

## **MERCY AND COMPASSION: PATHWAYS OF HUMANISATION**

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*Gaudium et Spes* (GS, n. 12) attempts a simple but unifying definition of what man (*humanum*) is: ‘What is man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him rule over the works of your hands, putting all things under his feet’ (Ps 8:5-7).

Man is an ‘icon of God’ and this divine condition of being an icon is expressed in those highest and most qualified features which express the powerful truth, goodness and beauty of our humanity: *intelligence* (which searches for truth), *conscience* (which discerns good), and *freedom* (the necessary context for intelligence and conscience to be able to express themselves to the full) (GS, nn. 15-16-17).

In what way can ‘mercy’ and ‘compassion’ make us ‘more men’ (not supermen), that is to say increasingly congruous and consistent with our vocation, and suited to our vocation, our shared life project, which is to expound ever more, perform always better, and express in an increasingly practical way, the *divine spark* that we bear within ourselves?

I would like to attempt to make a distinction between *mercy* (which is ordered by God and enjoyed in its radiation in our lives – a gift from on high) and *compassion* (which is shared in a transversal sense) from the point of view of moving from *giving* to *giving with*.

In order to understand the radical humanisation that mercy when received in life can produce, one has to first go, with a good dose of courage and honesty, to where the *humanum* has reached its most brutal deformation and come to generate a *banal* evil: banal because abyssal and at the same time normal because it is no longer seen as evil, because it is relativised, and as such becomes an absolute evil, that is to say free to pervade the vital centres of human existence, without fearing any serious resistance to its diffusion.

Mercy and compassion (giving and giving with) humanise us because they allow us to understand ourselves anew, not only at an ideal level but also, and above all else, at a practical level. The depth of the mercy that is offered by God is intertwined with the abyss of the sin of man. Man

when reached by the mercy of God can see ahead of himself into the distance and deeply at one and the same time.

**‘My God, these are very troublesome times...Yes, my God, it seems that you cannot do a great deal to change current circumstances, yet they also form part of this life. I do not invoke your responsibility; later you will declare that we are responsible. And almost with every beat of my heart, my certainty grows: you cannot help us, it is for us to help you, to defend unto the last your house that is in us’** (cf. Etty Hillesum, *Diario 1941-1943*). Etty in Auschwitz did not look for a useful God but, rather, tried to make herself useful for her unfortunate companions, believing strongly that she was helping God in this way. The witness of Hillesum was a response that went beyond reason without being against reason. The way in which she thought through and addressed the tragedy of her people became the pathway by which to sanctify the name of God: not justifying evil but making the mercy and the compassion of God experienced in faith operative at the side of, and within, evil. Her witness evokes that powerful witness of the Jew Jesus on the cross: a God who invites us to follow Him not because His ministry has become understood but because His love has been experienced. Thus the *mysterium iniquitatis* of Auschwitz refers back to the *mysterium dilectionis* of God. So that man never ceases to look for God and God never ceases to amaze man! **We can thus read mercy in terms of *generation*.**

### ***Pietas as a generator of real and true man***

The man who is awoken by mercy-compassion to encounter with the other, and with the other in pain, in frailty and in disorientation, is born in co-presence with the other, whether an individual or society, as a comfort in suffering, as support in weakness, and as direction in loss.

A birth to our own truth at no small cost, men of hospitality we become, leaving behind us that man of hostility who is unreal and false, who reads himself as a wolf, as a fox, and as indifference to the other in the name of a limitless avidity. A constant struggle against the lust of self-assertion at the cost of offending the other, slaves of the will to power and not made free by the sweet force of compassion. Free from what hinders the unwinding of love.

### ***Pietas as a generator of communion and of dignity***

Looking at, drawing near to and stretching out one’s hand to the other, and to the other in pain, being moved and directed by nothing else than a free and gratuitous intention to do good, are the deeds of mercy-compassion that generate the miraculous event of communion in which each person

is restored to his dignity: each person, starting with who is in a state of wellbeing – physical, mental, social and religious. Those who through ‘*pietas*’ dwell in their kindly minds and wise hearts are in fact freed from an ego walled up in itself and are restored to the other, and to the other in a malaise with many names, in a closeness made up of friendship, joint participation, sharing and solidarity.

Communion in stewardship is born and this is an event involving the liberation of man from isolation in order to begin specifically with who is well, whose risk is not knowing how to be reflected in – and not seeing himself reflected in – the poor man who is in front of him: flesh of his flesh who implores eyes, arms and crumbs; whose risk is not being born to awareness that dignity and nobility lie in becoming his own truth – being with and for the other, a servant of his joy and his need. Without forms of exhibitionism, without forms of self-exaltation, and without getting something back, one is dealing here simply with performing our own role as men – doing what is right.

***Pietas as a generator of the impossible, the transformation of a wolf into a lamb, of a criminal into a new creature***

By its nature, mercy-compassion is all-embracing, to the point of making the victim the source of the redemption of his torturer by the pathway of a mad and scandalous forgiveness.

Indeed, the unforgivable is forgiven by a very personal and unilateral decision, independently, that is to say, of the request and the response of the other. A setback is always possible, in the lucid awareness of the recreating energy that is inherent in it, a force that is able to restore he who does wrong to his own truth of being generated and to a good life in meekness, humility and non-violence. A man of compassion does not want the death of the criminal; he wants him to convert and to live. He will never say that this man is stupid and bad – only that this man, who is destined for wisdom and goodness, commits acts of foolishness and wickedness. Faced with these, there is only the frankness of fraternal correction, not holding back forgiveness, and a readiness to give of oneself as a never-ending opportunity for ever new beginnings.

‘*Pietas*’ makes the victim the redemption of his attacker, looking at him, on the one hand, with eyes of lucidity – what he does is wrong, and, on the other, with the eyes of truth and mercy: he is an unrepeatable and inviolable person and only love is the power that is able to regenerate him and restore him to his dignity of being a call to good. This is hope against all hope that never leaves the inhuman with the last word!

### *Pietas as a generator of a high and true image of God*

The religious tradition of humanity – that which follows Abraham for example – translates its own experience of God, defining Him linguistically as ‘the Good, the Merciful, the Benevolent, the Compassionate...’. God is seen as the Creator of man in His image and likeness, as the origin that has placed in man a yearning for good in mercy and in compassion, that is to say in what is truly right!

We have before us a truly high and noble reading of God and of man, who is an image of God in space and time. This is an image that has in Christ its most important and complete achievement: he in whom everything is told and an effective witness to the impassioned involvement of God in the events of man: his birth, his day, his cross and his empty tomb. In Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the directing Word, is called GOOD (Lk 18:19), LOVE (1 Jn 18:19), and his commandment is ‘love one another’, and he bestows upon it feelings of mercy and compassion.

This is the alphabet for a writing of history in justice. A severe discourse for a man ‘jealous of God’, his being You who generates and directs, who throws a shadow over wanting to be creators of ourselves, our own name, our own rules, and our own destiny. The disappearance of God seems to be a prior condition for the appearance of man, an event of conquest starting with the prior elimination of the rival. This is the decisive trial from which nobody can withdraw. Adam, on the one hand, and Jesus, on the other, are the symbols of two possible and different outcomes.

Christ is YES to the logic of giving, to a sonship welcomed in graces and a fraternity welcomed in love, in mercy, in meekness and in humility. *Sonship and fraternity* whose summit as witness and narration is the *cross*. In the cross, God reveals Himself as a victim who expresses the victims of all places and all ages. In the cross, all suffering is taken on and recapitulated. In it, in addition, God reveals Himself as a victim who includes in his love all people and each person. In the cross, lastly, God reveals Himself as a victim who is responsible for his persecutor, never surrendering to the idea that man can be denied the possibility of touching his own truth with his own hands, that truth seen in his forgiveness, which is a force that is able to convert the torturer into being merciful and compassionate, in his own image.

Differently from God in Christ, every other *idol* breaks and calls for the blood of another, the blood of its enemy.

### *Pietas as a generator of rationality*

Reason finds itself in compassion: true compassion is NOT simply an emotional response, it is a solid commitment based on reason.

Thus a true approach of compassion towards other people does not change, even if they behave negatively. One is dealing here with freeing human reason from its reduction to calculating and dominating rationality; retrieving its intuitive rationality, a rationality that is capable, that is to say, of reading inside phenomena and what appears; grasping the meaning and the message that are released from them and which are given to man. This is a perspective in which the phenomenon of compassion appears as a highly reasonable fact for a personal and social approach to living that is very human and very humanising, moving starting with the other, taking care to cause as little pain as possible.

### **The grammar of compassion**

To speak about Jesus is like speaking about ourselves, our own origins, our own ‘why’, and our own approach. Knowing that Jesus was generated by Love is to know that we are generated by Love; knowing that he was sent by Love is to know that we are sent by Love to write, in his likeness, the book of our days and our hours with the alphabet of love; and knowing that he was received by Love is to know that we are destined to be loved, in order to love, for ever.

In his – in our – special way of reading, and in his – in our – grammar-syntax of mercy-compassion, where compassion is equivalent to moving out of oneself to the other in himself, in his weakness-vulnerability that has become a cry which is a wound that reawakens awareness, on the one hand, of one’s own vulnerability and, on the other, of the ethical imperative to take care of him in a sequence of approaches and actions that constitute a declination of compassion.

These are its chapters:

- Being in front (**PRAE**) of the other who is in pain, respecting his irreducible otherness (Ap 3:20).
- Providing company (**CUM**) to the other, sharing his pains, hopes and disappointments.
- Making space in oneself (**IN**) for the other in all his suffering.
- Placing oneself at the feet (**SUB**) of the other, a servant to his need and his joy in a dedication that is solely concerned about his wellbeing (**PRO**).

This is the style of Christ, a model for the style of his disciples, a relating to others that requires a steady emptying of the self of what is not in conformity with the feeling, the thinking, the wanting,

the acting and the stance of Christ (Gal 2:20), and where co-existing with the other and pro-existing for the other, and the other in pain, is the basis of the style of his friends, the style of man.

The *pathos* of God generates the *ethos* of the disciple, where ethics is translating out of oneself the compassion of God in Christ for each person and where aesthetics is translating it into terms that are increasingly authentic.

Beauty is being able to say ‘take, eat me; take, drink me’ to everyone, in the lucid awareness of belonging to the totality of the world in faithfulness to the village in which we are staying! Compassion is particular and global; it is moving out of the great evil of narcissism; it is a response to knowing I with a ‘you’ and with an ‘us’ and to knowing ‘mine’ with an ‘ours’.

This is a reason for great joy; yes, indeed, joy is the fruit of compassion, it is indissolubly directed towards free and gratuitous self-giving, finally free from the weight and the sadness of being curved in on oneself, concerned about oneself.

### **In the end, which *humanised man* emerges from mercy-compassion?**

A triple profile of man emerges: *I am he who weeps; I am he who struggles; I am he who desires.*

#### **I am he who weeps**

‘Tears are the promised land; when you have reached it, you will no longer have to fear war. Indeed, God wants the soul to be afflicted so that it ceaselessly wishes to enter that land!’

‘What is purity? It is a merciful heart towards every created creature. . . And what is a merciful heart? It is the fire of the heart for every creature: for men, for the birds, for the beasts, for demons and for everything that exists. Remembering and seeing them, eyes shed tears, because of the violence of the mercy that moves the heart because of great compassion. The heart melts and cannot bear to hear or see an injury done to, or the little suffering of, any creature’ (Isaac of Syria).

God created man in His image and likeness, placing in his heart His own thinking, His own feeling and His own acting; thinking about his relationship with himself, with the other, with the creation and with God Himself, starting with the feeling of mercy-compassion, a fire that sets alight, a violence that leads one to work moved by a *pathos*, by taking care of someone in an impassioned way – measurelessly, without conditions, and without exclusions. This is becoming one’s own wished-for truth; one’s own name that is finally revealed: ‘I am he who weeps’ over everything and everybody, wounded by love for everyone and attentive to the least injury and to the smallest suffering experienced by any creature.

The tears of love that well up from God, the incipit from which everything proceeds, are visible in the tears of the Son of God who weeps for the death of a friend, who weeps for a missed appointment with the beloved city, for a life whose declination is invoking consolation and hope (Heb 5:7). These are tears that are poured into the heart of man by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5) and which through eyes become rivers that irrigate the total Adam, the whole of humanity and each person in particular.

This is the secret wish of every human being, to become his own meagre essentiality, loved to the point of weeping and loving to the point of weeping; and this is what awaits every creature: encounters in compassion, irrigated by tears that transform a desert into a garden and sterile lives into lives impassioned about law, justice and peace in joy.

### **I am he who struggles**

The call to become one's own reality involves a descent into hell, into one's own depths, with a view to a diagnosis without removals, denials and refusals, and with a view to a judgement that inexorably generates disappointment and disenchantment. Awareness of having to weep for the pain of the world and of bread broken for the life of the world opens one's eyes to one's self – I am far from what from constitutes me in truth.

It is a descent, in addition, with a view to a decision, the daily emptying of the heart of non-benevolent thinking, feeling and wishing; a decision that makes man resist and fight against everything that internally obstructs his birth in line with the 'behold man!', Christ, and 'behold God!', the Father of Christ, the benevolent, the indulgent and the merciful.

Here lies the 'battle of the heart', the making of one's negative intimate self into a void filled with the seed of divine love, a recreating energy that is able to transform deserts into pacified and pacifying oases that are without fences and enmities.

The drawing near to the promised land of compassion passes, therefore, by way of a severe struggle against oneself, starting with laying an axe to the roots of every perverse reading of identity – an exclusive and excluding reading that judges, condemns, despises, marginalises and persecutes the diverse in the name of one's own religion, one's own morality, one's own ethnic group...

Through a reading of our own identity in terms of otherness, we are generated by others, we are sent to others, and we are stewards for others; in ecclesial terms we are generated by the Other, God in Christ; and sent by the Other, God in Christ, to others, in line with the recommendation and

the style received from the Other, including everyone in our own act of love in meekness and humility.

This is a struggle, secondly, that is an axe laid to the root of a system of values that adjudges ‘out’ those who do not adhere to those values with all their hearts, with all their minds, with all their strength, and with all their substance: business, success, a manic attention to image and the protection of privacy. This is a system that sets in motion a reading of the other in terms of competition, seeing the other as a rival: a person, a group... We have enough of everything but not enough reasons for meaning. It is the task of those who still remember what it means to think, feel and live with the passion of love to dwell in this reality with the vestments of concerned and stewarding care so as not to allow themselves to be robbed of what they have that is most intimate and sacred – their hearts of flesh.

This is a constant and daily struggle so that we may be able to look with tenderness at those who see only money and only success in money and those who, with their eyes fixed to the television, their ears sealed by headphones, are left to themselves, strangers in their own homes, and without eyes that look with tears of compassion.

### **I am he who desires**

‘To desire’ is shaped by ‘considering’; it is the same as ‘feeling the absence of’. Desire is a highly emotional impulse written into man in a clear and intense way and is inexorably perceivable. First of all, desire defines man as ‘being without’, as incomplete, as lacking, and as poor. Secondly, it defines man as ‘being in need’; a need that has to be met. My hunger desires bread; my ignorance desires culture; and my affection desires relationships and love that are received and given.

Eyes are desired, one’s own eyes and the eyes of other people; eyes whose joy transmits joy, whose thoughtfulness transmits reflection, and whose tears transmit compassion. Desiring these eyes means that prayer for the gift of tears is simply desiring to become a man, and nothing else but a man; the same desire of God to make Himself man to tell man that he who does not love to the point of weeping, to the point of self-fragmentation, is not God and is not man.

This is the core from which everything moves and to which everything refers back; the precious pearl for which it is worthwhile selling the idolatry of the self, lust for possession and unredeemed eros; and the point of departure for an economy, for politics and for religion with a human face.