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IS THERE A NEED TO TALK ABOUT GOD'S MERCY THESE DAYS?

The question asked in the title seems to be a rhetorical one. For most people are satisfied with solving their everyday problems and they receive the messengers of God's Mercy as sellers of unpopular goods. However, such a situation is the result of subjective conditions of human thinking rather than the objective state of affairs. The truth, even forgotten, depreciated or rejected, is always good and has its value. In our case, it is the truth about man and God, about human community with its all inner and outer conditions. Without this truth the existence of man would be incomprehensible and thus a tragic one.

Man – a being who asks questions

Man, born into the world, has a desire to know the world. As an infant, he follows moving objects with his eyes, reacts to the smile of his mother, and cries when in danger. When he starts speaking, he exhausts the others asking the question: What is it? And when he grows older, he starts asking more and more complicated and difficult questions. As a teenager, he asks existential questions, among which the most important is the question about the sense of life.

The question about the sense of life consists of some auxiliary ones: Why do I live? What do I live for? How shall I live? Each of them is crucial for the very existence of life. Each of them calls for a sufficient objective answer, without which life loses its sense. These questions cannot be suppressed, neglected or rejected. They seize a man even in a moment of his greatest bliss. They cannot be replaced by any makeshift. Even the greatest disinterest will not survive in the face of senselessness. This usually leads to a suicide or vegetation at the level of an animal.

Of the three questions – Why do I live? What do I live for? How shall I live? – the most important is: What do I live for? For this is

a question about the purpose of life. Purpose – is the final point to which the road leads. For a man this point is marked by death. It comprises the greatest mystery of human fate. Man does not choose his death, he is condemned to it. Death is a tragedy in itself. It puts an end to all human joys, and while it ends human suffering, it does not explain its sense. Man is – as it was eloquently expressed by M. Heidegger – existence towards death. Left to himself, man would be dying of the paralyzing conviction: – I do not know what I have lived for. He would die with this idea not accepting the answers proposed to us by the world.

This state is not external for man. It is defined by the reality of a human being. Man exists in himself not only as a free and rational being, but also at the same time as a being directed towards other persons. A person is an existence in relation to the other being. This means that the purpose of man may only be personal and not material. One can be a gift only for a person and not for a thing. Man – according to the Ecumenical Council – „cannot entirely fulfill himself unless through a disinterested gift of himself” (*Gaudium et spes*, 24).

The question: „What do I live for?” thus changes into the question: „Who do I live for?” The profound answer is given by love. Every man wants to love and be loved. There are several kinds of love: brotherly, betrothal, marital, motherly, fatherly love, etc. Each of them comprises the statement: – „I owe my life to you or I live because of you. When a man has nobody to live for, he loses the desire to live, feels unneeded and lonely. He has been like that since the beginning and he is like that today. Human nature is not susceptible to changes, only the circumstances of life change. Such is the human being as a person, and everybody born as a man, from the moment of conception is a person and has a need to live in a communion of persons.

Another man does not entirely explain the sense of life. It is always defined by time, that is, it has its beginning and its end. When a man positively accepts his existence in the world, he still has to accept his passing away. The question: „And what is next?” crosses time and enters eternity. It cannot be satisfactorily answered neither by the theory of reincarnation nor by the encouragement to live for the future generations. Man is and wants to be a person. Man wants to love and be loved eternally. Life, love, communion of persons as the indicators of human existence do not cease at the threshold of time, but they want to cross over to enjoy the fullness without end. Without this „human soul is cast

down" (Ps 42, 6) and the human heart becomes uneasy (St. Augustine). It can be satisfied only by God in His merciful love. The depth of human existence invokes the depth of God (Ps 42, 8). The ends attract each other mutually. Man as an accidental existence may be happy only in the union with the Absolute Existence.

In the fetters of inability

According to the Bible, man is an image of God (Gen 1, 27). As the image, he participates in the reality of the Archetype and this determines his dignity. Man rises above the animal world, and has only God above him. God calls man and man, with his entire being, is directed towards God. He could head for God like rivers head for the ocean, were it not for the fact that he is free and since the beginning, he has been in a situation of temptation. One of the features of freedom is the ability to choose. The first parents, yielding to the temptation of evil, turned away from God and turned to the creation. Thus, they brought upon themselves the breach of the father-child bond with God, hurting themselves, ruining the relation between man and woman and misleading the management of the world. The Church calls this state the original sin, which through birth is inherited by every man.

Original sin increased the tragedy of man. Not only does he carry inside questions to which often he does not find the answers, but he also crashes into obstacles that he cannot conquer with his own strength. The Bible tells man: „If you do well, you can hold up your head; but if not, sin is a demon lurking at the door: his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master" (Gen 4, 7), but man knows the taste of sin all too well. Sometimes he truly defeats evil, but so often he fails in the fight.

The memory of paradise and experiencing its loss day by day expose human imponderables. Human history is a thick book, consisting of human achievements and failures.

Pains of birth giving, diseases, man's perception of man, pressure, arguments, wars – these are only some of the fractures in the image of man. Man of all times possesses them, and contemporary man also is not free of them.

It even seems that today evil's reach measures bigger than ever. The twentieth century was written in human history with greatest atrocities. Two world wars and revolutions brought death to millions of people. As a matter of fact, killing never ceases, it only moves from

one place to another. It also has at its disposal more and more efficient instruments of crime, and as the place of crime it uses public squares, buildings and hospital rooms. Terrorism is spreading; evil is used to fight evil.

We are witnessing an unprecedented struggle between good and evil. People achieve success in technology but they lose with themselves. They enlarge the areas of loneliness. In civilized countries human life-span has increased, but the elderly are not properly managed. Retirement homes are built because there is no place for old people in the family. As the birthrate decreases, societies are getting old faster and pension funds cannot handle this. To solve the problem euthanasia is applied. A beautiful word has been given a repulsive meaning. For what etymologically means a „good death”, in fact is a killing of an old man.

At the source of some processes happening in the modern world, there is an erroneous ideology. It is camouflaged so well that many people do not discern it at all. The most ominous of its manifestations is the rejection of God. The ones in control of this act discreetly, almost elegantly. They do not claim that there is no God. They only do not ask questions about God and live as if there was no God. They impose their model of life on others by all possible means.

The consequences of such an attitude are terrible. For if there is no absolute Truth, then there is no truth at all. There are only opinions, shared or questioned. The stronger is right, statutory law is in power, natural law vanishes. When there is no moral principle present always and everywhere, then conscience stops functioning. It ceases to be the advisory voice because there is nothing to relate it to.

It is man who suffers most because of this situation. Having rejected God, he has ceased to be His image. He has lost his unique, irreplaceable place in the world. He has become a specimen in nature, subject to experiments in medicine and goods in the economy. With such systematic principles only a productive man counts, one who brings profit to others. Such a man is subject to all kinds of manipulation. Human fetus is subject to experiments; its life is shortened or prolonged at wish. Again, there are attempts to breed a superman.

On the banners of modern societies, noble slogans are placed: freedom, democracy, tolerance and dialogue. But then, the meaning of these words has been changed. Freedom is given to the strong, while the weak are deprived of it. Where everything is allowed, nothing is allowed. Freedom without moral principles is anarchy, it is practically

coercion. Democracy without stable principles, binding both the rulers and the ruled, is usually corrupt and turns to be a fight for fodder. Private welfare conceals entirely the common welfare. Tolerance is a good attitude when man is loved and in the name of this love, his different acting to ours is tolerated.

Nevertheless, there is no tolerance for evil that destroys the common life. The boundary of freedom and tolerance is another man, his good, which is his life and human dignity. Dialogue was the way of getting to the truth even in antiquity. Today, dialogue is often conducted for the sake of dialogue, with the objective that one will not convince the other side. Such dialogue does not lead anywhere. The people taking part in the dialogue do not approach the truth, and thus, they do not change inside.

The quality of social relations influences the spiritual life of man. Spiritless civilization creates spiritless people, who lose their ideals and strive only for survival. A particularly dangerous disease among many people is the loss of the ability to love. They do not know any more what true love is, they reduce it to surrogates and then experience bitter disappointments. There are countries, where for every ten marriages seven are broken up, in other countries children are shot in the streets. One cannot touch somebody else's child without being suspected of harassment. In such relations, what is a part of a normal life among people is taken for extravagance and degeneration.

The Bible says that some day people wanted to build a tower so tall that it would reach the sky. They wanted to achieve this aim on their own, against the will of God. Then their languages were confused that they could not communicate with one another and they were scattered (Gen 11, 1-9). Today, many people do not have a desire to rise to God.

They are satisfied with building on the earth, without connecting the building with the sky. One has to admit that the skyscrapers, already existing and the new ones, are looked at with admiration. But then, few terrorists are able to destroy a creation built by thousands of people. The world without God is a nightmare. It has no stable foundations, and there are no signposts along its roads. An even if there are some, they apply only to short stretches of the road.

What is faith for?

It is faith that helps people to get out of the web of inability. It broadens the horizons of understanding and strengthens the spiritual po-

wers of man. Faith itself supports reason. Together they form the wings „on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 1). There is no controversy between faith and reason and there should be no antagonism. Faith brings understanding and guards the reasonableness of reason. For faith tells reason that the reality crosses over the borders of its natural cognition. At the same time faith calls reason to be its own witness and a judge of its own reasonableness.

The Age of Enlightenment divided reason and faith and granted the right to exist only to the light of reason. Heirs of this idea can also be found today. However, nobody following the advice of common sense will proclaim such ideas.

We have said „faith itself”. The point is that faith, in its nature, is a reality different from the foundation that is based only on reason. Although reason discovers the existence of God on its own, still it is not able to transform man. Faith somehow is an extension of reason, for it passes from the discovery of the existence of God to belief and trust in God. When man includes God in his thinking and acting, he becomes a different creature than before. His existential questions find grounds for looking for the answers, and his „to be” finds grounds to exist.

The problem lies in this: that faith is not always of the same quality, and because of the authority on which it is based and what it teaches. People have been believers since the beginning of their existence. Atheism is a very young phenomenon. However, throughout history, people have yielded to different deviations. Their beliefs became idolatry, their image of God terrified rather than attracted. Presently, there are a few religions in the world and many creeds, often of a sectarian character. Thus, there is a need to make sense of the great number of beliefs and determine which one is the true one.

Christians hold to Christ and propagate His teaching. They perceive it to be Good News, revealing what people did not know before and bringing joy to everyone who will receive it. Gospel is verified by Jesus Christ himself. For he sealed its truth with his own death and resurrection. In the light of resurrection, the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament and the primacy of love among all mutual relations between God and man and between people can be seen.

The truths of Christian faith have their roots in the Old Testament. Pious Jews are still bearing inside seeds that are able to sprout and give fruit. Jesus Christ developed what was in germs and let it grow.

God, whom he revealed, is God of Abraham, Isaac and patriarchs. At the same time, He is God who came closer to people in a way unheard of previously, because in His Son He became a man and shared in all the human matters from conception to death. He is Father, Son and Holy Ghost. What the Old Testament says about God adjectivally, the New Testament expresses substantively. Thus, it changes just, loving, omnipotent, etc. into justice, love, omnipotence, etc. God is not only merciful, He is mercy itself. A believer differs from an unbeliever as to something more than knowledge. If the two people were judged only according to their knowledge, it would be difficult to determine who is right in the end. For physical-mathematical knowledge is marked with obviousness different from the knowledge of faith. For what faith proposes, though it has its inner logic, it still postulates believing, so that it could gradually reveal its obviousness. The Church has always followed the principle: „Credo ut intelligam”. I believe, so that I may understand.

In the world dominated by technical thinking, faith seems to be foolishness. However, those who in this world are courageous enough to believe, show that their faith is wisdom. Evangelical wisdom still surpasses the wisdom of this world. „For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ...For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom” (1Co 1, 21-25). The wisdom and power of Christians is Jesus Christ.

Christianity is not a philosophical system, ideology or a number of rules to be memorized. Christianity is life, based on belief and realized through giving testimony of faith. The testimony is not an occupation, state, time to fill up, but it is just life of faith, that is living every day with Christ and through Christ. „...and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me... I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Ga 2, 20).

The problem of Christianity is comprised in the question „Who?” and not „What?” The truth of God's Mercy – is God, who is Love and has shown love to people since the moment of creation and to each man since his conception. Nobody and nothing can destroy this love.

Christianity as a mental construction may enchant some, and repel others. Christianity as the realization of love between people in answer to God's love is a victorious power, which sustains but does not waste, builds but does not destroy, brings to life, but does not kill. The victo-

rious conduct of Christians among persecutions walked the path of love, which in its heroism advanced as far as to make sacrifice of life, „the blood of the martyrs became the seed of Christians” (Tertullian). The contemporary world – said Paul VI – needs witnesses more than teachers, and if it needs teachers, it is only when they are witnesses. Only faith confirmed by testimony has the ability to convert others.

For the accurate understanding of the truth about God’s Mercy

Difficulties with the acceptance of God’s Mercy felt by many people nowadays, result from either faith itself or incorrect attitude towards God, or finally, from erroneous cognition of God’s Mercy. Faith is often met with dissent because it tells to accept what man cannot see and thus what seems to him incomprehensible, or it offers him help, which he hesitates to accept.

Then, an alternative cognition of God is often born: either God or me. Nietzsche advanced to absurdity when he wrote, if there is God, how could I bear the fact I were not God. The true faith in God does not oppose God to man, on the contrary, it shows Him as the ground, sense and purpose of human existence. It suggests conveying to God the relation between a child and its parents. Son does not ask his father why the father conceived him, does not reject help offered to him, because he knows that all this comes out of love. Child hugs its mother and here it finds its happiness, longs for its parents when they are away, would like to be with them always, because only then it feels safe. Growing up to faith means getting more and more of the spirit of a child. In faith one goes from the beginning to the beginning (St. Gregory of Nyssa), and until one lives on the earth one cannot get further than to faith. Still, it is not a vicious circle and standing in one place, but it is true stepping forward, closer and closer to God and deeper and deeper inside.

Faith is an adventure of existence and discovery of His presence in the situations of human life. Man learns about God from Revelation and experience. Revelation is sometimes disclosed to man by the world, while man, left only to himself, would never see it. And sometimes it names only the thing that man knows from his experience. Living through faith is experiencing God and becoming convinced that what Jesus Christ taught was true.

Nobody revealed God to people more than Jesus did. For he tied his faith with seeing. „Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (J 14,

9). Since then the sight of body should lead to the sight of faith, and seeing in faith should help the seeing of senses. For faith does not stay inside man but it gets out and shapes the whole human life.

The truth of God's Mercy is dominant in the Old Testament. The inspired authors showed it as fatherly faithfulness to once given promise (*hesed*) and as motherly tenderness for a child of her womb (*rahamim*). Jesus Christ confirmed and imaged God in His Merciful Love. For in Him the promises given to people in Eden were fulfilled. They were confirmed in subsequently repeated covenants. Jesus Christ is the awaited Messiah. Salvation came through restoration, and not through annihilation of the old creation. Conception and birth, which meant the passage of the first parents' sin, in Jesus Christ became the beginning of a new life, which we receive in Holy Baptism. Thus, the order of creation has become the order of salvation.

However, people have often exchanged the image of Merciful God for the image of a merciful man. And as man is imperfect, his mercy is also imperfect, and it has brought humiliation instead of salvation. Human dignity has suffered and man has hesitated to accept mercy of this kind. Man has asked God for mercy not to need it any more. Mercy in the eyes of man was not love but pity. In exercising mercy upon man, people have often forgotten to follow God and thus distorted what in itself is beautiful and good. Christ said, „Be therefore merciful as your father is merciful” (Luke 6, 36). People have kept the first part of this command, and lost the second, and this is why often their mercy has been grotesque.

Mercy must not be separated from love. In God, love is a feature of His existence. Everything He does comes from love. The creation exists as He loves it. Man lives because God embraces him with His love. Everybody experiences this love, even the greatest sinner. The love of God is able to do everything except depriving man of freedom. This is why hell exists. Hell is not a denial of God's love. God does everything to prevent man from choosing hell. However, He stops in the face of human freedom because He is faithful to himself. Resorting to God's Mercy is for man a chance, a line that rescues him even from the greatest depth.

To sum up, let us answer the question asked in the title. Always, and particularly now, there is a need to speak to the contemporary man about God's Mercy, for in God lies the solution of all of the most difficult human problems. Man can live not through suppressing them but thro-

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ugh struggling with them and solving them. Faith, as God's grace, strengthens human powers. The grace is given by Merciful God, in order to help man get to participate in the wholeness of God's love. Not every image of God satisfies man. If God were only wise, where would a stupid man hide from Him, if God were only powerful, where would a weak man escape from Him. God is Wisdom, Omnipotence and Love. This is why He can be close to everybody and everybody can find shelter in Him. All these features together mean that He is also Mercy, and thus, Justice. The more people will believe in this, the safer place the world, in which they live, will be.

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