Instruments of Divine Mercy in This Age of Unbelief

I invite you to reflect on the Marist Way of being instruments of divine mercy. What does divine mercy look like, and, more importantly, what is its "end game"? What does God intend to effect in us human beings through his mercy? How does it relate to the mission of the Society of Mary to this secular age?

Rather than try to define God's mercy, let's try to describe it. Pope Francis, in his General Audience of January 13, 2016: 4, The Mercy of God, provides several images to help us contemplate the mercy of God. "It looks *like a mother who looks upon her child, full of tenderness, compassion, and forgiveness."*[1] "It is *patient*, that is, "'slow to anger,' literally, 'of *great breadth*, that is, having a broad capacity of forbearance and patience. *God knows how to wa*it; his time is not the impatient one of man; he is like *the wise farmer who knows how to wait,* allowing time for the good seed to grow, despite the weeds (cf. Mt 13:24-30)."[2] "It is *love, which takes the first step, which does not depend on human merit* but on immense gratuitousness. It is *divine solicitude that nothing can impede, not even sin,* because it is able to go beyond sin, to overcome evil and forgive it."[3] In addition to forgiving sin, God's mercy protects, heals the brokenhearted, uplifts the downtrodden, and cares for all his children. Fr. Chris Alar, MIC, sums up God's mercy as loving the unlovable and forgiving the unforgivable.

Above all, "This merciful God is *faithful in his mercy*, about which St Paul says, "If you are not faithful to him, he will remain faithful, for he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). *Faithfulness in mercy is the very being of God*. It is who God is. For this reason, *God is totally and always trustworthy*."[4]

Note how God's mercy is transformative. It leads to conversion and repentance from sin. For Christians, that means being reborn in Christ through the waters of baptism and sharing in the divine life. That is a pure gift and the expression of God's mercy, so much so that we can say God enjoys being merciful. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). Our joy[5] at being recipients of divine mercy moves us to become instruments of divine mercy and to share that joy with others. In other words, we are called to be merciful because mercy has been shown to us. It is the *distinguishing characteristic of a child of God and a disciple of Jesus.*

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[1] The Lord is "merciful": this word evokes a tender approach like that of a mother toward her child. Indeed, the Hebrew term used in the Bible evokes the viscera or even the maternal womb. Therefore, the image it suggests is that of a God who is moved and who softens for us like a mother when she takes her child in her arms, wanting only to love, protect, help, ready to give everything, even herself. This is the image that this term evokes. A love, therefore, which can be defined in the best sense as "visceral". Then it is written that the Lord is "gracious", in the sense of having grace, he has compassion and, in his greatness, he bends down to those who are weak and poor, ever ready to welcome, to understand, to forgive. www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160113_udienza-generale.html.

[2] https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160113_udienza-generale.html

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] He is like the father in the parable recounted in the Gospel of Luke (cf. Lk 15:11-32): a father who does not withdraw in resentment at the younger son for having forsaken him, but on the contrary, he continues to await him — he begot him — and then he runs to meet him and embraces him. He does not even let him explain — as though he had covered his mouth — so great is his love and joy at having found him again. Then the father also goes to call the older son who is offended and does not want to join in the celebration, the son who always stayed home and who lived more as a servant than as a son. To him too, the father bends down, invites him to enter, tries to open his heart to love, so that no one is excluded from the celebration of mercy. Mercy is a celebration! Ibid.

That the Church should lead with mercy is at the heart of what Fr. Colin envisioned when he spoke about the need for a "new" Church – a Church with a Marian face. As Pope Francis mentioned above, "[The Divine Mercy] looks *like a mother who looks upon her child, full of tenderness, compassion, and forgiveness."* Fr. Jan Snijders, SM, comments on the link between mercy and maternal imagery in the Bible, "A male-dominated society, run on masculine principles, cannot but neglect that other aspect of God that is so central to his self-revelation. Isn't it striking that, when God's mercy is mentioned, so often female imagery takes over?"[6] No wonder Fr. Colin associated being instruments of divine mercy with the spirit of Mary.

Mary is called the Mother of Mercy because she is the mother of Jesus who is Divine Mercy incarnate. She obtains God's mercy for us through her intercession. St. John Paul explains, "Mary is also Mother of Mercy because it is to her that Jesus entrusts His Church and all humanity. At the foot of the Cross, when she accepts John as her son, when she asks together with Christ forgiveness from the Father for those who do not know what they do (cf. Lk 23:34), Mary experiences, in perfect docility to the Spirit, the richness and the universality of God's love, which opens her heart and enables it to embrace the whole human race. Thus Mary becomes the mother of each and every one of us, the mother who obtains for us divine mercy."[7]

Her life is also a life of mercy. She accepted the request to be the mother of Jesus. She went in haste to attend to the needs of her cousin, Elizabeth. She interceded with her son on behalf of the young married couple at Cana. As Jesus' first disciple and model of discipleship, we can assume she assisted her Son in his ministry by her prayers and support. Finally, Mary accompanied Jesus on his way of the Cross and stood by him at its foot.

Fr. Colin envisioned a "new" Church with Mary as the face that the Church needs to put forward in this secular age. That translates into a Church leading with compassion (mercy), a common theme of the *National Consensus of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.* The synodal consultations mentioned several areas where there exists a tension between how to walk with people who struggle with the Church's teaching while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church. "People want the Church to be a home for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect. They want the Church to meet people where they are, wherever they are, and walk with them rather than judging them; to build real relationships through care and authenticity, not superiority."[8] Yes, divine mercy seeks conversion but, as mentioned above, "*God knows how to wa*it, his time is not the impatient one of man; he is like *the wise farmer who knows how to wait,* allowing time for the good seed to grow, in spite of the weeds (cf. Mt 13:24-30)."[9]

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[6] Snijders, Jan, The Age of Mary, page 68, 70.

[7] St. John Paul II, Splendor of Truth, 120

[8] *National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission,* pages 7 – 8.

[9] In the 3rd century, there were empire-wide persecutions of Christians. All citizens were required to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods in the presence of officials. A certificate of compliance was then issued. Those who refused faced threats of property confiscation, torture and death. Pope Saint Cornelius and Bishop Saint Cyprian were among those arrested and martyred. This sparked an internal conflict in the Church about what to do with those who had complied with the sacrifices. Both saints supported reconciliation and mercy toward the *lapsi*, after they repented and did public penance. Then they could be restored to full communion with the Church. This position

Fr. Craig Larkin, SM, captured the above sentiments this way, "A Marian Church is a Church that makes a choice for compassion over competition; an option for relationship over dogmatism; for humility over power; for service over dominance. It is a Church that pushes its boundaries to include all, rather than one which defines boundaries to contain the chosen."

That translates into Fr. Colin's vision of a "new" Church that leads with God's mercy and compassion. She, too, needs to hear as much as she needs to proclaim that God bends down to those who are weak and poor, ever ready to welcome, understand, and forgive. A Church that is more humble and contrite, that speaks softly and listens attentively stands a better chance to be heard in our present age, where religious discourse has become more aggressive, strident, loud, intolerant, and violent.

Given the times in which we live, explaining the truths of our faith remains necessary and urgent, especially when opponents are strident and aggressive in their criticisms of the most basic tenets of our beliefs. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. *But do this with gentleness and respect*" (1 Peter 3:15). That falls under the umbrella of the spiritual works of mercy. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently" (2447).[10]

Working with our critics, other Christians, and other religions to make the world more just, compassionate, and merciful falls under the umbrella of corporal works of mercy. According to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God…" (2447)[11] To act in the spirit of Mary is to be intentional about being instruments of divine mercy, through which the Risen Christ reveals himself to the world.

That may be the more successful strategy for evangelizing this secular age. This approach is in keeping with what St. Francis is reported to have said, "Preach the Gospel always. Use words when necessary." Being instruments of divine mercy[12] rather than rational discourse may be the most effective way to preach the Gospel and introduce people to Christ and, eventually, the Church, his mystical body on Earth. Jesus certainly resembled Mary in his facial features. It stands to reason that the Church should lead with a Marian face, which Pope Francis likens to "*a mother who looks upon her child, full of tenderness, compassion, and forgiveness."* That was Fr. Colin's intuition, which we call the Marist Way of being Catholic and Christian in this age of unbelief.

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eventually won the day but only after many heated and contentious debates. https://mycatholic.life/saints/saints-of-the-liturgical-year/saints-cornelius-and-cyprian/.
This pastoral approach rejected a Church only for the perfect, recalling Jesus' words that he had come not for the righteous but for sinners. With the parable of the weeds and the wheat (Matt. 13: 24-43) in mind, the Church will be a mixture of weeds and wheat, of saints and sinners. The separation of the two will occur at death and be revealed to everyone at the General Judgment. Until then, the Church will be a conduit of the divine mercy, meaning sinners will be given every opportunity to repent and grow in grace. That is how to understand "a Church that pushes its boundaries to include all, rather than one which defines boundaries to contain the chosen." This is contemporary way of echoing these words of Jesus, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

[10] Vaticana, Libreria Editrice. Catechism of the Catholic Church . United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Kindle Edition.

[11] Ibid.
[12] For a list of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, go to *The Catechism of the Catholic Chu*rch, #2447.