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## **Audience of the Holy Father with the Missionaries of Mercy**

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Missionaries of Divine Mercy, to whom he addressed the following words:

### **Address of the Holy Father**

Dear Missionaries of Mercy, good morning and welcome!

I wanted to meet you again, because I entrusted to you the mission that is closest to my heart: being an effective tool of God's mercy. I see that every year the number of Missionaries of Mercy increases. This brings me joy, because it means that your presence in the particular Churches is considered important and valid. I thank Archbishop Rino Fisichella for his words, and for the information he has provided regarding your important missionary effort. As I wrote in the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, "Evangelization takes place in particular through the proclamation of divine mercy, by means of multiple approaches and expressions. The specific action of the Missionaries of Mercy contributes to this purpose in a special way" (Art. 59 §2). I hope, therefore, that you may grow further, and for this reason I address to the bishops my desire that holy, merciful priests may be identified, ready to forgive, to become missionaries of Mercy to full effect.

In our first meeting (9 February 2016) I paused to reflect with you on the figure of Noah, and on the cover his sons placed over him to cover the shame of his nakedness. At that moment I invited you to "[shield] sinners with the garment of mercy, so that they may no longer be ashamed and may recover the joy of their filial dignity". In our second meeting (10 April 2018), with the words of the prophet Isaiah, I asked you to be a sign of consolation to help those who approach you to grasp the just sentiment that God never forgets anyone, nor does he abandon anyone, to the extent that he wanted to tattoo on his hand the name of every creature (cf. *Is* 49:16).

Today I wish to offer you another biblical figure who may inspire your ministry. She is Ruth, the Moabite woman who, despite coming from a foreign country, entered fully into salvation history. The book dedicated to her presents her as David's great-grandmother (*Ruth* 4: 18-22) and the Gospel of Matthew expressly mentions her

among Jesus' ancestors (cf. 1:5). Ruth is a poor girl of modest origin; she becomes a widow very young, and moreover lives in a foreign country that considers her an intruder and not even worthy of solidarity. Her condition is one that in today's culture no one would be able to fully understand. Ruth depended on others for everything: before marriage she depended on her father and after marriage on her husband; as a widow she should be protected by her children, but she has none; she is marginalized in the village where she lives; she is without support and without any defence. In short, her life is among the worst imaginable and seems to have no future.

As if all of this were not enough, the sacred writer adds that the only person to whom Ruth is attached is her mother-in-law, Naomi. However, Naomi's situation too is certainly not among the best: she is a widow, she has lost her two sons and she is too old to have others; she is therefore destined to live without leaving any descendants. Naomi had emigrated to the land of Moab, but decides to return to Bethlehem, her land of origin, and face a long and tiring journey. Naomi feels that God has not been benevolent towards her, and states this clearly: "the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me" (*Ruth* 1:13). Such is her sadness that she does not even want to be called by her name Naomi, which means "my sweetness", but "Mara", "embittered" (1:20).

Despite all this, Ruth decides to bind her own life to that of her mother-in-law, and says to her with conviction: "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you" (1:16-17). Truly generous and above all courageous words, because the future ahead of Ruth is certainly not serene.

The two women set out on their journey towards Bethlehem, but every day Ruth must go in search of food to live; her days are spent in uncertainty and precariousness. The question arises: was Ruth right to tie herself to her mother-in-law? She was still young – she would certainly have found another husband in Moab... In short, why did she take this risky decision? The holy book already provides a first answer: Ruth trusted God and acted out of great affection for her elderly mother-in-law, who otherwise would have been left alone and abandoned. Ruth's story will have a happy ending: while she is gathering, she meets Boaz, a rich nobleman who is well disposed towards her; he recognizes that her generosity towards her mother-in-law gives her such a dignity that she should no longer be considered a foreigner, but a full member of the people of Israel. The foreign and poor woman, forced to search for daily food, is rewarded for her faithfulness and goodness with an abundance of gifts. The words of the Magnificat, which Mary pronounces, are anticipated in the life of Ruth: "He has exalted those of low degree / He has filled the hungry with good things" (*Lk* 1:52-53).

We can also draw from this an important teaching for us. Ruth is not a daughter of Abraham by blood; she remains a Moabite woman and will always be called thus, but her fidelity and generosity enable her to enter the people of Israel with full rights. Indeed, God does not abandon those who entrust themselves to him, but rather meets them with a love that repays any other desire. Ruth shows the characteristics of *mercy* when she *does not leave Naomi alone*, but instead shares her future with her; when she is not satisfied to stay close to her, but rather with her participates in the faith and the experience of being part of a new people; when she is determined to overcome every obstacle in order to remain faithful. What we draw from this is truly the face of mercy that is made manifest with *compassion* and *sharing*.

This figure of Ruth is an icon of how we can overcome the many forms of exclusion and marginalization that lurk in our behaviour. If we reflect on the four chapters that compose this short book, we will discover an incredible richness. Those few pages bring out the trust in the love of God that goes out to everyone. And there is more: it shows that God knows the inner beauty of people, even if they do not yet have the faith of the chosen people; he is attentive to their sentiments, especially their fidelity, their loyalty, their generosity and the hope that dwells in their hearts when they are put to the test. In its simplicity, this account reveals a surprising wealth of meanings. Being generous is shown to be the right and courageous choice, that must never be lacking in our priestly existence.

Dear Missionaries of Mercy, in the Book of Ruth God never speaks. He is named many times; the characters often make reference to him, but he remains silent. We discover, however, that God communicates precisely through Ruth. Every one of her gestures of goodness towards Naomi, who considered that the Lord had "dealt

very bitterly” with her, becomes the tangible sign of the Lord’s closeness and goodness. Through this figure, we too are invited to grasp the presence of God in the life of people. The journey that must be experienced is often arduous, difficult, at times even full of sadness; God however places himself on this path to reveal his love. It is up to us, with our ministry, to give voice to God and to show the face of his mercy. Let us never forget that he does not act in the daily lives of people through dramatic acts, but in a silent, discreet, simple way, so as to manifest himself through people who become the sacrament of his presence.

I beg you to stay away from any form of judgement, and always to prioritize the will to understand the person before you. Never stop at a single detail, but look at the totality of his or her life. God does not stop at appearances, and if he were to judge only by faults, probably no one would be saved! This is not how mercy is expressed. It knows how to look into the heart of a person, where there dwells the desire, the longing to return to the Father and to his house (cf. *Lk 15:18-20*).

Here then is the exhortation I leave you: always have the blanket of mercy at hand, to envelop with its warmth all those who approach you to be forgiven; offer consolation to those who are sad and lonely; be generous like Ruth, because only in this way will the Lord recognize you as his faithful ministers.

I bless you all and I accompany you with my prayer, so that your ministry may be fruitful. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. Thank you!

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