

Homily
Opening Mass - Divine Mercy Sunday
FCAO 2024 Tryp Hotel, Manila
April 7, 2024

Happy Easter and a Blessed Divine Mercy to you all!

Today is the last Octave of Easter and Pope John Paul the II instituted this 2nd Sunday of Easter as Divine Mercy Sunday. It is indeed beautiful that we begin our FCAO meeting on this Sunday of Divine Mercy. Easter is indeed a proclamation that God has fulfilled his promise of love and forgiveness through Jesus's passion, death, and resurrection! The victory of Jesus over evil and death is indeed the triumph of the mercy of God! I believe that as Franciscans and especially here in Asia where there is an obvious cultural and religious differences, divisions, conflicts, and violence due to economic inequality and ecological exploitation, our mission is one of peacemaking (shalom) and reconciliation (hesed).

The first reading offers an early Christian expression of the new life brought about by their belief in the resurrection. They were of one heart and mind and no one claimed any ownership but had everything in common. This is an early Christian perspective of what peace and mercy of the risen Christ is all about. Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles further describes the early Christians like this: *"There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need."* The early Christians took care of one another even financially, showing mercy and sharing wealth so that no one is impoverished. Why, because they believe in the risen Christ! The risen Christ calls for a newness of life, new relationship, new way of being a community, a new social order. They were merciful, just and equitable. Why? because they believed in the risen one!

Isn't this the very form of life that our Holy Father St Francis and the early Franciscans lived? It means that believing in the risen Christ and following the Gospel demands a life of communion and collaboration. This belief mandated the early Christians and the followers of Francis to live out God's mercy and peace. But it is mercy and peace that goes beyond being nice and sweet but one that makes me a brother's keeper. We become all brothers (Fratelli tutti) and we have to take care of one another! In fact, the early life as expressed in the acts of the apostles gives us a powerful principle that inform how we think about wealth accumulation, economic justice and governance today. I believe this is the reason why we come together, we are all brothers, perhaps, we are to go beyond Provincialism, but rediscover the very structure mandated to us by our belief in the risen Christ, the very *forma vitae* Francis wanted us to live even today.

Our Gospel today presents Jesus' peace and forgiveness. On Good Friday, his trusted disciples abandoned him. Judas sold him for thirty pieces of silver. Peter denied him three times. And the rest of the disciples, except John, went into hiding. Just when Jesus needed their help, they failed him. Perhaps because of this, even with the news of Jesus's resurrection, the disciples thought, Jesus would surely condemn them for their infidelity. But Jesus appeared to them, stood in their midst and the first words he uttered were: "*Peace be with you!*" Those were like the words of a mother tenderly consoling a weeping and terrified child. There was no trace of bitterness, anger and resentment towards his unfaithful disciples, but only warmth of love and forgiveness. Jesus in our Gospel stood in their midst and showed only the look of love to the unbelieving disciples and to the doubting Thomas with the words: peace be with you. From his wounds, the risen Lord said peace, shalom, i.e., fullness of blessing.

In this Gospel, God's mercy – his infinite and unconditional mercy is proclaimed!

From this mercy and forgiveness comes the disciples' mission. Having experienced the gift of the Lord's peace and forgiveness, they are sent out in the power of the Spirit to offer to others the gift of forgiveness they have received. 'Those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven'. That gift and mission to be faces of God's mercy is given to all of us who have been baptized into the risen Jesus. It is good to recall Pope Francis's declaration of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2015-2016. The Bull of Indiction was entitled *Misericordia Vultus*. Indeed, Jesus in our Gospel today is the very face of the Father's mercy!

As Franciscans, this mandate of forgiveness and mercy is to be first and foremost lived in our local communities. Before we preach about love and mercy, profound brotherhood and friendship should be exercised concretely within us. Fraternity is our primary form of evangelization. We are to preach and proclaim by the witness of harmonious lives. In reality of course fraternal life in the community is not easy. If we find it difficult, let us learn from this beautiful words from St Faustina's prayer to be Merciful: "Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful, so that I may never suspect or judge from appearances, but look for what is beautiful in my neighbors' souls and come to their rescue" (*Diary*, No. 163). Let us also be reminded by our Holy Father St Francis, to love our brothers as they are God's gifts to us by the Lord (*The Lord gave me brothers, Test 14*).

Mercy and forgiveness is also Christ's mandate to the Church. Pope Francis invites us to make the Church a place of mercy and hope, where everyone is welcomed, loved and forgiven. In this synodal Church, Pope Francis would like the Church to listen with humility especially to those who are discriminated against because of their gender, color and religion. Let us cease to be a condemning Church. Let us combat any trace of clericalism in our life. When clerics or religious men overstep their roles and "*mistreat the*

people of God, they disfigure the face of the Church...". Pope Francis warned us, "Clericalism is a thorn. It is a scourge. It is a form of worldliness that defiles and damages the face of the *Church*" (Message during the October 2023 Synod Meeting in Rome). Let us not be a navel-gazing Church but a Church that goes forth to the peripheries. As Franciscans, let us instead help create a Church of mercy and compassion, able to reach out to everyone especially the poor so that no one may be in want.

When we look at our world today, there seems to be no end to hostility, conflicts and war. But let us courageously proclaim that God alone and his invitation to mercy and forgiveness could open the real path to peace, reconciliation and fraternity. Pope Francis's *Urbi et Orbi* message insisted that, *"Without the forgiveness of sins, there is no overcoming the barriers of prejudice, mutual recrimination, the presumption that we are always right and others wrong. Only the risen Christ, by granting us the forgiveness of our sins, opens the way for a renewed world."* It is only faith in God's mercy that really creates a new and harmonious world and creation. It is not forgetting the source of conflict but accepting the wounds inflicted and to look for a new relationship, a new social Order. It is not hatred and vindictiveness that should be the victor. It is faith that transforms individuals and society into loving people that create a new world. Mercy brings hope! It is sad, that even in our own local Franciscan communities, there is hostility and vindictiveness. We do not seem to believe that mercy should triumph.

As Franciscans in this part of the world, we are invited not only to touch Jesus like Thomas did but to profoundly feel once again Jesu's forgiveness. Let us experience once again this Divine mercy that emanates from the risen Lord that transformed the life of the early Christians. Let us experience the stigmata and the mark of love that Francis felt that radically changed his life who became a brother to us and all creation. Without this encounter, there is no mission of mercy. Authentic mission only comes from Him.

May the light of the Resurrection illuminate our minds and convert our hearts, so that we become God's faces of mercy and peace in our world and the whole creation today! Let this same light of the risen Christ guide us in our FCAO meeting. A blessed Divine Mercy Sunday to us all!

Greg Redoblado, OFM