

The Scandal of God's Mercy in Luke's Gospel

by Fra Alberto Maggi – Director of the Biblical Study Centre "Giovanni Vannucci" -

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Good evening to all. Many thanks to Giovanni Battista (Don Borsato) for his invitation which I have greatly appreciated and a special thanks to you. It's always surprising, exciting and humbling to see that people after a day's work, on a Monday evening, are willing to spend time to tackle the Gospel. Let's hope it's well worth it. And it's definitely well worth it because the topic that we will deal with this evening is very interesting.

We will make an excursion on the theme of Mercy which is so much the main strand of Luke's Gospel that it is surprising. At one point in the early Christian community, this Mercy, this excess of Mercy seemed intolerable, unbearable, and they will excise from Luke's Gospel (and this will be the theme we'll develop this evening) a page that the primitive Christian community found unacceptable and intolerable. So Luke makes Mercy the leitmotif of his Gospel from beginning to end; but at a certain point this excessive mercy was so unbearable that the Community itself said to Luke: Luke thanks, but we do not want this page. And we'll see when we get there.

I said that the main theme of Luke's Gospel is that of Mercy. But what is Mercy? It's God's love, a love that is not influenced by man's behaviour or his response to it. And the Evangelist will anticipate what will be Jesus' main teaching and activity, at the beginning of his Gospel, with the announcement of his birth.

At the announcement of his birth, as you know, the angel of the Lord appears; when in the Gospels and also in the Old Testament we find this expression 'angel of the Lord' it never means an angel sent by God, but it is God himself that engages with men. The Jews kept a distance between God and man; they did not believe that God ever spoke to men or intervened in their lives. Therefore, they used the formula 'the Angel of the Lord', which doesn't mean an angel sent by the Lord, but God Himself.

So the Angel of the Lord, God himself, announced the birth of Jesus... to whom? Did he go and announce it to the High Priests? Did he go and announce it to the Pharisees or the scribes? He went in search of the dregs of society, the shepherds; these people were marginalised by civil and religious society, did not enjoy civil rights, were treated like animals, were regarded as the most impure of people: sinners par excellence. We can imagine how the shepherds lived at that time; these people always lived in the pastures, could not of course attend the synagogue, let alone the temple, lived in the dirt all the time. They weren't paid and therefore lived by theft and often murder. It was forbidden to buy anything from shepherds. It is written in the Talmud: if you find a shepherd or a pagan in a ditch do not pull him out, as for them there is no hope of salvation.

According to the Judaic traditions, when the Messiah will come, he will impose the observance of the law and carry out what today we would call an ethnic cleansing of his people, physically eliminating sinners, leaving only a group of people that were pure.

At the top of the list of sinners that God, through the Messiah, would have to eliminate were the tax collectors, along with the shepherds. That is why the Evangelist writes that when the Angel of the Lord appeared to these shepherds, they were terrified because they thought: it is done for us, it's all over! And here's the surprise, a surprise that will accompany us for the whole evening and that accompanies Luke's Gospel: the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were wrapped with his light.

The glory of the Lord is love. Luke contradicts everything that theology, tradition and spirituality had said before then. In every religion, including the Jewish religion, God was presented as someone that rewarded the good, but punished the wicked.

When God meets those who are considered evil, sinners, not only does he not threaten them, nor punish them, but he wraps them with his love. This is the unsettling news that the shepherds convey to Mary and Joseph. They are all shocked, all scared because there is something wrong. Just think about the Psalms: God hates sinners; and the psalmist says: my soul hates sinners, God punishes sinners. This is all wrong! When God meets sinners his love envelops them. And this will be the surprise that will accompany all this Gospel from the beginning until the end. We know the last words of Jesus on the cross when he had expressions of forgiveness for his killers; and even tells the bandit that was crucified with him that he will be with him in paradise. This announcement of a merciful God, exclusively a God of mercy, was unacceptable and incomprehensible to the culture of the time. The Prophet Isaiah says of God: *"He will judge the weak with integrity and give fair sentence for the humblest in the land. He will strike the country with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips bring death to the wicked."* (Is 11:4)

This is God the Chastiser and it is the God that John the Baptist will show while preaching in the desert. What did John the Baptist say? Seeing the crowds coming towards him he says: *'Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming retribution?'* (Lk 3:7). So this is the image of a God who punishes, a God who rebukes. And John the Baptist has some images that stand out, which are quite gory. He says: *'Yes, even now the axe is being laid to the root of the trees, so that any tree failing to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire.'* (Lk 3:9); *'His winnowing-fan is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.'* (Lk 3:17).

So at the time of Jesus, the Messiah was expected to make this division: separate the chaff from the wheat, keep the wheat and physically eliminate the chaff. Every tree that does not bear fruit, (the Messiah is represented with an axe in his hand) is eliminated. Well, this is quite the opposite of what the Evangelist will show us in Jesus, in his teaching and in his words.

Already, the first action that Jesus carries out is a dramatic one, after which they will try to kill him; it is the first time that he goes into what the Evangelist does not hesitate to present as one of the most dangerous places for Jesus. Jesus, the son of God, visible expression of an invisible God himself, and an expression of God's love, will find himself at ease in offering his love to the dregs of society, to the tax collectors, the prostitutes, to the unbelievers; on the contrary, he will find that the sacred places and holy people are the most dangerous for him. In fact, says the Evangelist, he entered the synagogue of Nazareth, he read a page from the Prophet Isaiah, and began to interpret it, focusing on words of grace. And immediately there is disquiet among the people because Jesus censored Isaiah by avoiding reading the last line of the page which was: *'And a day of vengeance for our God'* (Is 61:2); this was what they were waiting for. They were dominated by the Romans, they were waiting for the Messiah the liberator; it was a time of revenge for a population that felt subjugated. This was what they were waiting for.

Jesus does not agree with Isaiah. Isaiah said: *'He (God) sent me to proclaim the Lord's year of grace and love'*. But Jesus disagrees about revenge; he censors it, he leaves it aside. The Evangelist says that the entire assembly in the synagogue was furious. For this, all eyes were upon him; and Jesus, instead of calming tempers, exacerbates the situation by mentioning two episodes that the Jews preferred not to be reminded of, two unwanted episodes from Israel's history because they considered themselves a chosen people, favourite people; in their mentality the pagans were despised, the pagans had to be dominated.

Jesus, in front of this furious, nationalist assembly that is against him because he doesn't talk about the Lord's vengeance: what does he do? He reminds them of two episodes that were like aching sores for them; he states that God's love is for all mankind, including the pagans, in fact they are preferred. Jesus says: do you remember the time when there was a famine? Where did the Lord send the Prophet Elijah? To some Israelite? No, he sent him to Lebanon, to a widow in Zarephath of Sidon. And with so many lepers in Israel, the only time God intervened and cured one, it was a Syrian officer. At this point, the emotions in the assembly boiled over and they furiously chased him out of the synagogue in an attempt to eliminate him.

So it hasn't been easy for Jesus to carry his message of love from which no person may feel excluded. It is from Luke that expression contained in the Acts of the Apostles which he puts in Peter's mouth: *'But God has made it clear to me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean.'* (Ac 10:28). It is the end of religion. Religion relies on the division between the pure and the impure, between the righteous and the unrighteous, between those who deserve and those who do not deserve. Peter after his dramatic experience, came to the conclusion that: 'No, God has shown me that no man can be considered unclean, no man'. There is no human being that for his moral, religious, or sexual behaviour can feel somehow excluded from God's love. It is religion that excludes and says: you are worthy and you are unworthy, you are pure and you are unclean, you can come in and you have to stay out. It is religion that is God's enemy. But not so God: God's love must be conveyed to everyone. I repeat, Peter says: 'God has shown me that no person can be considered unclean'. Then Jesus carries forward this theme of universal love, not only with words, but from words he progresses to deeds.

A little later he met one of those people that every Jew, and especially every pious Jew, on seeing them, would keep at a safe distance, at least 2 meters. These people were considered a receptacle of impurity, so impure that if one of them put his foot on the threshold of your house, the whole house became impure and all walls needed to be washed with boiling water. If by any chance you brushed with your sleeve against the tunic of one of these people, you would become impure, and you would have to cleanse yourself. Who were these people? They were the tax collectors, custom officers, those who were called publicans; due to the fact that they were at the service of the rulers and especially because tax collection was given out by tender, they were impure. The ones who offered more took the job of custom officer and thereafter they were free to charge what they wanted. They were licensed thieves.

According to the Jewish religious tradition they had an indelible mark of impurity that even if one day a publican repented, for him there was no chance of salvation because according to the Mosaic law he would have had to return what he had stolen plus a fifth on top of that. And how could he find all the people he had defrauded? Therefore a publican is the image of a person for whom there is no hope of salvation.

Well, Jesus, to show that there is no person in the world, whatever his situation, that may feel excluded from the love of God, actually invites a publican to join his group. This is odd: there's no scribe following Jesus, there is no Pharisee following Jesus, but there is a publican. And what does Jesus do? If Jesus had been a serious person, a religious person, a pious person he would have had to tell Levi the publican: come follow me, but first do forty days of penance and prayers in the wilderness. Become clean and then you can come and be part of my community. And instead what does he do? Totally against common sense, he organises a dinner. This unleashes the furious wrath of the scribes and the Pharisees who said, not to Jesus himself, (because religious people always act

behind your back) but to his disciples: 'What kind of teacher do you have? Don't you see he eats with the impure and with sinners? (see Lk 6:30).

At that time, you know, people ate from a single tray into which all dipped their hands. If I am infected, and I dip my hand into the tray, the whole tray becomes infected; therefore every one else becomes infected. Then the scribes and Pharisees turned to Jesus' disciples, whom they knew to be the weak link, and said: "Why do you eat and drink with sinners? Be careful with this teacher! Don't you see that he infects you as well by mixing with these people?"

They hadn't figured out what was the great novelty that Jesus brought: a novelty that perhaps 2000 years later is still to be properly understood. With Jesus who is the son of God-love, it is not true that man must be worthy to receive the Lord, but, on the contrary, it is receiving the Lord that makes man worthy. It is not true that man must become pure before getting close to the Lord, but it is approaching the Lord that makes him pure.

According to the Pharisees and the scribes, who reason according to religious parameters, it was Levi who was infecting Jesus and his group. According to Jesus, it was Jesus, who with his love purifies Levi.

And Jesus will give an answer that after 2000 years still isn't yet properly understood by Christians. Jesus says one very clear thing: *'It is not those that are well who need the doctor, but the sick'* (Lk 5:31). These are the effects of religion, and talking about religion, as you noticed, I always speak negatively as it appears from the Gospels.

In the Gospels we distinguish between Religion and Faith. Religion is a creature of men that establishes how we deal with God and it is based on what man must do for God. With Jesus, this is finished; with Jesus, Faith begins: accepting what God does for men. It is religion that in its perversity has convinced people not to have either doctor or medicines. It's absurd: imagine a person feeling ill, you ask him/her: 'Have you called your doctor?' 'No, I am sick!' 'Okay, when then are you going to call him? When you're well?' Or: 'Have you taken your medicine?' 'No, I'm ill'. 'When are you going to take it then?' Religion has been able to convince people to behave like that. People are kept away from the Lord, why? Because they are in sin, because they are impure. But really it's they who are in need of the Lord!

Then Jesus says clearly: *'It is not those that are well who need the doctor, but the sick'*. Jesus presents himself as bread for the hungry, as medicine for the sick and it is absurd to keep a person away from the Lord because ill, or infected, or impure, or a sinner. Therefore Jesus introduces this image of the doctor that came for the sick and slowly prepares his great novelty, that of a God who does not give himself as a prize, but as a gift.

A prize is won depending on the merits of the recipient; when a gift is given it depends on the donor's generosity. The Lord does not give himself as a prize depending on the merits of the particular person who receives it, but he comes as a gift, and it does not depend on the recipient, but it depends on his heart, and his generosity. Jesus, and he will say this and explain it, Jesus' God is not attracted by people's merits, but by their needs; not by their virtues, but by their necessities. Not every one has merits and virtues; but we all have needs! And Jesus also shows in his attitude a teaching that is contained in Chapter 6 where he invites people to be as merciful as the Father.

In the Gospels Jesus never invites people to be holy. You know, in the Old Testament there is often the imperious command from God: *'Be holy because I am Holy'* (Lv 11:44-45; 19:2). And to be holy meant: observe all these rules, these precepts for holiness. Jesus in his teachings, not only in

Luke, but in any of the Gospels, never calls to holiness, ever. Holiness as observance of rules and precepts, is not for everyone.

But what is the especially deleterious effect of Holiness? It is that of separating people from one another. The Pharisees were the saints of the day. They (the word Pharisee means separated) separated themselves from all others through the observance of all the rules and precepts. The more you comply with them, the more you elevate yourself above the other people in an effort to meet with God who is supposed to be higher up.

Jesus did not invite anyone to be holy, but invites everyone to be merciful. To be holy is not for everyone, to be merciful is within reach of all. While holiness separates men from one another, mercy moves them closer.

Therefore Jesus' teaching is not to be saints, but to be merciful. And surpassing Matthew's theology (here is how Matthew presents the Father's nature: '*So that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike*' (Mt 5:45)), Luke says: be like your Father '*For he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked*'. (Lk 6:35). This is God. A God who, of course, causes scandal because no one has ever heard of a God of like this. It's always been the case in every religion, including the Jewish religion, that God rewards the good; but, especially, punishes the wicked.

If now this man, this person from Galilee, comes along and says that God is benevolent, i.e. treats even the ungrateful and the wicked well, then really there is no more religion! Quite right! Thanks to Jesus this is the end of Religion and beginning of Faith.

With Jesus, God's love is no longer to be deserved, but to be accepted. Under the old Covenant, the believer was the one who obeyed God by observing his laws; this discriminated against many people because not all could observe the laws; they therefore felt excluded forever from God. With Jesus the believer is not the one who obeys God by observing his laws, but the one who resembles him by practising a love similar to his; and this is possible even for people who aren't religious.

Well, we've just reached chapter seven, when something dramatic happens; this is much too much. And when it is too much, it is too much! Therefore when John the Baptist, who had been thrown into the prison at Machaerous, on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, heard from his disciples about this, he loses his patience and sends Jesus an ultimatum that felt like an excommunication. John the Baptist says: "*Are you the one who is to come or are we to expect someone else?*" (Lk 7:20)

This is the equivalent of saying: 'I have presented a Messiah with the axe in his hand; every tree that yields no fruit will be cut at the root. And they tell me that you go around saying that isn't true, but instead, if a tree does not bring fruit you hoe the ground around, add some fertiliser, wait one, two, three years until it bears fruit. I have introduced you as the one who separates the wheat from the chaff, i.e. the righteous from sinners and they tell me that you have even called sinners to be part of your group, and you wine and dine these sinners'.

So John the Baptist sends an ultimatum to Jesus that has all the flavour of an excommunication. Well Jesus' answer ends with: '*and blessed is anyone who does not find me a cause of falling*' (Lk 7:23). Love shocks. Why? Because the whole religious tradition presented a God whose love we had to deserve. Therefore this causes anger: 'How could it be that while I work so hard to observe these rules, while I have sacrificed my life to deserve God's love, you tell me that God's love is bestowed even on those that don't make any effort, who have done nothing to deserve it?' Therefore, for the mentality in the time represented by John the Baptist this was too much.

But Jesus proffers his advice: blessed is anyone who does not find me a cause of falling. And if he says this, it is because he knows he is saying something huge, and Jesus truly will be a source of scandal. Twice he is approached by women (to start with every woman was considered unclean), but these two women were one worse than the other in Jewish culture: one was a prostitute, the other a woman who had a venereal infection and women like these were strictly forbidden to touch a man because by touching they transmitted their infection, their impurities. Well these two women, both the prostitute and the one suffering from haemorrhages have the courage to transgress law and tradition, and therefore risk their lives (for the one suffering from haemorrhages there was the death penalty if voluntarily touched a man), and by transgressing the law, they commit a sacrilege.

This time Jesus gets into big trouble. People who were considered to be in a state of impurity according to the morals and religion of the time could not in any way touch the Lord and, if they did, they would have committed a sacrilege because he was the son of God. At that time, why didn't Jesus chase them away? Why didn't he reprimand them? Quite the opposite, Jesus encourages them! And what did he say to these two women? Take heart, my daughter, *'Your faith has saved you!'* (Lk 7:50; 8:48) But are we joking? What faith! They have committed a sacrilege!

What in the eyes of religion is a sacrilege, in the eyes of Jesus is an expression of faith that Jesus actually promotes. But they told me that I could not get close to you because I am a sinner and that, if I come close to you, I commit another sin. Don't worry... this isn't true! You've seen the effects: as you came closer to me you've been healed.

Therefore, what in the eyes of religion is considered a sacrilege, in the eyes of Jesus will be considered an expression of faith. At this point in the Gospel something dramatic happens. We have always said that, in religions, God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. But how did he punish the wicked? Israel has been for centuries under the Persian Empire, and had adopted some of the customs and cultures of this empire.

In the Persian Empire there was a very important character called the Eye of the King who was a bit like a General Inspector of the provinces. He used to travel around the whole Empire, looking at the behaviour of Governors and then referred to the King. 'This Governor performs well, let's give him a commendation'. Or 'That Governor misbehaves; he needs to be deposed or even eliminated'. This was the King's eye. The duty of the Eye of the King in the old Testament is performed by Satan. Satan in the book of Job is not the devil that afterwards we Christians have invented. Satan is a servant of God who carries out the work of an Inspector. He travels around the Earth to evaluate men's situation and then he refers to God, asking permission to punish them.

When Jesus proclaims that God is love, that God does not get offended (the God who gets offended is so dear to religion...) and above all that God does not punish, then for poor Satan unemployment is beckoning. Then when Jesus sends 72 disciples to proclaim this (it's not just a limited region that Jesus could walk through, but he sends out 72 disciples to proclaim this) and they come back saying: 'We've proclaimed it', what did Jesus say? Jesus says: *'I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven'*. (Lk 10:18) The role of Satan who was part of the divine Court, who walked around Earth, watching people and spying on them then disappears.

And poor Satan finds himself unemployed because God doesn't care how people behaved. God's love is not conditioned by their behaviour. God's love is not influenced by man's behaviour or by his responses. God loves because he is love. Not only God is good, but God is exclusively good. Then poor Satan doesn't know what to do. It would be a waste of time for him to go to the Eternal Father and say: 'Look, that one has sinned'. Well, so what? 'Then punish him!' For heaven's sake,

God does not punish; God loves. So poor Satan fell to earth and t he is no longer performing his role of the accuser.

In the book of Revelation where the author describes this fall, we find: "*Now that the accuser, who accused our brothers day and night before our God, has been brought down.*" (Rv 12:10) So the one who accused men, the one who reproached them, who made them feel guilty, shameful, is fallen from heaven to earth. (A bad joke one might think of ... fell to the ground and where has he landed? The safe answer is: in the confessionals!)

And the Gospel continues. We've said that, for Jesus, the believer is not the one who obeys God by observing his laws, but the one who resembles the Father by practising a love similar to his. Then it may be that we have a believer who does not believe in God, one who never sets foot in the temple, one that does not comply with our religious rules: yes, of course! And Jesus in the parable of the Samaritan presents the Samaritan, the most outcast person from the point of view of religion, as the only one that behaves how God behaves.

In Hebrew there are two verbs: to have compassion which is a divine action with which you give back life to those who have lost it. This is exclusive of God in the old Testament and of Jesus in the new. Men cannot have compassion because having compassion means to give life back. For men the equivalent verb is to have mercy.

Jesus says that it was a Samaritan, a person who is furthest from religion, furthest from the Temple who had compassion for the unfortunate one. This was so objectionable that when Jesus asks the doctor of the law who queried him in the first instance: 'Which of these three behaved like a good neighbour towards the unfortunate one', (and there was a priest and a Levite and a Samaritan) the answer should have been: the Samaritan. But the term Samaritan was so obscene - like an insult (a punishment of 39 lashes was contemplated for calling someone a Samaritan without reason) - that the doctor of the law, not to dirty his mouth with the term Samaritan, replies: He who has had mercy of him. Jesus had asked 'Who had compassion of him?'. However the doctor of the law cannot tolerate that a person, especially a Samaritan, can act like God. He therefore doesn't say: The one who had compassion of him, but: The one who had mercy of him (see Lk 10:29-37).

Therefore, for Jesus, who is the believer? The believer is the one who resembles the Father by practising a love similar to his; even one that is further from religion like the Samaritan. Instead what about the old believer, the one who obeys God by observing his laws? It is the priest who in order to obey the law of God leaves the poor man dying. And Jesus continues in this crescendo. We will shortly arrive at some verses that although they belong to Luke, are no longer in Luke's Gospel. We'll have to go and find them in another Gospel.

It is in this crescendo, in this wave of mercy that Luke tells the parables of the Lost Sheep that Jesus retrieves (Lk 15:1-7 and that of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) where the Evangelist presents a Father that is madly in love; with these parables the Evangelist heralds a truth that even today, after 2000 years of Gospel, is not well understood. The most useless thing that believers can do is asking God for forgiveness because God never feels offended and therefore never needs to forgive.

But this was part and parcel of a religious tradition that was all a litany of: Lord have mercy, Mercy Lord, forgive my faults, but are you sure he has forgiven me ...?. Jesus' attitude was sensational; it was not understood. When the father runs out to meet the boy, (remember that the son had prepared the Act of Contrition), the father does not let him finish it, he shuts his mouth. I'm not interested in knowing why you're back, I'm not interested in your act of contrition; feel instead how much I love you. And when the Evangelist says that the father ran out to meet him (when we read the Gospel we

must always put ourselves in the shoes of the first listeners who did not know how the story was going to end), people would have expected a severe reprimand: this scoundrel, imbecile son abandoned his father with his inheritance, went to a foreign land, quickly squandered his inheritance and ended up doing the lowest of all jobs, the most repulsive of jobs for a Jew: a swineherd. When he decides to go back home he doesn't do it out of repentance, because he misses his father, but because he's starving. He says to himself: in my house I had food. I must go back home, but how shall I do it? I have lost the right to be treated as a son, and so I shall ask to be treated as a servant.

Jesus says: *'His father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms' ...* and I would have expected: *'and he strangled him'*. You brute, you were treated so well here, you were a lord while you were at home, now you are starving to death! And instead, *'He clasped him in his arms and kissed him'*. This *'He clasped him in his arms and kissed him'* is a sign that forgiveness has been granted. This appears in the first great forgiveness of the Bible when Esau was swindled out of his inheritance by his brother. His brother then escaped, but Esau tracked him down. He galloped towards him with 400 horsemen. His brother thought that he was finished. But Esau clasped him and kissed him. The kiss was a sign of forgiveness.

So this father, who represents the action of God, forgives his son before his son can ask for forgiveness. God never forgives because he never feels offended. We said that God does not look at the useless merits of people, he is not interested in merits, but notices people's needs, as is shown in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Lk 18:9-14).

You know, there's a Pharisee who stuffs his mouth with all his virtues and there is a wretch of a publican who says: O Lord, this is my life, you can see what a miserable life it is! Well the love of God overlooks and ignores the unnecessary merits of the Pharisee and feels irresistibly attracted towards the sinner's needs.

Finally, before we get to those verses which are missing, we look at a hopeless case, (see Lk. 18:18-27) really a hopeless case. Jesus said: for the wealthy there is no place in the kingdom of God. *'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle'*. The community of Jesus is made up of lords and not of rich men. A lord is the one who gives and we all we are called to be lords; a rich man is one who has wealth and keeps it for himself.

Here then we have the desperate case of a person who is rich, very rich, and on top of this is a publican (see Lk 19:1-10). A hopeless case! How would you categorise this one, because once you make allowance for his wealth, he is still a publican. And I repeat, for tax collectors it was impossible to convert and be saved. They carried this indelible mark of impurity. Well Jesus goes in search of this rich man, this publican, and proclaims that *'The Son of Man came to seek out and save what was lost'* (Lk 19:10). Therefore the action of the Lord is for everyone because as formulated first of all by Peter, I remind you again, there is not even one person in the world that can be excluded from the love of God.

And finally now we get to eleven dangerous verses in Luke's Gospel. But they aren't there any longer because for at least a century no Christian community accepted them in this Gospel. Think about it: they accepted everything we've seen so far and the material in it is hard enough to accept. But Luke continued with these eleven verses that communities on receiving his Gospel would say: no, no, thank you! They would cut out this page and return it to the sender. Think, only in the third century these verses have found hospitality in a Gospel they didn't belong to, only from the fifth century have they been used in the liturgy; the fathers of Greek language until the 9th century never commented on this episode. Worse for the Latin fathers, in the West: until the 12th century, no

church father commented on this episode. What had happened? Why was this episode so distressing?

This episode was finally accommodated in John's Gospel and is known as that of 'The Adulterous Woman'. The style, grammar and themes used absolutely exclude that this page is John's. It is undoubtedly Luke's. In fact, if you go to the Gospel of Luke in Chapter 21 verse 38 and insert this episode there, you will find it is the right context. On the other hand, if you remove it from John's Gospel Chapter 8 you will see that the narrative becomes smoother.

For centuries no community accepted this episode. Why? We have a very authoritative testimony from St. Augustine who criticised the communities that did not want the episode and did so with these words. "Some people of weak faith or rather enemies of authentic faith, I believe out of fear of granting impunity for their wives' sins, remove from their codex (codex means the book of the Gospel) the gesture of leniency that the Lord made towards the adulteress as if the one who said 'From this moment sin no more' had granted permission to sin". That's why every community did not want this page: because the forgiveness that Jesus grants to the adulterous woman without rebuking her off, without asking for penance, was outrageous, intolerable, and was dangerous for men who would say: 'If our women know that the Lord forgives adulteresses in this way ...!!'

At that time the penitential practice was very, very severe. At that time the four Gospels weren't yet bound together, but each community had its own Gospel which then exchanged with other communities. When a community received Luke Gospel it would cut out these eleven verses as though to say: thanks, but we are not interested in this message because, as Augustine will say later on, our women may think they've been granted impunity. However they wouldn't trash them because they were words of an evangelist, and therefore important words.

So, here is why we talk about the scandal of mercy. Let's therefore see these dangerous eleven verses. They are at Chapter 8, verses 1-11 of John's Gospel, but then again, it has indeed been proved that they belong to Luke's Gospel.

1 *And Jesus went to the Mount of Olives*, The Mount of Olives is just opposite the Temple's esplanade.

2 *At daybreak he appeared in the Temple again; and as all the people came to him, he sat down and began to teach them.* This was the reason that triggered the trap against Jesus: Jesus exerts an incredible charm on people and the whole crowd goes and listen to him.

3 *The scribes and Pharisees*, the religious caste in power cannot put up with it any longer, but doesn't know what to do. How to get rid of Jesus? Because as long as the crowds support him we cannot get rid of him. Therefore we need to devise a trap so that Jesus harms himself or in some way contravenes the law. But why has Jesus so much charm? Because Jesus' teaching a positive one. In Jewish culture, in Jewish spiritual tradition, the highest level of spirituality was achieved with the formula: "Do not do unto others what you do not want done to you". Well Jesus take this, but changes it into a positive: not a "do not do", but "What you want others to do to you so you do". So Jesus' message is fully positive, and it is especially this that people felt; they felt that his message came from God. Jesus' message can never be imposed, but is always offered. Jesus does not speak of obligations, but speaks of invitations.

Jesus' message, since it is a proclamation of love, cannot be imposed because when love is imposed it becomes violence. It was the scribes, it was the High Priests who imposed their doctrine. Why?

Because they were the first ones not to believe it. Why do you impose a truth? Because you are not sure of its effectiveness. If a truth is good and does good to man, it is enough to offer it, there is no need to force it on people.

Why do religious authorities need to impose their doctrine, force it on people with penalties and punishments? Because they are the first one to disbelieve its effectiveness, disbelieve its truthfulness. Jesus instead does not need to impose, it is enough for him to offer because Jesus' message does nothing but express man's desire for fullness of life, a desire that each person has within.

Each person has within him a desire for fullness of life, and he feels it is expressed in Jesus' message. Jesus therefore does not need to impose, but only to propose. The only people who are unwilling to accept his teaching unfortunately are the religious people: those who lived in a framework of merit could not accept a framework of gift.

And now the issue that the Evangelist presents us and with which he challenges his community is: decide in which God you want to believe in. In God the Legislator? The one that makes laws and prohibits and punishes those who break them? Or in God the Creator, the God who creates life, loves and defends it? This is the issue that the Evangelist presents us with.

We have said Jesus went into the temple and great crowds came towards him.

3 *The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in the middle, 4 they said to Jesus.* In order to understand this scene we have to understand the institution of marriage in Judaic time which is different from ours. Marriage was conducted in two separate stages. The first stage, when the girl was 12 years and one day old and her prospective husband was 18 years and one day old there was the ceremony of marriage. The man accompanied by his parents goes to the bride's house. Normally this would be the first time they met. On this day the dowry is agreed. The man then puts his prayer shawl, (in Israel it is men who wear them) on the girl's head and says: "You are my bride". And she says: "You are my husband". From that moment on they are man and wife. But after this everyone goes back home.

A year later, on the girl's 13th birthday and the boy's 19th, it will be the girl who is taken to the groom's house for the second part of the wedding, what we would call the nuptials, and begin to live together.

For adultery in the first period of a marriage when they weren't yet living together, and it was forbidden for them to have marital relations, the penalty was death by stoning. For adultery in the second stage of marriage the penalty was death by strangulation. So here we know from the penalty the scribes request, stoning, that the girl was in her first stage of marriage.

Stoning is prescribed by the book of Deuteronomy. It says: *'If a virgin is engaged to a man, and another man encounters her in the town and has sexual intercourse with her, you will take them both to the gate of the town in question and stone them to death'* (Dt 22:23-24). You will take **them**, but where is the man? They have caught this woman red handed, in an adulterous situation, and what about the man? They've shown special consideration for the man. How come? This woman isn't suspected of adultery, they caught her in bed with her friend; but the man isn't here, there is only the woman. *You will take them both to the gate of the town in question and stone them to death: the girl, for not having called for help in the town; the man, for having exploited his fellow-citizen's wife. You must banish this evil from among you* (Dt 22:23-24). Anyway they take to Jesus this woman caught red handed in adultery.

Adultery was common because marriages weren't based on love, but were marriages of convenience managed by families without the couple having had a chance of knowing each other. This was an arranged marriage that required to be accepted, but the heart has always beaten in people's chests and even though the law made severe provisions, sometimes adultery happened. The rabbis who wrote the word of God, which is certainly the word of God, though written by men, and therefore they may have added something to their advantage, prescribed that, for a male Jew, adultery was committed only with a married Jewish woman. That's why they married their daughters so young. But a man could sleep with all unmarried Jewish women, (except that they were too young), and with all the pagan women. And this wasn't considered adultery.

For a female instead, any relationship with any man was considered adultery. But there was a problem: What if I don't have proof that adultery was committed? If I suspect that my wife is cheating, but I can't prove it, unlike in this case where she was caught red handed, what do I do then? Don't worry, the word of God had envisaged every situation. One of the more chilling pages, chilling because it was put into practice for centuries, can be found in Chapter 5 of the book of Numbers. Chapter 5, the word of God, prescribes that if the husband suspects his wife of adultery he must take her to the temple or a synagogue and tell the priest. Then the priest first takes away the veil from the woman's head (which was a dishonour because only prostitutes didn't wear head-scarves), then begins to sweep the floor of the temple or synagogue and collect the dirt, put it in a cup, mixed it with water and then write all the curses that were sanctioned by law against an adulteress, added them to the water, mash all together and then gave it to drink to the woman.

If she suffered from stomach ache then she was guilty. Says the book of Numbers: *'After he has made her drink it, if it is true that she has made herself unclean and been unfaithful to her husband, the water of cursing then entering into her will indeed be bitter: her belly will swell and her sexual organs shrivel, and she will be an object of execration to her people'*. (Nb 5:27)

So they lead this woman, a young girl really, who, as we shall see, was caught red handed, to Jesus and say to him:

Master: how hypocritical; “master” was the title by which disciples, those who wanted to learn, addressed their master; they didn't want to learn from Jesus, just find an excuse to condemn him. It's the religious people's hypocrisy of whom the Psalm says: *'Though their mouth is smoother than butter, enmity is in their heart'* (Ps 55:21). So they addressed Jesus with the word “master” and say:

This woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. And here is the trap:

5 *and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind.* This wording shows the contempt these scribes and Pharisees had toward her. I repeat, from their request of punishment, stoning, we know that she is a woman in her first stage of marriage, so she was a very young girl, between the age of 12 and 13. But the scribes' contempt towards her was very deep: *in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind.*

What have you got to say? The snare was well put together. We have seen that a crowd had gathered in the temple to listen to Jesus, because they were hearing from him that God was love, this God loved everyone, this God forgave before forgiveness was even requested, a God whose love nobody was excluded from. So much so that Jesus had called Levi to follow him. So much so that Jesus, something scandalous at the time, had some women in his group as well.

You know, in the Hebrew language the term disciple exists only as a masculine gender; there is no female equivalent, because disciples were only male. John the Baptist had only male disciples.

Jesus, expression of a God whose love no person, whatever his/her position, his/her conduct can be excluded from, had let some women into his group. So all these people followed Jesus because he had answers to their desire for a fullness of life; how was Jesus going to respond when faced with Moses' law? *'In the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind; what have you got to say?'* If he says: "Observe the Law of Moses", then this whole crowd that had heard his message of love, a different message, was going to be disappointed and would abandon him. If Jesus, as they expected had said: "No, let's forgive her", then for the scribes Jesus would have blasphemed, and since they were in the Temple and there were guards around, they would have had the chance to arrest Jesus; and this was what they wanted.

And the Evangelist, here Luke is an extraordinary evangelist, wonderful, but be careful when you read Luke because he doesn't dip his pen in ink, but in vitriol; his writing is vitriolic. And here's Luke's jab:

6 *They asked him this as a test.* The word "test" appears three times in Luke's Gospel; the first time was used when Satan tests Jesus in the desert. The Evangelist is telling us: Beware! Here we have the scribes. The scribes weren't just people who could write, but they were the official theologians, they represented the infallible Teachings of the 'Church'. The word of a scribe had the same validity as the word of God, in fact it was even superior. They used to say: when you find a conflict between the teaching of a scribe and what is written in the Bible, accept the scribe's line because it is he who correctly interprets the Scriptures for you. So we have here the cream of Israel's religious aristocracy, the scribes and the Pharisees (Pharisees, as you know, means separate and they are those who kept all 613 precepts of the law): thus the Evangelist unmasks them. These people who seem so pious and so devout, in fact they are Satan's tools: they test Jesus.

Looking for an accusation to use against him. Do you remember who is Satan? He is the accuser. Who is Satan here? Scribes and Pharisees. Be careful with these people who seem so pious, so devout, so religious who, to make themselves noticed, dress in a particular way, whose names are preceded by so many religious titles in order to show that they are closer to the Lord; careful, not only they do not help you to get closer to the Lord, but they are tempting devils who want to accuse people. Then the Evangelist's denunciation is tremendous: in the Temple, a holy place par excellence, scribes and Pharisees act like the tempting Satan. How did Jesus react?

But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger. Jesus does not answer, Jesus bends down and begins to write on the ground with his finger. This is a prophetic action that refers to what is written in the book of the Prophet Jeremiah (Jr 17:13), where it says that those who have abandoned the Lord will be written in the Earth, in the dust, i.e. will be dead. The Lord is presented by Jeremiah as a source of living water. Those who approach this water, quenching their thirst, have life. Those who abandon this fountain will have their names written in the dust, i.e. will be dead.

So Jesus' action is a prophetic, symbolic action. Jesus denounces the strenuous defence of the law on the part of the scribes and the Pharisees as a mask of their hatred, a hatred that is deadly. For Jesus those who hatch feelings of death are already dead. John says in his first Epistle *'... Whoever does not love, remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you are well aware that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him.'* (1Jn 3:14-15), that is they are permanently dead. So Jesus seeing these people who are so pious, so religious, but harbour feelings of death not only towards the girl who is used as a lure, but especially towards himself, Jesus writes on the ground.

7 *As they persisted with their question, he straightened up and said:* we've already said that Jesus is

in a trap because if he says: 'Yes condemn her', he loses all the people who follow him. If he says: 'No, let her go', there are already guards ready to apprehend him. And here is Jesus' unexpected answer:

Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her. According to the Jewish Law, a death sentence by stoning was not carried out as we are used to seeing in films or how we imagine it: everyone throws a stone against the unfortunate person. Let's read from the Talmud: 'The place of stoning was twice a man's height. One of the witnesses pushed him by the hips, [so that] he was overturned on his heart. He was then turned on his back. If that caused his death, he had fulfilled [his duty]; but if not, the second witness took the stone and threw it on his chest. If he died thereby, he had done [his duty]; but if not, he [the criminal] was stoned by all Israel ...'(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 45a – Soncino 1961 Edition, page 295)

Therefore the one condemned to stoning was thrown into a pit and if he/she didn't die immediately the second witness was supposed to take a stone (in another page of the Talmud we find: so heavy that barely two men can lift it – therefore about 50 kg) and had to throw it. So the one who throws the first stone is not the one who initiates the stoning, it is the one who kills, because a 50 kg stone falling on a person usually kills. Afterwards everyone else filled the pit by launching more stones. So Jesus invites someone to kill this girl: *Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.* And again the Evangelist writes with irony:

8 *Then he bent down and continued writing on the ground.* It could be that the list of people who were dead was quite long. And watch this group: it was so at one in accusing the woman and framing Jesus, but once they saw the danger they melted away one by one. The Evangelist with great irony wrote:

9 *When they heard this they went away one by one.* They slipped out ... let's hope nothing happens to me.

Beginning with the eldest, until the last one had gone. The term used by the Evangelist shouldn't be translated with oldest, because here it doesn't mean the oldest people; here it means the elders, the members of the Sanhedrin who could pronounce death sentences. It is the elders, as we find in the book of Daniel, Chapter 13, where there is the famous story of Susanna and the two elders. You can read this story to understand this better. So they slipped away one by one.

And Jesus was left alone with the woman, who remained in the middle. And here is the reason why this page was considered unacceptable by the Christian community.

10 *Jesus again straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they?' Remember scribes and Pharisees? 'The law of Moses commanded us to stone women of this kind'. This shows a deep contempt. Jesus does not despise anyone; Jesus acknowledges her dignity and says:*

'Has no one condemned you?' **11** *'No one, sir,' she replied.* Here we could have expected: 'but I condemn you'. Jesus had said: 'Whoever is without sin cast the first stone'. Therefore the only one who can condemn her is Jesus. And here's the scandal of mercy in Luke's Gospel: this verse is unacceptable. She said: 'No one, sir'.

'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go away, and from this moment sin no more.' Jesus, who did not come to judge but to save, doesn't reprimand the woman, he doesn't humiliate her, he doesn't give her a good telling off, he doesn't insult her. He doesn't even invite her to repent and ask for forgiveness. God's forgiveness had already been granted; it's now up to the woman to make herself aware of this pardon. And with the Father's forgiveness she'd also received the necessary strength to

return to live. This is why Jesus says: 'Go and sin no more'.

We have done a rather fast round-up of Luke's Gospel, emphasising on purpose these scandalous verses that were considered unacceptable. But Jesus' God is the God of love from which nobody can feel excluded.

St Paul will say in his Epistle to the Romans: *Who can bring any accusation against those that God has chosen? When God grants saving justice who can condemn? Are we not sure that it is Christ Jesus, who died – yes and more, who was raised from the dead and is at God's right hand – and who is adding his plea for us?* (Rm 8:33-34) Then the God of Jesus is love, the God of Jesus does not punish and more importantly, and let's hope this is the fruit of this evening, the God of Jesus is not frightening. If, due to the religious tradition that we have acquired, due to what we have been taught, there is sometimes an image of God that puts fear in us, let us get rid of it without any hesitation because it is a false God that should have no place in our existence.

Questions

Question: ... I'm a bit puzzled by the figure of John the Baptist who stands for the Jewish tradition (the axe, fire etc.) but is presented as Jesus' precursor, Jesus who would announce God's mercy.

Secondly, our response to this immense love of God. He loves us so how can we respond to that? We go after a good life, as God loves us anyway and forgives us and eventually we are saved! Or not?

Answer: The Evangelists while passing on historical elements do not intend to write historically accurate stories, therefore the characters are presented according to what is their theological intent. The figure of John the Baptist varies from Gospel to Gospel. E.g. in John's Gospel the figure of John the Baptist is clearly positive. If Luke presents us the Baptist's difficulty in understanding Jesus, although he had acknowledged, in his thoughts, that he will baptise in Holy Spirit, it is because Luke wants to show the turmoil people go through in accepting and recognising in Jesus the son of God while he behaved as if he was godless.

It's the same problem Mary had in understanding and welcoming this son that behaved in a strange way. John the Baptist's difficulty is the same difficulty that all people experience when moving from Religion to Faith. When for so long we had in our eyes an image of a God that gets offended, a God that punishes, a God that puts fear in people, the novelty of God who is love is baffling and can cause distress. So people resist, prefer to remain attached to that old image. The fact that this love is offered without needing to deserve it and unconditionally to all, obviously, doesn't mean that then one says: well then I do what I like, after all God is love. We have seen that this love is offered and is offered to be accepted. It is up to man to accept it. Love becomes effective, and operative not when it is offered, but when it is received and once one accepts this love, it is clear that one doesn't do whatever he likes / whatever is most convenient to him. Therefore all this continued offer of love is not to ensure that the man remains lazy: so I act as I want, after all God loves me; but it is a love received from the Lord that we have to turn into love offered to others.

Question: With reference to the parable of the prodigal son, at some point you have said: the most useless thing we can do is to ask God for forgiveness because God has already forgiven us even before we ask him for his forgiveness. How does one reconcile this concept of forgiveness in advance with the liturgy of the Holy mass where we start right away asking for forgiveness of our

sins ... and there is a whole sequence before get to the point where truly we ask God for forgiveness.

Reply: We notice how strident the liturgy is with its insistence on forgiveness. Let's change the liturgy! The liturgy unfortunately didn't follow at the same pace as the biblical reform. It is evident that it feels strident; certain liturgical forms are untenable, we can no longer use them. But how can we still say before taking communion: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, ..."; but when did Jesus ask us to be worthy to receive him?

Jesus does not offer himself to us, as I mentioned before, as a prize, but as a gift. It's not true that you need to be worthy to receive him, but it is in accepting the Lord that we are made worthy. Then the liturgy must be revised and needs to be in harmony with what is a novelty, the novelty relative to the Church discovery of the biblical teaching.

First of all some evangelical forms in the Church must be brought back to their original evangelical position and the liturgical formulation needs to be abandoned. What damage is caused by that formula before communion: 'Lamb of God, who take away the sins of the world!' But where in the Gospel is an expression like that? John the Baptist presents Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the **sin** of the world, not the **sins**. It is because 'sins' means our sins that the poor Jesus had to atone. You know he died for our sins ... I always remember the first Catechisms when they wanted to inculcate that the man who died on the cross had died for our faults and our sins: we didn't even know each other, we weren't even related! He died for me is a bit exaggerated! Imagine 7-8 years young children, what sins could they have? This Christ has exaggerated a bit, couldn't he find another solution?

John the Baptist says he has taken away the sin, i.e. there is a cloak over humanity which is the sin that prevents men discovering the love of God. And what is this sin? It is religion; religion has convinced men about sin, the feeling of guilt which prevents men from discovering the love of God. Therefore liturgy must be renewed, it should be reformulated. Certain liturgical expressions now don't mean anything.

Nothing to do with the liturgy, but it is one of my personal issues: I would like to tear funeral announcements, especially those for religious and pious people, that contain the sentence: 'He has gone back to the House of the Father'. People like this formula a lot! What utter nonsense! In biblical terms it is nonsense. If he has gone back it means that he was there before. It is in Greek philosophy that the souls were with God to start with, then came down into the body and cannot await to go back to God. It is important to note that all contempt for the human body had started from here; we do not return to any home. Some people, poor things, that have gone back to the Father's House, and travelled around, because they could not find it! Jesus said that we are the home of the Father. That is why death does not disrupt life: *'Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make a home in him'* (Jn 14:23). We are God's abode. This is why our life is indestructible: because we are inhabited by God.

That is why death does not disrupt life. And it is important because Jesus says he returned to the Father's House and then our loved ones in some way have gone back to this House, and cannot find it not realising that they were themselves the Father's House; therefore if we are the Father's House, the Father's House is here. I say this with reference to the funeral liturgy which is a disaster! You know the funeral final prayer: angels of heaven come down, then take him up, then ... Then let's change the liturgy, and liturgy gets changed from below.

Question: In a situation of power, in any field, how can we follow a powerless and weak God?

Answer: We have great strength, great certainty. We are the followers of Jesus that in the most dramatic moment of his life, when he was about to be abandoned by his disciples and hung from a cross which was a form of torture reserved to those who had been cursed by God, well Jesus, shortly before this happened, said to his disciples: *'Be courageous: I have conquered the world'*. (Jn 16:33) This is going to happen, take heart because I've conquered the world. God is weak because love is undoubtedly weak, but love wins because love is life. Then any power, any domain has already been defeated at the beginning because life will always have the upper hand. Then we in spite of the difficulties, sufferings, misunderstandings, persecutions, we have this certainty: we are the winners, because who gets in tune with life (and life means putting the good of man above all else) is already a winner.

Question: Faith and Religion. Faith is what counts, but hierarchies hold fast to Religion.

Answer: Why the use of religion? It is clear! If we want to subjugate a people, if we want to be in charge we cannot use faith. Faith makes people grow up, makes them able to stand on their own two feet and to reason with their heads. So if we want to control and subjugate we must use religion.

Why has religion still such a great fascination? Because while it deprives you of freedom, it gives you certainty. When you enter a large religious movement, you give up freedom because you are no longer free to do or think as you want, but you feel a great deal of security: you just carry out what others order you to do. You'll have a boss, a leader, a person who you recognize as such, who will tell you what to think, how to think, what to do and when to do it. Then you give up your freedom in exchange for security, but you remain at a childish stage, you will never be a grown up person.

That is why in the Gospel, as a condition to follow him, Jesus encourages us to leave those obstacles behind: *'In truth I tell you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land – and persecutions too – now in this present time'* (Mk 10:29-30). A hundred times is not quantity but quality; it means a blessing filled with mother, and sisters, and children, and brothers, and fields, ... but what about the father? The father was left out. The father represents the authority, he is the one who controls, but in the community of Jesus' followers there are no fathers. In the community of Jesus' followers the only father is God and God does not govern men issuing laws that men must observe, but giving them freely his spirit, his own ability to love.

Question: Today some people complain about the crucifix in offices ... they want to remove the crucifix, a symbol for Christians. What do you think? It seems an absurd request to me!

Answer: I ask only one thing: don't you find suspect that the defenders of plastic crucifixes on walls are the very ones who crucify the 'poor christs' in the flesh?

Question: Can you tell me something about confession because still today it starts like this: 'List your sins' and ends with something unsettling: as a penance say a prayer ... praying isn't penance, it should be joy; perhaps confession should start from: let's say a prayer together to bring about a change in our lives. However, today it is still done like that

Question: Tonight you've presented to us a God who is a bit too liberal ... for us it is to our advantage that he is like this, with his great understanding and compassion. I wanted to ask about the role of confession. Please explain for a moment why we are invited to go to confession frequently even for venial sins, why it increases the sanctifying grace. Not to speak about mortal sins: we cannot get closer to God because he has to pardon us first, we must ask for forgiveness.

Answer: Those who participate in these meetings know that there isn't an occasion when this question isn't asked. It is more than 30 years since the Catholic Church has completely changed this Sacrament, renovating it, turning it inside out like a sock, and changing its name. It's no longer called confession. Then let's not call it confession any more: this is the Sacrament of Reconciliation to bring again your life in tune with that of God.

In the confession, the emphasis was on the detailed list of faults, being careful not to forget about, or predominantly not to hide one, because that would have been sacrilegious. Those who were brought up during the 50s, a time of high levels of religious terrorism, know that preparing for these sacraments was a nightmare because when you went to confession you weren't sure if you had mentioned everything or not. I always tell the story, that in the village where I lived there was an elderly woman who suffered from this education. When she came to confession she would say: I confess all the sins I've made and even those that I haven't you never know in God's log book there might be something I've missed. And then the fear of going to communion if you had taken a drop of water etc.

So it is now called the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is not about obtaining forgiveness for your sins that are already forgiven, because God never forgives given that he never feels offended. We will never find in the Gospels an invitation by Jesus to sinners to ask God for forgiveness. It is strange, but yes, we often find, exaggerating a bit, from the first to the last page of the Gospels, Jesus insistence on the need to forgive the sins of others.

If I told you now: God forgave all my sins. How do you know? It could certainly be that I've been forgiven, but I can't prove it. Not even if you'd seen me five minutes earlier being confessed by John the Baptist would it be a guarantee that I have been forgiven. But if instead, knowing that I had grievances, feelings of resentment towards John the Baptist and then you see that now there is harmony between us, then this is proof of forgiveness.

Therefore the forgiveness that God has granted us for our sins becomes operational and effective in our lives when it is translated into forgiveness towards others. So the Sacrament of Reconciliation is useful for this. It is not so much a detailed list of our childish faults that remains always the same, but the ever enriching encounter with God's mercy. In fact in the new rite of penance (now more than 30 years old) the centre point is no longer the list of faults, but listening to the word of God. That's what changes our lives and that's what gives us strength. If you go with your infantile list of sins, you will always have the same list throughout your life.

You know, I said many times, that in my village an old man went to confession for many years. Every time he would say: 'Father Alberto, the usual'. The absolution was also very speedy: 'Romualdo, the usual' ... for a lifetime he confessed the same infantile faults. In this way, the sacrament is ineffective. The sacrament instead means transmission of divine life.

Is it possible that the same person confesses the same things the following month, or a year later? Instead the sacrament, as proposed by the new liturgy, with the listening of the divine word, the laying on of hands and the effectiveness of the transmission of the spirit, then yes, this is transmission of divine life.

Question: With regard to Communion, we live in a time, in a world now where many couples and many families are separated and we have new unions that are not blessed, so to speak, by the sacrament of marriage. These people have been banished from the Church and cannot receive communion. It seem we are going back a little to the time of the scribes and Pharisees who banished certain categories of people and so excluded them. I wonder whether this vision is in accordance

with Christ's doctrine or it is us that in name of religion banish these people ...

Question: Reflecting on what you said before about Communion I have a suspicion: isn't it by any chance that Communion is the sacrament of sinners?

Answer: Issues about divorce, Confession and Communion, at the end of the evening?! Of course you understand that it isn't possible to respond to these very delicate questions in a comprehensive manner. There is so much debate about them. So let's answer only in bullet points.

Regarding communion: always remember that we priests are not the owners of that bread, we are only the servants. Jesus in the episode of the sharing of the breads that prefigured the Eucharist says to his disciples: now give it and share it. The priests are not the masters of the bread, but it is the Lord and he said to share it. You know that with the episode of the sharing of the loaves and fishes the Evangelist foreshadows the Eucharist. There are thousands of people, Jesus does not ask them to wash their hands (ritual purification) before they eat; he doesn't say that only the ones who are pure can eat his bread. The bread is given to all and sundry. There was no need to purify oneself in order to eat the bread, but it is the bread that purifies. So remember that the priests are only the servants of this bread, not the owners and it isn't up to them to decide who is worthy and who is not, to whom to give it and to whom to deny it. It is the Lord who gives.

If we are not convinced let's read John's Chapter 13: the washing of feet. Have you noticed where the washing of the feet is placed during the last supper? During dinner, and not before. Jesus doesn't wash their feet to purify the disciples and so to make them worthy to attend the dinner, but he washes their feet during dinner, and this is the meaning of the Eucharist. It's the dinner that purifies the people. The Communion then, it is not up to us to decide who can and who cannot receive it. Jesus said: I am the doctor and I've come for the sick.

As for the law about divorce it's a relatively new issue for the Church because the Catholic Church, although universal, is Roman. In Italy, divorce was introduced during the 70s, therefore just the day before yesterday and the Church found itself, as is often the case, unprepared to address this issue, and therefore responded with old formulas to new needs. The Holy Spirit says that it will guide us to the new, and the Holy Spirit is the guarantee for the Christian communities that it will be able to give new responses in the face of people's new needs.

Unfortunately, often the Church gives old answers when faced with new needs. So the Church has found itself unprepared and in an embarrassing situation, something that never happened before in history. The Church has always, and rightly so, claimed a mandate from Jesus to forgive every sin, all sins. There isn't a sin that the Church cannot forgive. Right now it stumbles on the sin of divorce. It can forgive every sin, but cannot forgive the sin of divorce. Something is wrong.

We have arrived at today's paradox: is the sin of divorce worse than that of murder? If someone kills his/her spouse, and then repents, he/she can remarry and be given access to the sacrament of Communion. If one divorces and remarries then he/she is damned forever. Is it possible that divorce is worse than murder?

Someone could think: I can solve my problem by killing my ex spouse! Under Italian law and with a decent lawyer, you get a prison sentence of a couple of years at most and, think about it, problem solved! If I had killed my spouse when I first thought about divorcing him/her, I would be out of jail by now.

Is divorce more serious a crime than murder? Furthermore, what is the difference between a divorced and a widowed person? The divorcée's spouse is still alive, the other's is deceased, but

practically, the situation is the same. Aren't widowed people allowed to remarry? No! For centuries the Church forbade widowers and widows to remarry. Afterwards, it relented. But just think that until the second Vatican Council (the day before yesterday) during the celebration of marriage of a widowed person there was no blessing: you've been blessed once already why do you want another blessing! Therefore the Church takes a while to understand it, but the condition of a divorcee is similar to that of a widowed person. Is a widowed person allowed remarry? Then a divorcee must also be allowed without that perverse formula that is the result of a sick and unhealthy mind.

You know that the concession benevolently granted to divorced people is: you can live together provided that you live as brother and sister. I always wondered what sort of relationship the person that invented this formula had with his sister. What kind of madness can produce such a formula! The Church, we know for sure, is addressing these issues. Unfortunately, the Church's times are long, but the invitation is for your own happiness to come; do not wait for a rubber-stamped document. Let us grab our happiness from now because the Lord wants us happy!

Question: Thank you again for this word of the Gospel that truly gives life and gives joy. One feels the need to share it with others. A few weeks ago I listened to the difficulties a friend of mine went through after she became a widow this summer. She was really looking for something new because she prayed so much to be worn out, but the Lord had not granted grace, etc. etc. I sent her a few of your excerpts, the ones that I thought more enlightening; she received them well for about a month and then I found her with a big shield in front of her, a deep protection ... I've figured out that one can offer a proposal, one can only invite, because this is Christ's way. But practically I have to be silent. As I struggle to be silent, I ask your help. Thanks again.

Answer: Jesus' message is only love and can only be offered, proposed. Jesus himself says: 'Don't insist'. You can't insist. If a person refuses, resists, it is because there are problems so serious that it is not good to insist. One offers and one suggests, then in time ... every person has his time.