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“SAINT NICHOLAS BISHOP
IN THE SPIRITUALITY AND CULTURE OF EUROPE”:
THE SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE
ORGANIZED BY THE INSTITUTE OF SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY
OF THE JOHN PAUL II CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF LUBLIN
WITHIN THE 40TH SPIRITUAL DAYS
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The Year of Mercy announced by Pope Francis ended, but the problems of mercy never get outdated, not only in Christian life, but also in general human relations. It is worth presenting the scientific event here, initiated by the Institute of Spiritual Theology of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, in cooperation with the Roman Catholic Parish of St. Nicholas in Lublin and the “Happy Childhood” Foundation, devoted to this very subject and the person associated with it. At the beginning of the Holy Year, from December 3-4, 2015 at the Aula of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin a scientific conference on *Saint Nicholas Bishop in the Spirituality and Culture of Europe* was held as part of the XL Spiritual Days.

The debate was solemnly opened by Prof. Mirosław Kalinowski, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Then diplomas were awarded to graduates of the Post-Graduate Studies on Catholic Spirituality.

The first lecture of the day, *The Church and the World in the Time of St. Nicholas*, was delivered by Rev. Dr. hab. Marcin Wysocki from the Department of Greek and Latin Patrology of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Wysocki provided a very interesting description of the historical, geographical and cultural situation of the time of St. Nicholas of Myra and the events of the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries after Christ, in which he participated. The lecture was complemented with numerous slides showing places related to the life, activity and worship of St. Nicholas.

In the next speech, this distant perspective was moved to a much closer ground for us to show the extraordinary richness of rituals, traditions and devotion associated with St. Nicholas, which has flourished in our country from the Middle Ages and penetrated the everyday life of Poles of all states and professions. Some regional cultural differences are apparent, but the tradition regarding St. Nicholas that has been passed down from generation to generation is closely related to his evangelical image, revered both in the Church of the Eastern and Western rites. These issues, complemented with numerous legends, were the subject of the lecture on *Beliefs and Cult of St. Nicholas in Polish Folk Tradition* delivered by Magdalena Połoncarz, M.A., curator of the Lublin Village Museum, culture

expert and the customs teacher conducting museum lessons. In the summary, Połoncarz referred to the attempts to damage the image of St. Nicholas in socialist times and modern commercialism. On the other hand, she referred to John Paul II, who called St. Nicholas the “patron of the gift of man for man” and emphasized the importance of his universal message, which is the need for kindness, sensitivity, and unselfish love for another human being, especially in the contemporary materialized world.

The next speaker in the first part of the conference was Rev. Dr. hab. Adam Rybicki, Prof at KUL. His speech was entitled *Female and Male Face of Mercy*. He wanted to show that God’s eternal intention is the complementarity of the genders, also in the aspect of mercy. The work of creation shows us that God creates in pairs, and only the creation of a woman makes man become a man and the work is good. Also, the terminology used in the Old Testament to describe mercy is twofold. There is the Hebrew word *hesed*, referring to the more masculine dimension, and meaning loyalty, unchangeability, legal aspect of the Covenant, tenacity, determination, stability and non-withdrawal of love even in the case of betrayal. It is not a feeling, but an action. The term *rahamim*, which means *the womb of the mother*, refers to what is free, undeserved, resulting from internal coercion. It also expresses the whole range of feelings: goodness, tenderness, patience, forbearance, readiness to forgive. These two aspects of mercy were noticed and referred to by John Paul II in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*. The next part of the lecture was based on excerpts from Henri J.M. Nouwen’s book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and illustrated by Rembrandt’s painting of the same name. The two hands of the merciful Father differ, responding to the masculine and feminine face of mercy. One of them touches gently and tenderly, soothing what is wounded; the other — strong one — holds and strengthens what needs support. The culmination of the speech of Rev. Rybicki was to show those figures of the New Testament who do various acts of mercy towards Jesus, but they are always corresponding to the specificity of their gender. On the other hand, the Saints of the Church, through the cooperation of men and women, create the true face of mercy and testify about it to the world. It is possible, however, according to Cardinal J. Ratzinger, only after a deep, personal conversion.

After the break, the first speaker was Dr. hab. Bożena Kuklińska, Prof. at KUL, head of the Chair of History of Ecclesiastical Art, addressing the theme of *St. Nicholas the Bishop in Iconography*. First, she emphasized that works of sacred art were usually created according to the needs of the Church, for the development of a particular cult, and not for ornamental purposes, because art evolved in service to theology. Although we do not know much about the life of St. Nicholas, his popularity as an advocate has been expanding very quickly. It can be due to the belief that although he does not perform spectacular works, he hears and answers the prayers that are made in small, simple, everyday matters. The legends concerning him most often mentioned giving to the needy without their knowledge. Extremely rich hagiography was a source of inspiration for thousands of works of art. In the Middle Ages, over two thousand churches of St. Nicholas were erected. Usually, they were located on the seas, rivers or on trade routes. St. Nicholas was most often worshipped as a savior, defender, as life-saving and giving. His attributes were, among others three golden balls, three golden apples, an anchor and bishop’s dress. A great role was attributed to the intercession of St. Nicholas, especially in the Eastern Church. This is evidenced by the fact that the icon of *deesis* often contained the image of

St. Nicholas instead of Mary or John the Baptist. He was also extremely popular in Italy. The image of St. Nicholas is contained not only in a huge number of icons, but also in a very large number of paintings, stained glass, sculptures and various liturgical equipment. Kuklińska showed it using not only words, but also slides, which made the lecture even more attractive.

Another speech, *Works of Mercy Towards the Bodily Dimension of Man*, was delivered by Prof. Teresa Paszkowska from the Institute of Spiritual Theology of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. She aimed to show the theological reflection on the works of mercy referring to the corporeality of the human person. In the first place she indicated that mercy towards man is inscribed in the eternal plan of God, according to which “the Holy Trinity did so much for him who sinned so much” and brought the picture of Christ after his torment, lifting Adam on his shoulders. The mercy that we have experienced and are to witness to others should be the guiding idea of the Year of Mercy. It is essential that the source of all good deeds, including the creational and saving initiative, is the only Good—God Himself. In *Dives in Misericordia*, John Paul II points to the essence of mercy. Mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores the real value of good, promotes and draws it from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man, according to God’s measure. Evil is only the background of good. Who has experienced mercy wants to bring it to others. Merciful works come from a wide, simple and orderly heart. They originate from the spiritual dimension of human life, which is why they cannot be equated with ordinary charity. Pope Francis said that Christians are the germ of another humanity, in which they serve one another, are available and respect every human being. A special novelty of Christianity consists in an extraordinary appreciation of the body first through the incarnation of the Word of God, His life in the flesh, resurrection of the body and elevation to heaven. The person’s body appears here as a place of God’s experience, praising Him in every state of life, in health and in sickness. Christians need to see the needs of the other person’s body in a divine way and respond to them with their heart. Bringing help requires skills, but most of all it requires humanity, and for this purpose, proper formation is necessary in the Church. Most works of mercy are carried out in the domestic sanctuary, in simple activities, in the daily maintenance of the lives of those who are *vulnerable*—children, the elderly, the disabled. The persons responsible for care are endowed with special trust from God and society. One must be aware that all the works of mercy were first received by Christ Himself, when He was in need. Therefore, He treats mercifully every good that we now provide to others. He also taught to be merciful, as the Father in heaven is merciful. Summarizing, Paszkowska emphasized that good deeds make life on earth possible and that none of them will be lost, and that they need spiritual disposition more than material goods.

The second day of the meeting was started by Rev. Dr. hab. Marek Chmielewski, Prof. at KUL, from the Institute of Spiritual Theology, addressing the theme of Mary—Mother of Mercy. In his speech, he first showed Mary in the mystery of God’s mercy and, referring to the teaching of John Paul II, justified the reasons for which she could be called the Mother of Mercy. With regard to people, Mary is the one who, from the wedding of Cana of Galilee, is showing interest in the spiritual and material infirmities of all her foster children. Marian devotion from the beginning was characterized by a cry for Her merciful intercession, which fruit is experienced by the Church to this day, especially in the form of

the moral transformation of sinners. The earthly life of Mary, which binds the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, is the greatest work of God's mercy in the world, together with the life of Jesus Christ. It is interesting that some events related to the revelation of the Messages of God's Mercy to St. Sister Faustina Kowalska are also associated with Mary, Mother of Mercy, as if Divine Providence itself confirmed her title. The last part of Chmielewski's his speech was devoted to the well-known, 17th-century image of Our Lady of Mercy, placed in the Gate of Dawn in Vilnius, and worshiped in many places in Poland, in Polish communities, and in the Vatican. Due to the fact that the dress of Mary masks the whole picture, attention is drawn to Mary's face and her hands crossed in a gesture of prayer, prompting us to contemplate. It is interesting that Madonna's focused face expresses many different emotional states and shows an intent gaze toward the secrets of her life and the people who come to her. Delicate hands point to the gesture of hugging the conceived Son of God, but also of the merciful, tender embrace of those at whom she looks. Chmielewski agreed with the statement of John Paul II that in Mary we can recognize the motherly face of a God rich in mercy, and her life and intercession is a light that shows God's mercy.

The next speaker in this part of the conference was Rev. Dr. hab. Stanisław Zarzycki, Prof. at KUL, who, like Rev. Chmielewski, is a long-time employee of the Institute of Spiritual Theology of John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. His speech was entitled *The Social Dimension of Mercy* and aimed to show how Christian charity is to shape social relations. It consisted of three main parts. The first part pointed to the relationship between mercy and love. Starting from the Old Testament, we see two aspects of mercy, which should be applied not only to man, but also to the merciful, faithful Covenant of God. They are: an internal disposition to help and a state in which someone, driven by compassion, helps the other. The saving work of Christ, as a visible sign of God's mercy, influences his disciples and broader social relations. This is an indispensable dimension of love. It is something that is born in interpersonal relations as a reaction to the experience of evil, sin and misery of another human being. Following St. Sister Faustina, we can say that where love is a flower, mercy is the fruit. In the second part of the lecture, Rev. Zarzycki started from showing the old approach of moral theology to the question of discerning the duty of rendering mercy, and pointed to the change that took place in this matter. With the development of spiritual theology and the instilling of the thoughts of the Second Vatican Council, it became clear that the Christian must be merciful in God's way and live a community life, united with God and in communion with all the brothers whose joys and sorrows are reflected in his heart. The third part of the speech concerned the practice of mercy in the social dimension. Because in modern times the physical distances have diminished considerably and help can be provided to expatriates, refugees, and starving people all over the world, there is a need for specific charity structures. In its missionary service, the Church has three equal tasks: proclaiming the Word of God, administering the sacraments, and the ministry of love. It is worth emphasizing that love and mercy are of greater value than social justice, which people have so often fought for. In conclusion, Rev. Zarzycki set the direction for spiritual theology, which is to emphasize that mercy must result from one's own experience. Spiritual theology should emphasize the commandment of God's love and neighbor's love, and point to models of mercy and develop such attitudes.

As if the immediate continuation of Rev. Zarzycki's lecture was another lecture, presenting precisely a specific social structure that proves mercy, which is Caritas. It was delivered by Rev. Marcin Grzesiak, M.A., deputy director of the Caritas of the Archdiocese of Lublin, and was entitled *Caritas—Today and tomorrow*. From a short historical outline, one could learn, among others, that Caritas of the Lublin Archdiocese in the post-war period, assisting various groups of the needy, also supported poor students, finding them at individual faculties of the university. Because Caritas is an ecclesiastical institution, an important role is played by spiritual formation, which aims to teach God's merciful love. Although skills are needed to perform the works of mercy, they are not enough. Humanity, openness of heart and attention are necessary. The formation takes place in the parish and school circles of Caritas. Grzesiak discussed areas of very rich activity of Lublin Caritas for professional and social activation of unemployed from various social groups, assistance to immigrants and refugees and the operation of an emergency help center in the form of a pharmacy, food store, gifts in the form of clothes and household appliances or assistance for those affected by natural disasters and other types of disasters both in Poland and in the world. The last part of the lecture presented the average annual quantitative comparison of individual activities of Caritas of the Lublin Archdiocese to show that it serves systematically, every day, and not only from one venture to another.

The last part of the meeting, after a break for afternoon coffee, began with the lecture on *St. Nicholas in the Orthodox Spirituality* delivered by Rev. Prof. Ireneusz Werbiński from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. In an interesting way, complemented by legends, descriptions of beliefs and traditions referring to St. Nicholas, Rev. Werbiński presented his place in the Eastern Church, as he was placed on par with Mary, and even with God himself, and not only in the awareness of ordinary people, but also of an 18th-century clergy. According to Boris Uspienski, Orthodoxy is the cradle of the cult of St. Nicholas, from which it later moved to the West. The origin of the cult of St. Nicholas is connected with the reverence of St. Michael the Archangel in the West and St. Peter as standing before God and having the keys to heaven. An important role was played by faith in the saints as sinners, because they were expected to have a greater understanding of human weaknesses. The cult of St. Nicholas is also closely connected with the ancient Slavic myth of fighting for cattle between the gods Perun and Veles. That is why up to that moment, there were only plain people named Nicholas. St. Nicholas was regarded as the patron of ordinary men. It was most often believed that he cared for cattle and farming, and numerous rituals were associated with it. An important aspect of spirituality also referred to the belief that St. Nicholas helped a dying man enter the other world. It was up to his mercy if he would let the deceased before God's throne or not.

The last speech was given by Rev. Dr. Jan Miczyński from the Institute of Spiritual Theology of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, who spoke of *Works of Mercy Towards the Soul*. The list of the works of mercy towards the soul has been shaped from the beginning of Christianity, to receive its final form in the time of St. Thomas Aquinas and his students. At the beginning, Rev. Miczyński defined the concept of mercy. Mercy is an action resulting from love that raises, restores dignity, and in the aspect of the soul leads to spiritual rebirth, to faith, hope and love. By doing the deeds of mercy, we do what Christ did. It is Christ who is merciful in us. Thanks to our deeds, man is to meet a merciful God. Rev. Miczyński pointed out works that are not always remembered as the works

of mercy, such as listening to the other and trying to understand him, proclaiming the Good News, forgiving (because God forgives), spiritual guidance, counseling, the sacrament of reconciliation. Thanks to them, the other person may feel clothed with love. The lecture was completed with the famous prayer of St. Sister Faustina Kowalska for the transformation of her whole into God's mercy for others.

It should be noted that the organizers of the conference made sure that the message of St. Nicholas was proclaimed in a variety of ways. To this end, the first day of lectures ended with the performance of the Panopticum theater entitled *Life and Work of St. Nicholas Bishop*, and the other ended with a concert by Trio Cantabile entitled *Cantata of St. Nicholas*.

The overall conclusion is that the conference fully met the goals set for itself. It showed the depth and richness of the mystery of mercy based on the message that Bishop Nicholas has brought over for centuries, departing from the images that the modern world wants to impose on him.