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To volunteers and operators of mercy: your presence is the hand of Christ held out to all

“You are among the most precious things the Church has, you who every day, often silently and unassumingly, give shape and visibility to mercy. You express one of the most noble desires of the human heart, making a suffering person feel loved”, said the Holy Father to the tens of thousands of participants in the Jubilee of Volunteers and operators of mercy, gathered this morning in St. Peter’s Square. The Jubilee began yesterday and will conclude tomorrow, 4 September with the ceremony for the canonisation of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

The Holy Father’s catechesis was preceded by a Bible readings, hymns, music of various types, and the testimonies of volunteers, including a Syrian refugee, who reached Italy via the humanitarian corridors organised by the Sant’Egidio Community and the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy; a Palestinian woman who works with the Misericordie di Betlemme, in a troubled land where service to one’s neighbour is especially meaningful; a volunteer of St. Vincent de Paul, who as a result of a judicial error spent twelve months in an Italian prison and lost his job, after which he devoted himself to assistance for prisoners; and finally a Missionary of Charity, a member of the order created by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who after serving in Bombay was sent to the Middle East, where she worked with the most marginalised in thirty countries. In 2012, along with another four sisters, she was posted to Aden, in Yemen, in the most adverse circumstances, where amid bombing and shooting, even the most basic provisions were lacking: water, food, and medicines for the people in their care. However, they continued to “knock at the Tabernacle door” and asked God to help those in need who depended upon their community, and following an extraordinary series of coincidences, and reciprocal giving and receiving, they succeeded.

After the reading of St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, a hymn to love “that constitutes one of the most beautiful and demanding texts for our witness of faith”, the Pope commented that the apostle often referred to love and faith in his writings, but this text offers something “exceedingly grand and original”. He states, the Holy Father said, that “unlike faith and hope, love ‘never ends’. It is for ever. This teaching must be for us an unshakable certainty; the love of God will never diminish in our lives or in human history. It is a love which remains forever youthful, active, dynamic and which has an attraction beyond all telling. It is a faithful love that does not betray, despite our fickleness. It is a fruitful love which generates and surpasses our laziness. We are witnesses to this love. The love of God, truly, comes towards us; it is like a swelling river that engulfs us without overwhelming us. Quite the contrary is true: ‘If I have not love, I am nothing’, says St. Paul. The more we allow ourselves to be taken up by this love, the more our life will be renewed. We should say with all our being: I am loved, therefore I

exist!"

However, the love of which the Apostle speaks is not something abstract or vague; rather, "it is a love that is seen, touched, and experienced first hand. The greatest and most expressive form of this love is Jesus. His entire person and His life are nothing other than the concrete revelation of the Father's love, reaching its highest expression on the Cross: 'God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us'. This is love!" Francis exclaimed. "Not words, love. From Calvary, where the suffering of God's Son reaches its culmination, the source of love flows, a love that wipes away all sin and transforms everything into new life. We always have indelibly within us, this certainty of faith: Christ 'loved me and gave Himself for me'. This is the great certainty: Christ loved me, He gave Himself for me, for you, for all, for every one of us. ... Nothing and no one can ever separate us from the love of God. Love, therefore, is the highest expression of life; it allows us to exist."

Francis went on to emphasise that, before this essential truth of our faith, "the Church can never allow herself to act as that priest and Levite who ignored the man half dead at the side of the road. She cannot look away and turn her back on the many forms of poverty that cry out for mercy," and remarked that to turn away so as not to see hunger, disease and exploited people is a grave sin; a sin that in our times, Christians cannot permit themselves. "It is not worthy of the Church nor of any Christian to 'pass by on the other side', and to pretend to have a clean conscience simply because we have said our prayers or attended Mass on Sunday. No. Calvary is always real; it has not disappeared at all, nor does it remain with us merely as a nice painting in our churches. That culmination of compassion, from which the love of God flows to our human misery, still speaks to us today and spurs us on to offer ever new signs of mercy. I will never tire of saying that the mercy of God is not some beautiful idea, but rather a concrete action".

There is no mercy without concrete action, reiterated the Holy Father, insisting that mercy is not doing good "in passing", but rather getting involved where there is evil, where there is illness, where there is hunger, where there are many forms of human exploitation. "Even human mercy is not authentic until it has attained tangible expression in the actions of our daily life. The warning of the Apostle John has perennial value: 'Little children, let us not love in word and speech but in deed and truth'. The truth of mercy is expressed in our daily gestures that make God's action visible in our midst".

"Brothers and sisters, you represent the large and varied world of voluntary workers. You are among the most precious things the Church has, you who every day, often silently and unassumingly, give shape and visibility to mercy. You are artisans of mercy: with your hands, your eyes, through listening, closeness and caresses, you express one of the most noble desires of the human heart, making a suffering person feel loved. In the different contexts of need of so many people, your presence is the hand of Christ held out to all, and reaching all. You are the outstretched hand of Christ: have you thought this? The credibility of the Church is also conveyed in a convincing way through your service to abandoned children, to the sick, the poor who lack food or work, to the elderly, the homeless, prisoners, refugees and immigrants, to all struck by natural disasters... Indeed, wherever there is a cry for help, there your active and selfless witness is found. In bearing one another's burdens, you make Christ's law visible. Be always ready to offer solidarity, to be steadfast in your closeness to others, determined in awakening joy and genuine in giving comfort. The world stands in need of concrete signs of solidarity, especially as it is faced with the temptation to indifference. It requires persons who, by their lives, defy such individualism, which is the tendency to think only of oneself and to ignore the brother or sister in need. Be always happy and full of joy in the service you give, but never presume to think that you are superior to others. Instead, let your work of mercy be a humble and eloquent continuation of the presence of Jesus, Who continues to bend down to our level to take care of the ones who suffer. For love 'builds up' day after day, helping our communities to be signs of fraternal communion".

He urged those present to speak with the Lord about these things, like the Missionary of Charity who spoke of how they "knocked at the door" of the Tabernacle, asking the Lord to listen and to look at the poverty, indifference, those who look away, always asking Him why. "Why am I so weak, and yet You have called me to this service? Help me and give me strength, and give me humility". The kernel of mercy is this dialogue with the merciful heart of Jesus.

“Tomorrow we will have the joy of seeing Mother Teresa proclaimed a saint”, he continued. “How she deserves to be! This witness to mercy in our time will join the vast array of men and women who, by their holiness of life, have made the love of Christ visible. Let us also imitate their example, as we ask to be humble instruments in God’s hands in order to alleviate the world’s sufferings, and to share the joy and hope of the resurrection!.

Before imparting his final blessing, the Pope invited those present to pray for the many people who suffer, for those who are rejected by society, and also for the volunteers like them, who reach out to the flesh of Christ to touch it, heal it, and be close to it. He also asked for prayers for the many people who, faced with such misery, turn away, and in their heart hear a voice that says, “It has nothing to do with me, it doesn’t matter to me”.
