

Bishop Damian Muskus
Auxiliary Bishop of Kraków, Poland

“Mercy is a test of credibility of Christians in the modern world.” (Pope Francis)

WYD Kraków 2016 as a school of Divine and human Mercy

The motto of this article are the words of Pope Francis addressed to the young in this year’s Message for the 31st World Youth Day. The radical clarity of this short sentence: “Mercy... is the measure... of our credibility as Christians in today’s world” gives a lot of food for thought.¹ The Holy Father clearly tells young people that one cannot call themselves a Christian if he/she closes their eyes to those in need. It is not enough to be an eagerly and wholeheartedly practising Catholic; the testimony of words or prayers is not enough, either. If one is not charitable, he/she is not a credible witness of the Gospel. Mercy is the test of our authenticity as disciples of Jesus. This means that mercy is a measure of the quality of

1 Message of Pope Francis for the the XXXI World Youth Day 2016 *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (Mt 5:7)*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/youth/documents/papa-francesco_20150815_messaggio-giovani_2016.html (22.06.2016).

our relationship with the Saviour, because a deep relationship with God is always reflected in our attitude toward others.

What is this modern world today that the pope talks about? The reference to the present day is not only a stylistic measure, but a clear indication of the place and time: we are to be witnesses to mercy here and now, towards the people among whom we live, in the realities of our everyday life, but also against the challenges and questions posed by our global modernity. They, for the most part, some time ago were not so obvious, as evidenced by the discussion on accepting refugees which is still ongoing inside the Church. The topic that until recently seemed an abstraction, today has taken the face of real refugees from war-torn countries, and it turns out that consciences of many fail and still they are not able to deal with this problem and avoid a unequivocal declaration that each refugee is our brother who needs real and tangible help. Today, when the world has shrunk to the size of your smartphone display, it is impossible not to ask Christians from safe and wealthy Europe about their attitude towards the bloody civil war in Syria, the murder of four nuns in Yemen or the tragedy of Pakistani families who have been victims of a terror attack on Easter. One must not, however, omit the questions about the tragedy of hunger, fratricidal fighting, racial persecution, poverty, exploitation and diseases in the forgotten regions of the world. These are the contemporary challenges that everyone must face, abandoning the comfortable perspective of an observer and simply asking oneself: What do I do in this situation? How can I help?

The author of this work says the above for a reason, as our global world is affected by the phenomenon which the pope calls the “globalization of indifference.”² The omnipresence of evil dulls our sensitivity and causes our passivity. This passivity and indifference cannot be justified by ignorance, because the media, particularly social media, ensure that the news of further tragedies of our brothers and sisters reach us almost in real time, and expose us to images of atrocities, whether we like it or not. Words expressing our

2 Cf. Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for Lent 2016 *I desire mercy, and not sacrifice* (Mt 9:13). The works of mercy on the road of the Jubilee, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco_20151004_messaggio-quaresima2016.html (22.06.2016).

helplessness do not matter, either – words like “After all, there is nothing I can do about it, this is happening so far away, I can do nothing to help.” Well, today everyone can do something, anyone can respond according to their individual capacities. Help can also be provided from a distance, and so can our human solidarity be shown. We are in a way destined to participate in the tragedies of our neighbours, which unfortunately – instead of leading to a deep reflection and wise response – quite often take the form of ordinary voyeurism. Our attitude to the wrongs that are happening in the world exposes selfishness and spiritual emptiness which is displayed by many European Christians who, often unwittingly, devote their lives to comfort and secure stability, abandoning a sense of responsibility for their own lives but also for others and for the world in which they live. Tragic events in Brussels or Paris pull us away from this apathy and numbness. They show that the security of our world is an illusion, and the values to which we adhere require verification. “We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, that it is worth being good and decent. We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty. It is time to acknowledge that light-hearted superficiality has done us no good,” writes Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*.³ We need to strengthen the awareness that we are one human family. “There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference,”⁴ warns the pope. This is the question of saving a human being, lifting them from the darkness of spiritual misery and suffering. One can no longer avoid the problems of the world and close their ears to the cry of the poor, because such an attitude in us, sooner or later, is going to lead to a spiritual death.

For such a condition of the modern world and the problems of people living in it, the pope sees one effective remedy. It is mercy. He pointed to it announcing the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in the Church, culminating in the World Youth Day in Poland, Kraków, which will be

3 Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of The Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home, 229, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (22.06.2016).

4 Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*..., 52.

experienced under the theme: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” (Mt 5:7). Young people are children of the world in which they live; they are not separate from its affairs. They are also affected by indifference, excessive presence of material goods, self-centred comfort and poignant loneliness, despite having multiple virtual friends. But they are equally longing for a meaningful life filled with love and offered as a gift to another person. And that makes them the hope and opportunity for this world.

WYD 2016 as a school of God’s mercy

Once we asked the young volunteers at WYD how they understand the concept of mercy. They frequently said: Mercy is free and boundless love of God. What does it mean for them? God, who loves man without limits and conditions, will do everything to make him happy. This love that comes for free is, according to our interlocutors, a love that is not deserved, and in addition, willing to forgive us the things that we are not able to forgive ourselves. It is the love which helps a man to understand himself.

Inviting young people to Kraków, Pope Francis encouraged them to read the Beatitudes and made them to be further signposts paving the way to the July meeting. He urges young people not to be afraid to go against the current. He is like a wise teacher who knows what to do to target well rebellious tendencies that are natural at this age and to transform them into a constructive force, not a destructive one that could uproot the life and happiness of a young person stepping into adulthood. In his talks with young people, through the messages, speeches and meetings directed at them, the pope urges youth to rediscover mercy as a formula for a happy life. Solidarity with the poor, pure heart, mercy and compassion shown to others are clues that the pope gives to young people. The source of these attitudes is, however, a heart open to God’s mercy. Young people need to be brought to merciful Jesus. They are looking for unconditional love, desire acceptance and forgiveness as well as meetings with someone who loves them regardless of all. Clever, carefully designed and attractive pastoral programs, plans of group meetings and outlines of fascinating catecheses

are not enough here. Young people need an individual approach; they above all want to be heard. They long for love, which – unfortunately increasingly often – they had not known at home, but it also happens that they cannot accept such love. They do not know how to trust others and open up to love. Meeting with the love of Jesus, its experience in the real context of one's own life is the foundation, the heart of every Christian life. And as the organizers of World Youth Day in the Year of Mercy, this is how we see our mission. We focus on enabling young people to experience the renewing power of the encounter with Merciful Jesus and young people hungry for love could find its purest source, which is God himself. That is why youth from all over the world flock to the Łagiewniki hill where millions of people from all continents head for to beg for mercy and experience the healing touch of God's love. Here, where the miraculous image of Merciful Jesus can be found and in the place which constantly resounds with prayer for mercy on the whole world and on each of us, a young person can experience the most important event of their life, which would be its new beginning.

The holy apostles of Divine Mercy: John Paul II and Sister Faustyna Kowalska, will be the guides on this road. It is from them that a young man can learn boundless, child-like confidence and open their heart to a meeting with grace. Both of them are extremely credible and convincing witnesses of mercy to young people. Faustina devoted her whole young life to Jesus, despite many difficulties she experienced every day, even from her nearest and dearest. John Paul II used to come to Łagiewniki even as a young boy. As he later recalled: "The Message of Divine Mercy has always been near and dear to me. It is as if history had inscribed it in the tragic experience of World War II. In those difficult years, it provided a special kind of support and was an inexhaustible source of hope not only for the citizens of Kraków, but for the entire nation. It was also my own personal experience, which I took with me to the See of Peter and which in a sense forms the image of this Pontificate."⁵ Many years later, when

5 The Speech by the Holy Father John Paul II at the Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy in Kraków-Łagiewniki, 7.06.1997, 1, <http://www.milosierdzie.pl/index.php/en/aktualnosc-9.html> (22.06.2016).

the pope entrusted the world to Divine Mercy, he expressed his desire that the message of the merciful love should be broadcast from Łagiewniki to the whole world. “May the binding promise of the Lord Jesus be fulfilled: from here there must go forth ‘the spark which will prepare the world for his final coming’ (cf. Diary, 1732). This spark needs to be lighted by the grace of God. This fire of mercy needs to be passed on to the world. In the mercy of God the world will find peace and mankind will find happiness!,”⁶ he urged. Today we put that spark in the hands of young for them to carry it and kindle it in their communities, so they will be tools of God’s mercy, which the world drowning in chaos of values, fear of terrorism, shaken by wars and unjustly divided – needs so much.

WYD 2016 as a school of human mercy

Young people today, living in a culture of constant excess of consumer goods, sensations, emotions, entertainment and information, do not really know where to look for meaning in their lives. Often they cannot even give a proper name to their desires, aspirations and dreams, they have trouble expressing their own feelings. They are sensitive, but also more and more lonely, because living in a virtual world they only establish for the most part only semblances of relationships and not deep bonds. World Youth Day, prepared and created in the communities of volunteers and parish leaders is an education of overcoming barriers, leaving the narrow cage of self-centeredness and narcissism, and a chance for young people to discover what extraordinary richness may be found in experiencing diversity together, striving for common goal and solidarity in building something great together. Today one can see that now we have many more pupils in in the school of serving others and giving oneself, because the Church in Poland is stirring with preparations for World Youth Day, and among the most involved are young people in parishes and pastoral communities. Even if they often lack experience or competence and need

6 Homily of the Holy Father John Paul II, 17.08.2002, Kraków-Łagiewniki, 5, <http://www.milosierdzie.pl/index.php/en/aktualnosci-9.html> (22.06.2016).

support of a wise adult, it is their enthusiasm, zeal and joy of faith that they give to others, bringing a fresh perspective to the life of the parish. The organizers of WYD would like this activity not to be a one-off event, but the beginning of a lasting renewal and revival in parishes and other ecclesial communities. It is also important that young people do not run out of enthusiasm, that they feel at home in the Church and have the courage to bring their unique individual character to it.

In this context, awakening the spirit of service to others seems to be an important issue. Volunteer WYD work certainly contributes to this aim. This is a particularly privileged form of participation in this event and many young people seek to become a part of a group of volunteers. Certain requirements, e.g. as to age, language skills, interpersonal skills and previous experience of World Youth Day apply if one wants to be a volunteer, which makes the recruitment not automatic. The mere possibility of being a volunteer makes, however, young people begin to think about the idea of selfless dedication of time and oneself in service to others. Polish young people are just learning voluntary work and, although their involvement in various forms of selfless work for others is on the increase, in this respect they have less experience than their peers from Western Europe. The research of the Klon/Jawor Association shows that almost three quarters of young people not involved in volunteer activities admit that they have never been interested in such work and 70% say that no-one has ever asked them to do such work. More than half of the young (53%) also added that they did not know people or organizations with whom/which they could undertake this type of activity.⁷ World Youth Day can change this state of affairs.

Preparations for World Youth Day are a great opportunity for young Poles to be able to see what volunteering is about and to make sure that it is not just a theoretical idea, but after WYD it will become a component of everyday life that gives joy, satisfaction and the sense of accomplishment. Programmes addressed to them, such as Wolontariat Plus (Volunteer Work Plus), Młodzi Ambasadorzy ŚDM (Young Ambassadors of WYD)

⁷ Cf. P. Adamiak, *Wolontariat – nie tylko dla herosów*, an article published on www.ngo.pl, <http://wiadomosci.ngo.pl/wiadomosc/965562.html> (22.06.2016).

and other projects, have the following objectives: freeing social awareness, breaking down barriers, sharing the passion for social commitment with others and inspiring their activity with the spirit of “the creativity in charity,” about which the patron saint of WYD spoke at the Błonia Commons during his last pilgrimage to Poland in 2002 and on which he wrote in the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: “Now is the time for a new ‘creativity in charity,’ not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by ‘getting close’ to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters.”⁸

After several years that have passed from this appeal one could ask how it has been received in Poland. It is worth asking whether what we are actually lacking today is not “a loving look around ourselves if we are to be aware of the neighbour by our side, who [...] feels a sense of abandonment, of being lost, of distrust. This ‘creativity in charity’ is needed to provide material and spiritual assistance to neglected children; to refrain from turning one’s back on the boy or girl who have gotten lost in the world of addiction or crime; to give advice, consolation, spiritual support to those engaged in an internal struggle with evil?”⁹ We must persevere in teaching young people sensitivity and solidarity with those in need in their own living environment, because if one does not sharpen from the very beginning their senses for the ills of their immediate environment, they can easily fall a victim of “globalization of indifference,” which was mentioned at the beginning of the article. As the areas of deprivation and injustice keep growing, we are faced with new challenges for which we are not prepared. The new creativity in charity, which Saint John Paul II spoke about, is the creativity focused on times which are rapidly changing. It is new and therefore open to what cannot be assumed and predicted.

⁸ Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful at the Close of the Great Jubilee of th Year 2000, 50, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html (22.06.2016).

⁹ Apostolic Voyage to Poland, Holy Mass and Beatifications: Zygmunt Szczyński, Jan Balicki, Jan Beyzym, Sancja Szymkowiak, Homily of the Holy Father John Paul II, Kraków, 18.08.2002, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20020818_beatification-krakow.html (22.06.2016).

One should see it not only in terms of effectiveness but of ordinary human sensitivity and fidelity in accompanying those who need our help and our presence. Pope Francis comes to our aid again giving practical tools to young people and argues that mercy is neither cheap sentimentality nor an attitude aiming only to show off but it is deeply embedded in real life and connected with an honest gift of self. He recommends that the young take exercise in the creativity in charity as regards the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. Our observations indicate that young people are very willing to undertake such practice, engaging in various projects aiming to do the Works of Mercy. These efforts must be taken very seriously and care should be taken so that such practice leads to a desire to give, the awakened creativity and spontaneous desire of helping others be transformed into a lifelong attitude of giving a consistent and faithful testimony to an encounter with the merciful God and becoming His instrument towards other people. World Youth Day in Kraków can become for many young people a great start on this road, because we all need to study in the school of mercy. It is impossible to once and for all prepare someone to be merciful. A sensitive conscience and the ability to react to the evil that is present in the world and takes on ever new forms is shaped during one's whole life. It is important that the mission of the witnesses of Divine Mercy has a good start.