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WELCOMING THE HERALD OF MERCY

PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2022

Mercy lies at the inception of our faith

“After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us around it” (Acts 28:1-2).

Every time we read these verses from Chapter 28 of the Acts of the Apostles and hear the name of Malta, our hearts become aflame and a shiver of emotion runs down our spine. This is so not only because our island’s name is mentioned in the Holy Scripture, but also because we renew our memory of the extraordinary welcome which our forefathers gave Paul and his companions in their hour of need to the point that it remained etched in the heart of Luke, the author of the narrative of this event.

“The natives showed us unusual kindness”. Luke uses the word *philanthropy* – friendship. After the three months that Paul spent on the island, the initial kindness shown by the Maltese towards him and his companions had matured to the extent that Luke concludes his account of their stay in Malta by saying: “they bestowed many honours on us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions we needed” (Acts 28:10).

God’s mercy is greater than our sins

During the time Paul and Luke spent among us, they revealed to us the True God who manifested himself in Jesus of Nazareth. They showed us how “God [...] is rich in mercy” (Eph 2:4) and told us that his mercy towards us is more profound than the love which unites two lovers and more faithful than the love between a mother and her son or daughter: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?...I will not forget you” (Is 49:15).

God’s love overflowing with mercy manifested itself in its fullness in the person of Jesus. Going against the traditions prevailing in his time, Jesus spends time conversing with a Samaritan woman who was a sinner, and promises her the water which quenches thirst (cf. Jn 4:7-15). He enters the homes of public sinners, such as

Matthew and Zaccheus who were ostracized by the community, and eats with them (cf. Mt 9:10; Lk 19:6). He approaches the lepers who no one dared to get close to for fear of contagion and touches them to heal them (cf. Mk 1:21-28; Lk 4:31-37). He meets and speaks with those possessed by demons and frees them. He restores dignity to the shamed adulteress and shelters her from certain death (cf. Jn 8:1-11). Jesus is hoisted up on the cross as a testimony to the Father's cry of mercy over the whole world (cf. Lk 23:35).

Thus, God's mercy transcends by far the most intense of human love in its breadth and length, as well as in its height and depth (cf. Eph 3:18). His mercy is all-encompassing and includes even those who nailed him to the cross (cf. Lk 23:34). His love never runs out, to the extent that he continues to seek the lost sheep until he finds it (cf. Lk 15:4). It is mercy taken to the extreme, ready to sacrifice itself for the sake of the beloved (cf. Jn 15:13).

God's mercy invites us to be merciful towards each other

St Paul teaches us that God feels at his best when we savour a sample of this mercy. He feels that he is truly our Father when we experience being pardoned children. The authentic experience of mercy and forgiveness makes us aware that God is our Father and renews our identity as his loved and pardoned children.

What are the indicators that we are experiencing God's mercy towards us? The answer is swelling gratitude towards him and the manifestation of mercy towards each other. The more we let God show his mercy towards us (cf. 2 Cor 5:20), the more we feel at peace and grow in mercy towards each other. We bear witness to the full experience of God's forgiveness and mercy when we extend these to others in our relationships in our daily lives: "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col 3:13).

We would not have had an authentic experience of God's mercy were we to feel empowered by it to do as we like in the face of God and each other. If we truly understand that God loves us, we would certainly find it hard to offend him; and when this happens we feel genuine remorse.

If we abide in God's mercy, we would pay more attention to being merciful towards each other. We would view others not as competitors but as our allies and brethren. Life in the womb would be appraised as a precious gift from the Creator and not as an obstacle. Our elderly would be valued as our benefactors and life models, and not as burdens. The migrants who reach our shores would be welcomed as our brethren in dire need and as a resource, and not as outsiders who are robbing us of our livelihoods. The environment would be treasured as our common home to be looked after responsibly by one and all, and not as the exclusive property of the few to be

milked for profit. One's profession would be considered a vocation and a service, and not as a sign of prestige and an opportunity for personal gain. Leadership would be seen as a chance to serve and not to indulge in corrupt practices and exploitation.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the path to experience the mystery of God's loving mercy more deeply. Just as we often feel as human beings the need to experience that we are loved by others in word and deed, so do we need a confirmation of God's loving mercy towards us, especially through confession. And just as we feel a fresh enthusiasm for life each time we feel loved, so are we reborn through God's forgiveness and filled to overflowing with the Spirit of his mercy.

Welcoming the 'herald of God's mercy'

The visit of our Father Pope Francis to Malta on the 2nd and 3rd of April is in itself an event that expresses God's loving mercy towards us all. Inspired by the loving mercy which Pope Francis has for us Maltese and Gozitans, he wishes to meet us in person to deliver his message.

In his teachings, Pope Francis often makes use of different images to help us experience the profoundness of God's mercy. For good reason, he can be known as the 'herald of God's mercy' in our times.

Pope Francis attests that "the name of God is Mercy" (cf. *General audience*, 13th January 2016) and this name is manifested at its best in the person of the crucified Jesus. God has his own way of assessing: his gaze imparts solely love and vocation. If we want to be the sons and daughters of the Father and genuine brothers and sisters to Jesus, we must show mercy to each other. In this manner, the community of the disciples of Jesus becomes like the "abode of mercy" (cf. *Misericordia et misera*, 1) and a "field hospital after battle that welcomes everyone" (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 20-24).

Replete with God's mercy, Pope Francis has a particular love for the poor, migrants, the suffering and the ostracized. He desires that the Church practises with renewed vigour the works of mercy which Jesus lived and proclaimed in the Gospel.

Preparing ourselves for the Pope's visit

Now that we are starting the period of Lent, we are presented with a golden opportunity to prepare ourselves spiritually for the visit of His Holiness Pope Francis. The period of Lent is particularly suited to help us reflect upon God's infinite mercy in our regard and how we should become more merciful towards each other, especially towards the suffering and the outcasts.

Paul's coming to our shores two thousand years ago was our forefathers' baptism, and consequently ours, into the faith. May Pope Francis's visit in April renew us and our children in mercy. Moved by a deep sense of humanity, our forefathers welcomed Paul and his companions "with unusual kindness". Encouraged by our love and respect for our Father the Pope, let us do our best to welcome him with joy and eagerly await his message so that we too may be part of this "revolution of tenderness" (EG, 88).

The Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy, who preceded us in the path of faith, intercedes for us before her Son so that the Pope's visit strengthens our love towards God and our brethren, particularly those in need.

We cordially impart our pastoral blessing.

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✠ **Anton Teuma**
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