

MERCY & THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

“Blest are the merciful, they shall have mercy shown them.”

Matthew 5 : 7

When, in 1535, Henry Tudor signed the death warrant of his former chancellor, Sir Thomas More, for his opposition to the king's marriage to Anne Boleyn, he emulated quite unwittingly the conduct of another king, Herod Antipas, 1,500 years prior in ordering (for his opposition to Herod's marriage to Herodias, his brother Phillip's wife) the death of John the Baptist. The parallel extended even to the manner of death of the two saints.

Given the attitude of many in the Catholic Church with respect to Christ's teaching against divorce, reflected in the ambivalence of Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, the Church's insistence on the celebration of the *Beheading of John the Baptist* must stick in their craw.

St Jean-Marie Baptiste Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, was opposed to dancing. Over the archway of his side chapel to St John the Baptist he had inscribed (in French) the text 'His head was the price of a dance'. One might, with due respect to the Church's greatest parish priest, alter that text to 'His head was the price of adultery'.

We are living in a 'Year of Mercy'. It is of the greatest significance that many in Christ's Church do not understand what is meant by mercy. The man chiefly responsible for confusing the issue is John XXIII, who in his *Opening Speech* to the fathers gathered for the Second Vatican Council, said this—

“The Church has always opposed... errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations...” (11th October, 1962)

Contrary to a widespread view, mercy does not mean indulgence over a failure to adhere to moral principle. Mercy is *sorrow at another's misfortune accompanied by a desire to help him*. (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 30, a. 1) Setting mercy against severity is naïve for it denies the condemnation of error is itself a work of mercy, “since by pinning down error those labouring under it are corrected and others are preserved from falling into it” (Romano Amerio, *Iota Unum, A Study of Changes in the Catholic Church in the XXth Century*, transl. From 2nd Italian Ed. By Rev. Fr John P Parsons, Kansas City, 1996, p. 81).

The ambivalence of the Church's bishops over questions of discipline following the error in John XXIII's abandonment of theological principle (reflected in the conduct and teaching of his successors) has brought in its train systemic chaos. The confusion among certain bishops over the issue whether the divorced and remarried ought be allowed access to the Blessed Eucharist is simply the latest manifestation of this chaos.

Michael Baker

29th August, 2016—*Passion of John the Baptist*