustina Kowalska. Cf. www.collevalenza.it.

²⁸ See following note.

Angelus message at this Shrine that he spoke candidly about the supreme importance of the message of divine mercy in his pontificate:

„Fin dall’inizio del mio ministero nella sede di san Pietro a Roma, ho ritenuto questo messaggio [dell’Amore misericordioso] come mio particolare compito. La Provvidenza me l’ha assegnato nella situazione contemporanea dell’uomo, della Chiesa e del mondo. Si potrebbe anche dire che appunto questa situazione mi ha assegnato come compito quel messaggio dinanzi a Dio, che è Provvidenza, che è mistero imperscrutabile, mistero dell’Amore e della Verità, della Verità e dell’Amore”²⁹.

John Paul II realized that divine mercy spared his life through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary partly so that he might understand and thus communicate in a renewed way the message of mercy.

Throughout his time as bishop and later as pontiff, John Paul II was pleased to propose and facilitate the beatification of Sr. Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938)³⁰, the Polish nun and mystic to whom Jesus revealed himself as Divine Mercy. On 30 April 2000 John Paul II canonized St. Faustina Kowalska, the Apostle of Divine Mercy, as the first saint of the new millennium. With this canonization, the Second Sunday of Easter was also established as the Feast of Divine Mercy for the universal Church.

2.2. Themes of Mercy Found in John Paul II

The importance of mercy permeates all of the speeches and writing of John Paul II. He introduces his most characteristic thoughts on mercy in his second encyclical, *Dives in misericordia*³¹.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Angelus at the Shrine of Merciful Love* (Collevalenza, 22 November 1981), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/angelus/1981/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19811122.html

³⁰ Cf. Grzegorz Górny and Janusz Rosikoń, *Trust: In Saint Faustina's Footsteps*, trans. Stan Kacsprzak and Mary Murphy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 232-270.

³¹ John Paul II does not specifically address St. Faustina Kowalska or her diary in *Dives in Misericordia* since its publication precedes the canonization of St. Faustina. However, the encyclical is clearly influenced by it, given Karol

In it, John Paul II extensively and almost exclusively cites Scripture; as such it can be characterized as his commentary upon recurring Scriptural themes and as his primary contribution to a doctrine of mercy³². An extensive study of John Paul II's treatment of mercy is warranted, but here it is only possible to briefly mention the most pertinent themes. This begins with John Paul's observation that love manifests itself as mercy when it encounters sin. This mercy re-dignifies the person suffering from the effects of sin both by healing the wounds sin caused and also by prompting sinners to turn away from their transgressions which caused the wounds in the first place. Ultimately, Divine Mercy reconciles a sinful world with Christ, who heals and transforms it.

2.2.1. Mercy is Love's Second Name

John Paul II's teaching on mercy traces Scripture to show that God's love reveals itself as mercy when it encounters sin and distress (cf. Jn 3:16, Rm 5:8). He writes that „mercy is an indispensable dimension of love; it is as it were love's second name and, at the same time, the specific manner in which love is revealed and effected vis-a-vis the reality of the evil that is in the world”³³. Since the final defeat of sin has not been perfectly actualized in time, mercy remains the primary way in which God's love is manifest. Consequently, the Church must manifest the love of Christ through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

Pope John Paul II was emphatic that insofar as the Church faithfully fulfills Christ's mission of mercy, she is vibrant, but insofar as she neglects mercy, she is ill. He observes in *DM* „The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy – the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the

Wojtyła's involvement in advancing the canonization of Sr. Kowalska. cf. Górný and Rosikoń, 256.

³² *Dives in misericordia* has 71 direct citations of Scripture and 55 other allusions (using 'cf'). (J. Michael Miller, introduction to *The Encyclicals of John Paul II* [Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2001], 28).

³³ *DM*, 7. It is especially fitting that mercy is „love's second name” for a native Polish speaker. The Polish word for love (*miłość*) is the root for the most common word for mercy (*miłosierdzie*). Even in daily usage, *miłosierdzie* is a merciful manifestation of love.

Redeemer – and when she brings people close to the sources of the Saviour’s mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser”³⁴. This exact passage, which Pope Francis later quotes, is the impetus for the Year of Mercy³⁵. Mercy must not remain a mere concept, but must characterize every facet of the Church’s life.

Pope Francis’ beautiful witness of caring for the weak, poor, and others on the fringes of society has attracted intense attention; John Paul II imitated Christ in a similar manner. Because he had endured so many tragedies throughout his life, he demonstrated great solidarity with those who suffer. His lifelong companion and personal secretary, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, witnessed John Paul II’s example. „Whenever he would visit a parish or go on one of his trips, he would make an appointment to meet with the sick, the suffering and the handicapped. He went to San Francisco and took an AIDS-infected baby in his arms. He visited a leper colony in Korea and kissed one of the inmates...The Pope wanted to remind people that accepting suffering doesn’t mean losing their dignity”³⁶. The merciful examples found in John XXIII, John Paul II, and Pope Francis are living witness that God the Father is „particularly close to man especially when man is suffering, when he is under threat at the very heart of his existence and dignity”³⁷.

2.2.2. Personalism Meets Mercy

John Paul II is famous for advancing a doctrine of human dignity rooted in Scripture, but it is seldom observed that he also demonstrates an intrinsic link between dignity and mercy. Man and woman have dignity because they were created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), which is the root and cause of their personal relationship with God. However, the first sin willingly rejects God and severely disorders the human-divine relationship. Similarly, in the parable of the prodigal son(cf. Lk. 15:14-32), the child rejects his father in preference for his material inheritance. John Paul notes that it is only after squandering his newfound we-

³⁴ DM, 13.

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11.

³⁶ Dziwisz, 250.

³⁷ DM, 2.

alth that the son begins to realize how dire his situation has become. The son laments his material poverty, but under the surface, of his words „is concealed the tragedy of lost dignity, the awareness of squandered sonship”³⁸. The son believes he can no longer be called son, i.e. he has lost his very identity and worth. This is why he believes he is only fit to be a paid servant. However, the father welcomes his son back with exceptional generosity and restores his dignity *qua* son. The Father is ecstatic because „although the son has squandered the inheritance, nevertheless his humanity is saved”³⁹. The son’s humanity is saved because he can once again live as he was originally created, in the image and likeness of God in relation with the Father. This parable reveals that divine mercy does not simply excuse sin, it re-creates. The relationships which were all but destroyed by sin are restored by Christ and in Christ.

Once grace restores man and woman’s relationship with the Father, it is possible for intra-human relationships to also be healed from the wounds of sin. This theme is developed extensively in John Paul’s 1984 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*:

„With our eyes fixed on the mystery of Golgotha we should be reminded always of that ‘vertical’ dimension of division and reconciliation concerning the relationship between man and God, a dimension which in the eyes of faith always prevails over the ‘horizontal’ dimension, that is to say, over the reality of division between people and the need for reconciliation between them For we know that reconciliation between people is and can only be the fruit of the redemptive act of Christ, who died and rose again to conquer the kingdom of sin, to re-establish the covenant with God and thus break down the dividing wall which sin had raised up between people”⁴⁰.

³⁸ DM, 5.

³⁹ DM, 5.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 7. This document presents John Paul II’s most extensive treatment of mercy with the exception of *Dives in misericordia*.

2.2.3. Mercy Always Intends Conversion

There is a contemporary popularized notion of mercy which fails to reject sin and reform one's life. This false understanding believes that a merciful Church should embrace sinners without guiding them to amend their lives. According to this view, the fundamental source of division and conflict between men is not sin, but prejudice. Insofar as the Church adapts her moral law to contemporary lifestyles, she will be perceived to be merciful. However, insofar as she refuses to compromise the teachings of Christ, the Church will be judged to be severe, intolerant, and antiquated. Because of the prevalence of this false idea of mercy, it is important to demonstrate that neither Pope Francis nor the trajectory of the tradition separate mercy from the loving gaze of Christ (Mk 10:21) which beckons sinners to follow him and sin no more (Jn 8:11).

The genuine position of Pope Francis is already visible in the teachings of John Paul II who denies that mercy permits sin to persist. When he invokes the mercy of God, John Paul II simultaneously upholds the fundamental need for conversion:

„The parable of the prodigal son expresses in a simple but profound way the reality of conversion. Conversion is the most concrete expression of the working of love and of the presence of mercy in the human world. The true and proper meaning of mercy does not consist only in looking, however penetratingly and compassionately, at moral, physical or material evil: mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man. Understood in this way, mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of His mission”⁴¹.

Mercy is only efficacious if it restores a person's original dignity. This is achieved by repairing the relationship between the offender and the wronged, viz. man and God. This requires the original cause of disorder to be removed. A person with cancer can only resume his or her normal activities once all traces of the can-

⁴¹ DM, 6.

cer have been removed and the person has genuinely been cured. Likewise, relationships can only be restored if, as a minimum, the sin which has distorted the relationship has been confessed and the perpetrator has resolved to avoid injuring the relationship again through sin. Insofar as an active avenue for sin remains—insofar as cancer remains in the patient—the person has not been cured⁴². Here John Paul II reiterates the perpetual teaching of Christ and His Church, „Reparation for evil and scandal, compensation for injury, and satisfaction for insult are conditions for forgiveness”⁴³. Mercy without conversion is not mercy because it fails to accomplish mercy’s precise goal: tangible reunion with Christ and His Body, the Church. Just as health does not exist unless cancerous cells are eradicated, so also relationships damaged by sin cannot be healed without a willingness to „cut off” sin (Mt 18:8).or any objective situation which will perpetuate it

2.3. Conclusion

After John XXIII reintroduced the theme of mercy on the drama of the world-stage, John Paul II shone the spotlight on it. Indeed, John Paul II proclaimed, „There is nothing that man needs more than Divine Mercy... which raises man above his weakness to the infinite heights of the holiness of God”⁴⁴. Nevertheless, he simultaneously maintains that genuine mercy does not excuse a person from moral norms. Instead, divine mercy grants profound grace and strength to accomplish the will of God, as impossible as this may appear in certain circumstances. If John XXIII reintroduced mercy and John Paul II illuminated it, then at the present

⁴² Surely healing can be incremental and it is important to accompany even those who habitually commit grave sins. Each small increment of improvement is indeed an advancement. However, insofar as such sinful habits remain untamed or routine near occasions of sin are unmitigated, personal freedom itself is hampered. Consequently, such a person is unable to possess full human dignity. Mercy wants to heal precisely these situations. Christ re-dignified to the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8: 3-11), but he also commanded her to „go, and do not sin again” (Jn 8: 11).

⁴³ DM, 14.

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Homily at the Shrine of Divine Mercy*, (Ludźmierz, 7 June 1997), <http://www.thedivinemercy.org/message/johnpaul/homilies/jun071997.php>.

moment Pope Francis is promoting this theme of divine mercy to the front and center of the dramatic stage so as to reconcile the world with the Father. This is the perpetual *munus* of the Church.

3. Conclusion

Following the trajectory laid before him, Pope Francis is presently expanding the scope and ardor of the Church's mission of mercy so that it now reverberates through every level of the Church. On his recent trip to the United States, Pope Francis said „It is my duty to build bridges and to help all men and women, in any way possible, to do the same”⁴⁵. Indeed, this is precisely the mission of the Church of Mercy: it re-builds the bridge between the sinner and the Father so that bridges might be built between all the members of humanity. Mercy reconciles persons with each other as the beginning of the re-creation of heaven and earth and all they contain (cf. Rom 8). This means that mercy also guides man in restoring his relationship with all of creation. Pope Francis explicitly develops this topic in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, building upon the foundations laid by John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

The ultimate goal of mercy is not simply to excuse sins, but to actually reconcile the whole world to Christ for the „glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:11). In order to realize this, every member of the Church must act as Christ's body (cf. 1 Cor 12) to offer „his love that pardons, reconciles and reopens hearts to love”⁴⁶. Every person in the Church, including the hierarchy, priests, religious, and laity, are supposed to spread this mission of mercy throughout the *milieu* in which they live. Pope Francis also calls upon theologians to live mercy whilst studying theology:

„Do not settle for a desktop theology. Your place for reflection is the frontier. Even good theologians, like good she-

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, *Address to the Joint Session of the United States Congress* (Washington, 24 September 2015).

⁴⁶ These words are among the last words prepared by John Paul II for public address. He hoped to deliver it on the Feast of Divine Mercy, 3 April 2005, but entered into eternal life on the Eve of this great feast. This Regina Caeli was presented on his behalf by Archbishop Leonardo Sandri on 3 April 2005.

pherds, have the odour of the people and of the street and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine onto the wounds of mankind. Theology is an expression of a Church which is a „field hospital”, which lives her mission of salvation and healing in the world. Mercy is not just a pastoral attitude but it is the very substance of the Gospel of Jesus. I encourage you to study how the various disciplines — dogma, morality, spirituality, law, and so on — may reflect the centrality of mercy”⁴⁷.

It is no accident that Pope Francis simultaneously raised both Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II to sainthood on Divine Mercy Sunday in 2014. Each of these supreme pontiffs proclaimed that a developed doctrine of the mercy of God must suffuse pastoral practice. In the present moment, Pope Francis has discerned that it is his *munus*, and indeed the *munus* of the whole Church, to spread and implement the message of Divine Mercy. During the Mass for the canonization of John XXIII and John Paul II, Pope Francis declared:

„They were not afraid to look upon the wounds of Jesus, to touch his torn hands and his pierced side ... They lived through the tragic events of that [20th] century, but they were not overwhelmed by them. For them, God was more powerful; faith was more powerful – faith in Jesus Christ the Redeemer of man and the Lord of history; the mercy of God, shown by those five wounds, was more powerful; and more powerful too was the closeness of Mary our Mother....May both of them teach us not to be scandalized by the wounds of Christ and to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of divine mercy, which always hopes and always forgives, because it always loves”⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Pope Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Grand Chancellor of the Pontifica Universidad Católica Argentina for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Faculty of Theology* (3 March 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150303_lettera-universita-cattolica-argentina.html.

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, *Homily for the Mass of Canonization of Blesseds John XXIII and John Paul II* (Vatican, 27 April 2014).

Notatka o Autorze: David Szostak – mieszka z żoną i córką w stanie Maryland (USA), absolwent Ave Maria University (Floryda), doktorant Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family (Washington D.C.). Współpracuje z National Right to Life –największą organizacją pro-life w USA. Oryginalny tytuł publikowanego artykułu: *Mercy: a theme of continuity. A common point of focus for Popes John XXIII, John Paul II, and Francis.*

Key-words: Divine Mercy, Francis (pope), John XXIII, John Paul II, mercy.

Streszczenie

*Miłosierdzie w hermeneutyce ciągłości:
Jan XXIII, Jan Paweł II i Franciszek*

Miłosierdzie stało się częstym tematem pontyfikatu papieża Franciszka, który zasłużył na tytuł Papieża Miłosierdzia. Jest to właściwy tytuł, ale wielu błędnie upatruje w tym odejście od nauczania jego poprzedników. Badanie nauczania i pasterskiego przykładu współczesnych papieży ukazuje u nich ciągłość tematyki Miłosierdzia Bożego. Jeśli „Dobry Papież” Jan XXIII ponownie wprowadził ten temat, to Jan Paweł II – papież encykliki *Dives in misericordia* i Niedzieli Miłosierdzia Bożego – oświetlił go i pogłębił. Franciszek – papież Roku Miłosierdzia – rozeznał, że obowiązkiem (*munus*) jego jak i całego Kościoła jest upowszechnianie orędzia o Miłosierdziu Bożym i wprowadzanie go w życie.

Streszcz. Sławomir Pawłowski

Słowa-klucze: Boże Miłosierdzie, Franciszek (papież), Jan XXIII, Jan Paweł II, miłosierdzie.