**OUR FRANCISCAN EXPERIENCE OF THE MERCY OF GOD**

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On the day of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in 2015, Pope Francis said, “I have decided to announce an Extraordinary Jubilee which has at its centre the mercy of God. It will be a Holy Year of Mercy. We want to live in the light of the word of the Lord: ‘Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful’” (cf. Lk 6:36).

William Barclay, in his *New Testament Words,* (p.280), made a telling comment about attributing mercy or compassion to God. He wrote: “The notable thing about this word is that to a Greek its use about anyone who was divine would seem completely and utterly and totally incredible (278). The Greeks believed in a God who could not feel. To them a divine being who was moved with compassion was incredible (279). The idea of a God who could be moved with compassion, and of a life whose motive force was pitying love, must have come to such a world literally like a new revelation. We think it a commonplace that God is love, and that the Christian life is love. We would do well to remember that we would never have known that without the revelation of Jesus Christ, of whom it is so often and so amazingly said that he was moved with compassion.”

In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, I thought that we may benefit from a reflection on our Franciscan experience of the mercy of God and by our being led into prayer as the result. I believe that we can be greatly helped if we accompany St Francis as he experienced the mercy of God, as described in the Franciscan sources, as in *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents,* also in the *Omnibus of Sources* (not to be discarded), and in the Italian *Fonti Francescane.*

As we proceed with Francis, model of all Franciscans (*forma Minorum* for those who fondly remember the latin), we can compare his experience of God’s mercy with our own.

Francis knew and experienced the mercy of God even while he was still living as a spoilt youth. From all accounts, he was no saint then. Francis’s self-assessment later on leaves no doubts about it. He said, "If Christ had pursued so great a criminal with such mercy, I surely think he would be much more grateful to God than I.” That’s quoting St Bonaventure’s *Major Life (Legenda Major)* Ch VI.6).

If that self-denigration wasn’t enough, the *Fioretti* quote Francis as saying: “Since those most holy eyes have not seen among sinners anyone more vile, no more incompetent, nor a greater sinner than me to perform that marvellous work that he intends to do… He has not found a more vile creature on the earth and therefore he has chosen me to confound the nobility (etc.)” (*Fioretti* Ch 10).

St Francis’s biographer, Friar Thomas of Celano, tells us, “At the very time when he, not knowing how to become tame, was aroused by the venom of the ancient serpent, the divine vengeance, or rather the divine anointing, came upon him. This aimed, first of all, at recalling his erring judgment by bringing distress to his mind and affliction to his body” (1 Cel 3). “Divine anointing” is rendered in Italian as “mercy”. So God’s vengeance is carried out in mercy!

Perhaps, perhaps not, we were no saints either before we decided to join the Franciscans, or after, for that matter. But like Francis, after some reflection, we probably recognise that we did not choose God but that God chose us, and called us, and has kept us as Franciscans. I believe that the greatest grace in all that is that God has kept us in our Franciscan vocation.

However, Francis did not presume to be kept in his vocation without the mercy of God keeping him faithful. According to Celano and repeated by Bonaventure, he said, “I can still have sons and daughters. Do not be too quick to praise me, for my future is not certain” (2Cel 133; *Major Life* 3). He didn’t comment on his poverty or obedience, but it would seem that he felt that his chastity was fragile.

Celano says that God’s mercy “aimed, first of all, at recalling his erring judgment by bringing distress to his mind and affliction to his body.” (1 Cel Ch II.3). There we note a recurring theme: God’s mercy brings us distress and affliction. It seems to be a contradiction, but there we have it in the experience of Francis, and perhaps in our own.

Julian of Speyer, in *The Life of St Francis*, says the same: “Thus, the divine mercy first began – for his own benefit and for many others – to call back the vagabond with physical troubles and forced him, worn down by a lengthy illness, to think differently about things than he had been accustomed.” (Speyer, Ch I.2).

This could well have been our own experience, and it could be at any time in the future. God’s mercy, the “divine anointing”, does not always fall lightly upon us. A bodily accident, a serious illness, a disappointment, a failure one way or another, has proved to be, with hindsight, God’s merciful intervention in our lives. It’s worth reflecting on our own experience. I for one am aware of an example of each of those mishaps in my own life and have thanked God for his mercy, perhaps not at the time but as things turned out.

The mishap that was eventually resolved by the mercy of God could also have been for some of us a falling out with our family over our following our Franciscan vocation. Francis, for example, hid from his father “in a certain cave. Julian of Speyer says, “He emerged from there rarely … and did not stop imploring the divine mercy there with tears and fasting to rescue him from the clutches of his persecutors.” (Speyer, Ch I.7).

Celano finally lifts the burden of Francis’s painful soul-searching: “One day, when he had invoked the Lord’s mercy with his whole heart, the Lord showed him what he must do” (1 Cel.7).

At some time after his conversion, says Celano: “[Francis] was marvelling at the Lord’s mercy in the kindness shown to him.” “Marvelling at the Lord’s mercy” The Italian text, in translation, reads: “full of admiration for the Lord’s mercy.”

Celano continues: “… he wished that God would show him the course of life for him and his brothers, and he went to a place of prayer, as he so often did” (1Cel.26). We are reminded of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, where he went aside to pray before making all of his important decisions.

Francis, says Julian of Speyer, “gave thanks to divine mercy for all that he had received from the pope in confirming their rule” (Speyer, Ch IV.22).

Celano adds: “Returning from Rome, they met “a man carrying bread in his hand and he gave it to them, and left. Marvelling in their hearts, they eagerly encouraged one another to a greater trust in divine mercy” (1 Cel.34).

So here we have Francis praying, marvelling, full of admiration, and giving thanks for God’s mercy lavished on him and the friars, and their encouraging one another to trust in God’s compassion and his future mercies.

Upon reflection and prayer, our own Franciscan experience may move us to marvel at the divine mercy shown to each of us.

Francis discovered God’s mercy in everything, in creation, in redemption and in salvation. St Bonaventure, in his *Major Life,* 8,1, wrote that: “Compassion ... had filled the heart of Francis. It united him to God in prayer. It transformed him into Christ. It led him to devote himself humbly to his neighbour. It showed him the way to restore harmony with the whole of creation and it enabled him to return to the state of primeval innocence.”

Francis wrote in his *Earlier Rule*, “Let us love the Lord God who has given and gives to each one of us our whole body, our whole soul and our whole life, who has created, redeemed and will save us by his mercy alone, who did and does everything good for us” (Ch XXIII.8).

One great good that Francis ascribed to divine mercy was the forgiveness of his sins. He prayed often, as we do, the Our Father: “Forgive us our trespasses.” He added: “through your ineffable mercy” in his *Paraphrase of the Our Father*, 7.

Francis often expressed in his daily prayer life his awareness of the presence of God’s mercy. In his Office of the Passion, he selected verses from the Psalms or made up verses of his own to acknowledge God’s mercy, such as:

“The Lord has made his salvation known …On that day the Lord has sent his mercy” (in the *Office of Matins*, Psalm IX.3).

“God has sent his mercy and his truth. He has snatched my life from the strongest of my enemies” (in the *Office at Prime*, Psalm III.5.)

“Hear me, Lord, because your mercy is kind. Look upon me according to the greatness of your mercies … You, O God, are my protector, my God, my mercy” (in another Office, Psalm XII.7 and 10).

After Francis received the Stigmata, Celano says, “God multiplied his mercy on him, and he contracted a serious disease of the eyes.” (2 Cel. 98). That harks back to what we have already commented on, that God’s mercy brought affliction to Francis’s body. But in this case Francis wanted it this way “because [says Celano] he had not yet filled up in his flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ,”

After the number of men joining Francis had increased prodigiously, Celano says, “It hurt him that some … had forgotten their original simplicity … So he prayed for God’s mercy to set his sons free and fervently begged that they be preserved in the grace given to them” (2Cel.104).

Francis, soon to die, reserved a special blessing for Assisi, invoking the mercy of God. According to the *Legend of Perugia* (98), he prayed aloud:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Father of mercies, do not look upon our ingratitude, but recall to mind the infinite love that you have shown to this city.” By the way, Francis deviated from St Paul here, who, in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, called “the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father” (2 Cor 1:3). Not much of a slip, when we consider that whenever Francis referred to Scripture, he quoted it from memory.

At his death, sounding to a mournful friar inappropriately joyful, Francis excused himself, saying, “Brother, let me rejoice in the Lord and sing his praises in the midst of my infirmities: by the grace of the Holy Spirit I am so closely united to my Lord that, through his goodness (mercy), I can rejoice in the Most High himself” (*Legend of Perugia*, 64).

I’ll conclude my reflection on St Francis’s and our experience of the Mercy of God with his Blessing on Brother Leo, which we are happy to receive as his blessing on each one of us:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May He show His face to you and be *merciful* to you.

May He turn His countenance to you and give you peace.

May the Lord bless you,

And may the Lord bless all our Franciscan brothers and sisters.