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153

MISSIONARY OF THE HOLY FACE

BLESSED MARIA PIERINA DE MICHELI

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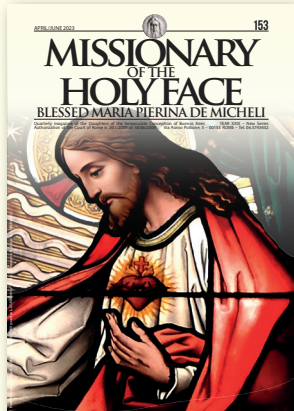


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May is a month that is dear to Blessed Maria Pierina De Micheli. In fact, she made her perpetual vows to the Congregation of the Daughters of the Immaculate Conception of Buenos Aires on 23 May 1915. She had thus definitively entered the Institute founded by Venerable Mother Eufrasia Iaconis, in Buenos Aires. Her self-giving to God was total and, from that moment on, she professed religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to the Daughters of the Immaculate. Her life became a continuous offering of love and sacrifice, not only to imitate the example of Mary and entrust herself to her maternal care, but also to spread devotion to the Holy Face of Jesus, in accordance with what the Virgin herself had requested of her.

We know how seriously she took this commitment and how she brought it forth with zeal and courage, despite all the difficulties and obstacles. From her Diary, we discover that there was no lack of spiritual suffering and attacks from the devil, who did not want devotion to the Holy Face to spread. However, Mother Maria Pierina never lost hope and always abandoned herself trustingly to the Lord, even when the trial proved more challenging and everything appeared to be collapsing on her.

Those who know about the life of the Blessed Mother therefore consider the month of May fundamental to her existence, since the promise of her vows inserted her permanently into God's project and made her willing to listening to the Spirit.

It is worth recalling that the Mother's spiritual life was marked by participation in the Sacraments, especially in the Eucharist and Confession. Hence, here is an invitation to reflect on the gift of indulgences that the Church offers to her members, in order to free them from all the remnants of sin. It is worth taking advantage of this richness for our spiritual life.

The Editorial Staff



THE GIFT OF INDULGENCES: AT THE HEAT OF THE MYSTERY OF INDULGENCES

The following is a Lectio Magistralis by Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, Major Penitentiary, delivered on Tuesday, 21 March 2023, during the XXXIII Course on the Internal Forum, promoted by the Apostolic Penitentiary.

The theme of this *Lectio* is the gift of indulgences.

One might wonder at the meaning of this, at a time marked by an ever more frightening secularism that makes men and women in general, and at times even our faithful, incapable of lifting their gaze to Heaven, withdrawn as they are in the things of the world, albeit even necessary earthly needs, but distracted from the Only One necessary, from what is truly indispensable: a gaze towards Heaven

and a personal relationship with God.

However, it is precisely in a secularized epoch as ours, that an in-depth study on the topic, gains a profound prophetic value, especially for min-



isters of reconciliation.

I will structure this Lectio into three areas, as together we take a look at the doctrinal perspective, followed by the historical one and lastly, the spiritual-pastoral one.

1. The doctrinal perspective

“An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints”. (*Enchiridion Indungentiarum*, n.1).

It is evident that we are at the heart of the mystery of Redemption, the heart of the work of Christ, who took on flesh, died and rose for us and for our salvation.

The temporal dimension is of particular importance in understanding the doctrine of indulgences, to which the text refers, and which highlights a fact that is often neglected: the structural historical dimension of Christianity.

The numerous “reductions” of the Catholic



faith which we have before our eyes: the moral decline and the spiritual one, the social and humanitarian decline, call us with ever greater urgency to attentively avoid mistakes and even heresy which proved to be devastating in the past. The historical dimension of Christianity is the first great antidote against any gnostic-sounding tendency or even explicitly gnostic tendency, that definitely drives mankind to false self-redeeming ideas, linked to subjective knowledge.

If salvation is not linked to the historical event of the Incarnation and Christ’s death on the Cross – and obviously to His Resurrection – it is not Christian salvation! From too many sectors, the sirens of the world are ringing in unison so that faith in the Risen Christ is reduced to a vague deism, emptied of the fact of Incarnation, moralistic but without the reasons for authentic morality, and with vague therapeutic feelings, which link the judgment of truth and good, only to the

individual and to one's own "passing feelings".

We know how lethal this danger could be for our souls and for those of the faithful entrusted to us. The danger is widespread and it is necessary and urgent to emphasize that Christ is the Only Saviour and that salvation can only come through Him. Any other possibility of salvation, if fulfilled, is only fulfilled thanks to Jesus on the Cross and not without the mediation of His Body, the Church.

Our Saviour, true God and true Man, gave all of Himself. He shed His Blood for the Salvation of humanity. That Blood, a single drop of which could have saved the world ("*Cuius una stilla saluum facere totum mundum*"), was abundantly, indeed, totally shed by our Saviour, in an overabundance of mercy, which we will never completely comprehend nor be sufficiently grateful for.

And such an abundance of mercy, perennially updated and renewed in the sacrament of Reconciliation, sees the Church as its first custodian. This is the reason why "authoritatively", that is, using the Apostolic authority that Christ Himself conferred on her, the Church, with wisdom and prudence, draws from the treasure of divine Mercy, not only forgiveness for the sins committed by the faithful after Baptism, but also the remission of the temporal punishment linked to them.

The joyful announcement of indulgences is thus only one: it is possible to become saints and it is possible to live in a saintly way already on this earthly life, welcoming the gift of Divine Mercy, every time that it will be necessary, and living permanently within the loving embrace of God, who always renews His "yes", also through the gift of indulgences.

In a horizon that is secularized even in its language such as the one in which we are immersed, it is not easy to speak about indulgences or the remission of temporal punishment. I think, however, that one can adequately present this fact of faith, by interpreting it in a relational way: like the beloved who always has her heart open to her beloved and yearns for him, so the soul is called to a permanent tension towards the Lord: a tension that is fed, oriented and permanently supported by the ecclesial gift of indulgences.

Above all, partial indulgences (which I could describe as "weekday indulgences"), which we can obtain several times a day, by reciting a short prayer, making a penitential gesture, reading some verses from Scriptures, or making an act of charity, constantly keep our hearts

open to God and our gaze turned towards Heaven.

And what is vocation to sainthood if not the call to look on high, to have a wounded heart and therefore open to Our Lord and His Most Blessed Mother, directing each gesture, each word, each breath to the Only One necessary, to the Lord and Saviour of our lives, of the Church and of the world?

If we pause to reflect for a moment, along with the wonder of the work of Creation and Redemption, what also emerges with clarity is that indulgences are not only part of the sphere of redemption, but that with their richness they can spur us to the third great movement in the history of salvation: sanctification. In this sense, indulgences certainly have a value as atonement, but it is always opportune to highlight also their relational and spiritual preciousness, and thus, the support they provide to personal journeys of sanctification.

A final doctrinal element of indulgences which I would like to highlight is their profoundly ecclesial dimension and their temporal transversal quality. Indulgences in fact are a gift from the Church, who draws from the unfathomable treasure of Divine



Mercy. Thus, they stir in the hearts of the faithful, the gratitude of a son for his Mother, who provides for his every need. At the same time, they strengthen the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints, because they can be obtained even for our deceased brothers and sisters, who are still on a journey of purification towards the full blessed vision. In this sense, indulgences pass through and almost tear through the space-time limits of our earthly existence and are like the foretaste of life as resurrected, which we already received in Holy Baptism and of which all too often, we are not adequately aware.

It is evident that the catechesis on indulgences can and perhaps should be a destination point, following the proclamation of Christ, of His work of Salvation, of the Church as His visible Body, of the sacraments and especially the Eucharist, as the realization of Christ's work, of the resurrection of the flesh and of eternal life, without which it is practically impossible to speak of indulgences.

Nevertheless, the curiosity and devotion of the people can often also suggest to us the opposite journey, that is, starting

from an adequate explanation of a pious practice that has obtained indulgence, it is possible to proclaim the greatness of the mystery of redemption and with it, that of sanctification.

2. Historical Perspective

From the historical point of view, when we speak of indulgences, it is indispensable to avoid a dual reductionism: one that would not like to consider any limits, sometimes not even the abuses that have taken place throughout history, and its opposite, which would like to demonize their use, hoping for their extinction.

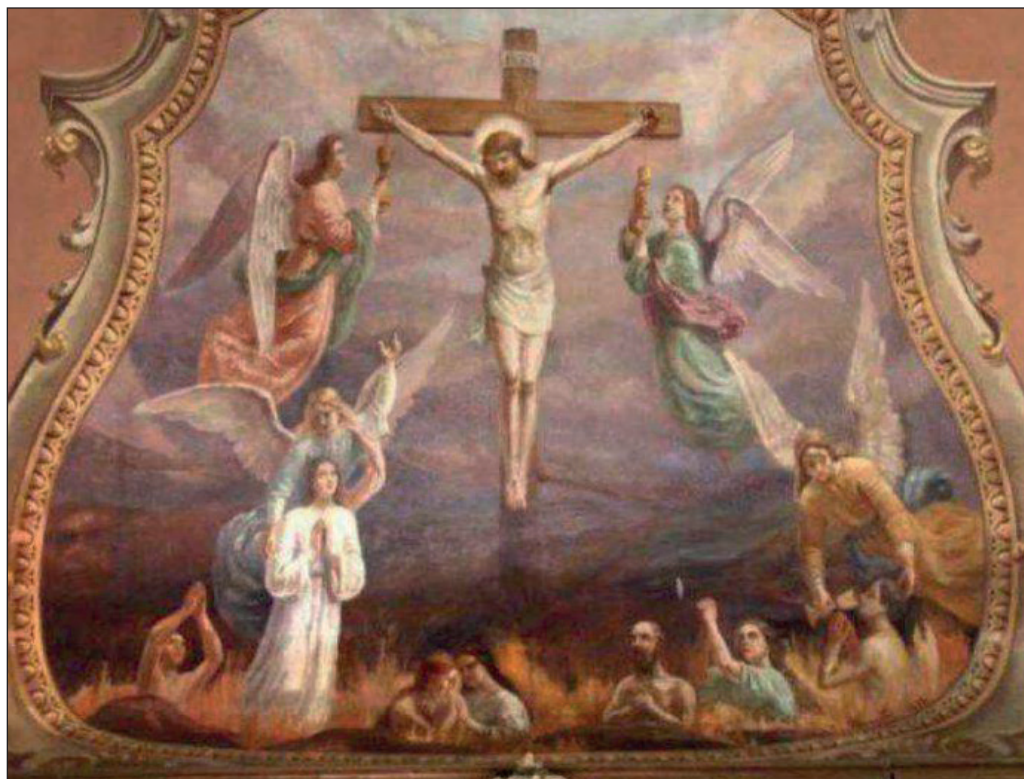
Both positions do not correspond neither to historical reality, nor to the theological substance of indulgences.

I do not intend to offer you an in-depth analysis of the Church's history of indulgences, at this time. However, we can say that the Church's understanding of the vast treasure of Divine Mercy and its resulting power to draw from it for the benefit of the faithful, occurred gradually.

If, from the first century, persecuted Christians always lifted up their prayers of suffrage also for their deceased brothers and sisters, we have to wait until the 11th century to find the indulgences as such, which are "daughters" of the *redemptiones*, in use from the 8th century in the Irish monasteries, to which we are in fact indebted for oral confession.

There is no doubt that the "monetization" of indulgences, that is, its translation into paid offerings as penance owed for sins, has certainly gone through very serious abuses. They were however, explicitly deplored and were never representative of the authentic spirit of indulgences. Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize that even the willingness to contribute to the needs of the Church through financial offerings and to invest large fortunes in this way, indicated the existence of a cultural, social and religious context whose supreme horizon was eternal salvation, for which it was possible to sacrifice even large earthly fortunes. This fact alone, which certainly is not intended to absolve the many abuses committed throughout history, compared with the current situation in our societies, would suffice to understand the radical overturning in perspective.

One should also avoid falling into the reductionist mistake of archiving and quickly silencing the issue of indulgences in the name of a misunderstood ecumenism with the Reformed communities. In fact, we know that in



those spheres, not only were indulgences delegitimized, but the very sacramental action of the Church, given by Christ the power to enact the salvation obtained by Him, was incredibly reduced and amputated, not to mention the function of Tradition and of the Magisterium.

The Council of Trent states “that the use of indulgences, most salutary to a Christian people and approved by the authority of the sacred Councils, is to be retained in the Church, and it condemns with anathema those who assert that they are useless or deny that there is in the Church, the power of granting them” (*Decrees Concerning Indulgence*, Denzinger n. 1835).

Vatican Council II does the same, asking the Supreme Authority of the Church to organically and briefly re-elaborate and simplify the doctrine on indulgences, a call that would lead to the promulgation of Saint Paul VI’s Apostolic Constitution “*Indulgentiarum doctrina*” on 1 January 1967. *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum* is the direct echo of this Apostolic Constitution and its pastoral reading.

3. Spiritual and Pastoral Perspective

I think that, in addition to knowing the real history of indulgences in order to be able to reasonably and calmly respond to potential ideological objections they may encounter, the pastors of the Church, can and should also adequately know the Apostolic Constitution of the Holy Father, Paul VI, and the exact text of the *Enchiridion*, in order to mention parts of it in their preaching and catecheses, and above all, to make intelligent use of it in the



dialogue of spiritual direction, of catecheses and perhaps, of sacramental Confession itself.

In fact, on the important journey that leads from attrition to contrition, from imperfect suffering resulting from sin to the understanding that sins offend the Lord, Our God, a fundamental role can be played by a confessor who is attentive and balanced, one who is capable of showing the true distance that sin places between the faithful and God, one who knows how to show that Divine Mercy, freely and constantly given, can bridge this distance. In this sphere too, it is necessary to be in constant equilibrium because the joy of forgiveness is directly proportional to the lucid awareness, at times disenchanted and even crude in the seriousness of the sin committed. The fact that the misunderstanding concerning the judgment of the sinful acts and their clear identification can bear positive fruits, should not be considered neither doctrinally nor pastorally.

It is not merciful to lie about sin, let alone to leave the faithful in a state of sin due to the fear of the confessor when speaking to the faithful, like an authorized father

and an caring physician.

Only a misunderstood mercy, devoid of Christian realism, can abdicate from the grave task of judge and physician that Christ entrusts to the Apostles and to their successors. That Christ entrusts to each confessor!

By using all the instruments of fraternal dialogue, of authentic spiritual fatherhood and helping the faithful perceive the infinite goodness of God and the Lord's permanent willingness to cover over and destroy every sin, with the fire of His Mercy, individual priests have the serious duty of admonishing sinners with regards to the seriousness of their condition, and if they were not to do so, they themselves would have to answer for it before God.

I think that the medicinal role of indulgences can be placed into this horizon of authentic fatherhood and of evangelical *parrhesia*. On the one hand, indulgences show the burden of the sin, which even after being absolved, still bears a penance that must be atoned and repaired for the integral salvation of the person. On the other hand, it shows the greatness, breadth and depth of Divine Mercy, which wanting all men and women to be saved, offers the objectively extraordinary opportunity to allow us to have the chains of penance owed for a sin, already unburdened in this earthly life.

With regards to this, the urgency of a suitable formation for all the pastors of the Church, emerges. Not only academic formation, about which we could say many things, but also – I would say above all – pastoral formation. And even though this term – “pastoral” – has been and continues to be widely abused, attributing to it all possible unjustified subjective creativity, under the banner of an alleged and inefficient closeness to people, we know well that all that is pastoral cannot but refer back to the only Good Shepherd.

Attention to the doctrine of indulgences keeps high the spirituality of the priest, who knows that he can obtain daily, especially through exercising the ministry entrusted to him, plenary indulgences for himself or for other deceased faithful, and that he can obtain partial indulgences many times throughout the day, simply by being who he is. Suffice it to think, for example, that partial indulgences are linked to a catechesis, offered or received, to the recitation of the Magnificat, of the *Sub tuum praesidium*, or even just making the sign of the Cross. How many times does a priest make the sign of the Cross during the day, from the moment he opens his eyes in the morning, even before

leaving his bed, to when he closes them at night, entrusting his entire existence to Divine Mercy in the *Nunc dimittis*?

If the quality of the spiritual life of priests is high, even through knowledge, familiarity and the use of indulgences, the holy people of God cannot but also benefit from this.

The very conditions that are applied to obtain indulgences are a joyful pastoral and spiritual journey to take constantly, both as sacred ministers and as lay faithful.

The conditions of having confession, of having received holy Communion, of reciting the Creed and praying according to the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff, as a whole, represent a true and proper spiritual itinerary, which if correctly made, is capable of going from hostility with God to full communion with Him, from the distance of sin, even mortal sin, to the Blessed embrace of Divine Mercy.

In fact, sacramental confession carries with it the remission of all sins, both mortal and venial sins, committed

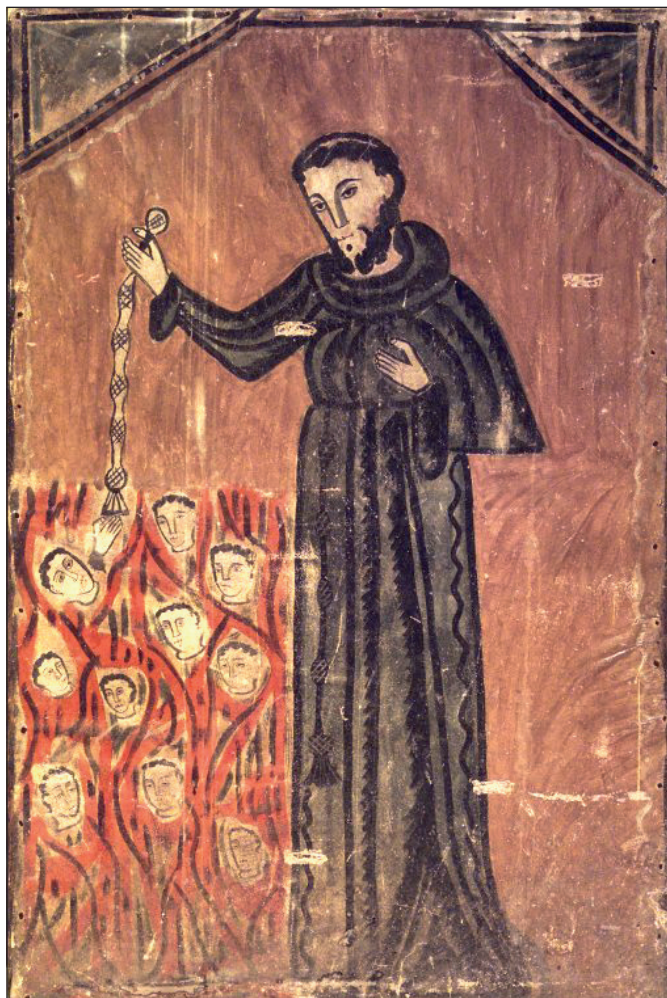
since the last confession and demands of the penitent real suffering over them, whether of attrition or contrition, which is the indispensable premise to be truly absolved, along with the intention founded on the irreplaceable value of personal freedom, of not sinning again. If Saint John Mary Vianney reminds us: “God always forgives us, even if he knows that we will sin again”, a fundamental role precisely out of the respect due for the inde-



scribable gift of freedom that God has given us, is to recognise the current intention not to continue to commit the sins that one is confessing. The reflection of this willingness is also recognised in the requirement of “detachment from any affection to sin, including venial sin”, that is typical for obtaining plenary indulgences.

Among all of the conditions, this last one seems to be one of the most difficult to achieve, because the persistence of such a radical detachment does not seem to be an immediate and simple personal evaluation. Nevertheless, it must be based on a personal act of will: if the faithful want to be detached from any affection towards the sin, then de facto, they already are.

The second condition – receiving sacramental Communion – incardinate the experience of indulgences in the closest communion we can have with Our Lord in our earthly life: Eucharistic Communion which is also physical communion. God alone knows what an extraordinary effect on a duly prepared and adequately confessed and absolved human soul, can be experienced through the pious receiving of Eucharistic Communion,



through which God Himself, who took on flesh, died and rose again, in His true Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, unites Himself with His creatures, giving them their form, that is “Christifying” them. Because the Father recognizes the image of His Son in His creatures, it is clear that progressive conformation to Christ, above all through sacramental union with Him, implemented and manifested by a life lived in accordance with fidelity to His Word, is the prevailing condition for full communion with God, which we call Eternal Life and Paradise.

The prayer of the Creed, then, incardinate indulgences in the objective profession of faith of the Church. In our days, plenty of moral and doctrinal deviations have obscured and continue to obscure the face of the

Bride of Christ! Steadfast and humble profession of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan faith, in the awareness, especially for us ministers, of its gravity and of the journey that the Church has undertaken in the early centuries to arrive at it becomes the condition to obtain the gift of indulgences. As if to say that you cannot separate orthodoxy from orthopraxy, not for orthodoxy's sake, as sometimes can happen, nor for orthopraxy's sake, as if a particular action of a Christian could justify or "cover up" faith's shortcomings or deficiencies.

This second aspect of the matter, today appears to be particularly risky, especially in a context in which the grave secularization in which we are immersed could push us to want or have to justify our existence as a Church and as pastors, according to the presumed social effectiveness of our existence and our actions.

It is not so!

We are priests in order to bring Eternal life to the world!

The Church exists to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ to men and women and to give it to them through the celebration of the sacraments. All the rest, while beautiful and certainly appropriate, is a consequence, an extension of the Kingdom of God, that springs forth from faith.

The profession of the Creed, implicitly or explicitly inserts the path towards indulgences into the two thousand year old faith of the Church, keeping the faithful safe from possible deviations or from the continuing weakening that authentic profession of the faith can always be subjected to.

Lastly, prayer according to the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff, recalls a dual aspect. The first refers to the authority of Peter, who alone has the power to draw copiously from the treasure of Divine Mercy, confirming in the faith, the gift of indulgences to the faithful.

The second aspect which we could perhaps describe as "from below", has to do with the souls of individual penitents seeking indulgence: they are called to open themselves out to the gift of hierarchical communion knowing that there is an order in the Church, established by Christ Himself, that no one will ever be able to change: that the power itself of the Church is limited to what Christ entrusted to her and told her, and that the Church can never go against the Word of her Lord. She can analyse it, she can more clearly understand its reasons and perspectives, she can interpret it in hodiernis adiunctis, but the Church can never go against what Christ has explicitly told her.

In this sense, prayer according to the intentions of the Holy Father, is an act of trust in the Successor of Peter required of the faithful. His intentions, after all, cannot but be the spreading of the Gospel, unity with Christ and the eternal salvation of souls.

In short, we could say that in fact there is a single condition to receive plenary indulgences, recognisable in communion: in sacramental communion, through Penance and the Eucharist; in communion with the only faith; through the Creed; in hierarchical communion; through prayer for the person and in accordance with the intentions of the Roman Pontiff.

At this point, it may seem that obtaining indulgences is more the peak of a challenging journey towards ascesis, than the freely given gift descending from Divine Mercy. But it is not so.

The tender Goodness of God that freely gives everything, simply asks and respects the timid yes of mankind, the timid welcoming of our wounded freedom, but one that is still capable of opening itself wide to the infinite Love that made itself visible in Jesus Christ, who was made flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

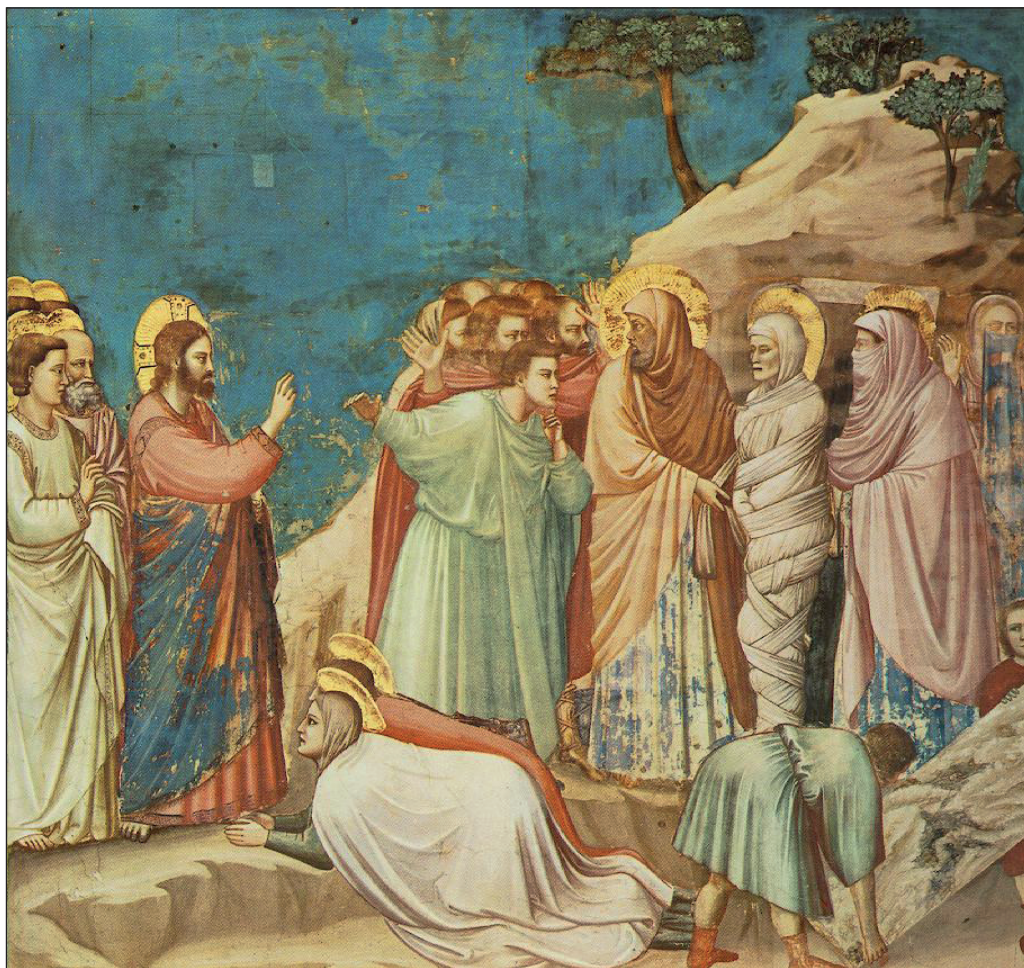


THE VICTORY OF THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST

The following is a homily by Father Luca di Girolamo of the Servants of Mary, delivered on Sunday, 26 March 2023 in the chapel of the Institute of the Holy Spirit in Rome.

We are in the last Sunday of Lent in which the message of the Liturgy of the Word is life. The incident of Lazarus imbues us with hope that the Lord's last word

is Life, filled with light and bathed by the waters of the Spirit. This richness allows us to divert more easily from the sin for which we are asking forgiveness.



HOMILY

The episode of Lazarus concludes the Sunday intervals of Lent and presents to us the third key element of Easter, which is essentially the most important and resolved one, that is Life: “I am the Resurrection and the life”, says the Lord and, clearly, being bonded to Him in faith means having part of this gift that the Lord offers to us and that goes beyond the boundaries of nature as we know them.

This time too, as occurred for the other two frameworks that we saw in the III and the IV Sunday, Jesus’ intervention in words and deeds is firmly, and at the same time, delicately inserted into a negative situation: in the episode of the Samaritan Woman, there was ambiguity, in the one of the blind man, there was the impossibility of seeing.

Today, we have two elements that truly scare us and that are the field into which Jesus’ action is inserted: illness and death. Jesus works his sign on these disturbing realities.

Last Sunday, the disciples were asking if sin had affected the birth of the blind man and Jesus had replied the same way we also hear today: “This sickness is for the glory of God”. A humanly discon-

certing answer, but one which points us to a new way of looking at reality. However, it is also a phrase that we could make our own, today, thinking of the glory of God, perhaps identifying it with the end of a particular situation that we are living through, as for example, a war.

But Jesus goes beyond, with all his charge of humanity that brings him to be moved, but without allowing this feeling and this reaction – entirely understandable, as it had to do with a friend – to distract him from the plan he shares with the Father. Moreover, he reminds the disciples that the good and the light are related and that one cannot positively do works in the night of existence. It is an aspect that we have heard much about in the episode of the Samaritan woman and in the one about the blind man: light is the presence of Jesus (“I am the Light of the world”), darkness suggests the apparent absence at his death on the Cross when He was apparently inactive. This has a precise significance!

A Jesus who at first does not seem to feel much interest for his friend.

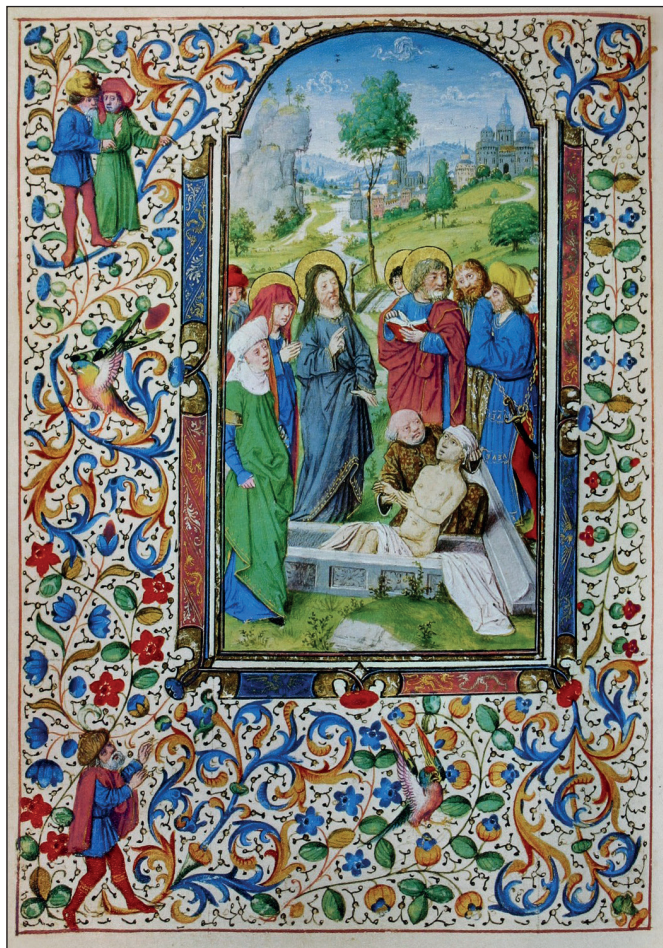
He moves on the third day, – a fact that is not without meaning - at Easter when life is recovered. There is the announcement of a sickness, followed by a death, and there is an apparent loss of time that seems to almost please Jesus: “Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe”.



These are harsh words, almost a bomb against all the expectations of the good things that this Jesus could have done. But if one reflects closely, it is the harsh reply that Jesus had given to the devil who had ordered him to throw himself down from the temple for a cheap miracle – in the episode of the temptations. He is not willing to participate in this magical comedy but has another view: it is only on the third day that he works, and he does so by bringing back to life a person that was dear to him. Sickness and death are placed before Him, but also, as last Sunday, mankind’s partial and mistaken way of thinking, that is ever ready to restrict things into its own categories, albeit in good faith. But it is precisely the third day that nullifies all this.

Having reached the place of the event, Jesus hears a phrase from Martha that belongs to humanity that believes and that however, still needs further comfort: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”.

It is a very human phrase which undoubtedly, we must have happened to, if not say it, then at least think it, when faced with the loss of a loved one. And this happens invariably each time that we are faced



with what is irreparable and with difficulties that cause or have caused a negative outcome. A phrase which finds its solution in that profession of faith that leads Martha herself to say on the last day: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day”. This is right because it reflects the faith of Israel, but it is partial: Jesus is the last day. Indeed, He is the First and the Last, as underlined in Revelations: the first and the last word of our lives.

Thus, Jesus gradually takes the two sisters by the hand: the sign is not automatic but gains significance and strength from his words that insist on the only attitude that mankind can have against evil in all its manifestation, including death. Strong words: “he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” Faith that leads to closeness, to

active communion between mankind and God, a faith that inserts us into a new dimension, that of obtaining life in its fullness. A faith that is a common element and is present in the episodes of the Samaritan woman and of the blind man.

The Glory of God passes through this faith, and then, here comes the sign of life for Lazarus, but also for those present.

At the core is not only the man Lazarus, bound and gagged and placed in a tomb, who is now able to move (and God truly helped him, let us remember the Lazarus who lives under the table of the rich man and who God truly welcomes into His Kingdom): this Lazarus, Martha's and Mary's brother, brought back to life is a sign of what will happen to those who keep their bond with Christ; a bond mandated and marked by faith. Secondly, faith itself, a gift from God, sows our lives and our ability to go towards even negative situations.

Along the sign of Lazarus, there is another miracle on the horizon and John concludes the episode with it: "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him".

It was the same as what occurred with the Samaritans, who went from being enemies of the Jews to recognizing Christ the Saviour of the world. All this is an indicator of the dawning of the resurrection that sheds a light that is capable of breaking some closed hearts and of defeating darkness and harshness.

It is the victory of the Spirit of Christ over the dominion of the flesh and of thinking according to this flesh. It is a victory that will be fulfilled with the now closely approaching, Easter.



