

The 12th annual Divine Mercy Medicine, Bioethics, & Spirituality Conference © Kristine Correia 2016

The 12th annual Divine Mercy Medicine, Bioethics, & Spirituality Conference on May 4th and 5th brought to Holy Cross College an exceptional keynote speaker for the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Fr. Patrice Chocholski is the rector of the Shrine of the Curé d’Ars, France and serves as the General Secretary of the World Apostolic Congress on Mercy. He came to give two talks during the conference and also brought with him a surprise.

On the first day of the conference, Fr. Patrice discussed how Divine Mercy played a central role in the life and priesthood of St. Jean-Marie Vianney. He explained that Jean-Marie deserted during the Napoleonic Wars. Wanting a replacement, the army drafted his brother François who died in battle. After learning of the death of Francois and not knowing the whereabouts of Jean-Marie, their mother died of despair. When Jean-Marie returned home, his father would not let him into the house until he prayed at his mother’s grave because, “It was your fault she died.”

Jean-Marie returned to seminary and wrote to his father, “I do deserve perpetual indignation. I am the unworthy son who deserves only contempt.” But during his studies he discovered the mercy of the Christ and offered his wounds to the Holy Trinity. “Our sins are like grains of sand in front of the great mountain of God’s mercy,” he said.

The heresy of Jansenism, which emphasized Original Sin, human depravity, and strictly interpreting the law, was widespread in France and other parts of Northern Europe. Under this influence, St. Vianney’s early homilies showed him to be a rigorist as well. In order to combat this heresy, the Church spread the teachings of St. Alphonsus Liguori that were focused on God’s love and mercy. The pope sent many bishops to Venice to study Liguorism so that they would, in turn, bring that teaching to their dioceses.

Due to his own encounter with Divine Mercy, St. Vianney became one of the first parish priests to adopt Liguorism when his bishop returned from Venice. At the time, priests in Gaul would not grant absolution at the time of confession, but only after they verified that the assigned penance had been completed. St. Vianney instead believed God’s mercy trusted his people. They also used a manual of penances to give for each sin, so those for each sin someone confessed, more penances would be added. St. Vianney thought this brought about despair in many so instead he would give only a small penance while the rest he carried out himself. “Go, my friend. I will do the rest.”

Fr. Patrice explained, “Neither the laxist nor the rigorist bears witness to the mercy of God. Neither one nor the other takes care of the person he encounters. The rigorist washes his hands of them. In fact, he nails the person to the law understood in a cold and rigid way. And the laxist also washes his hands of them. He is only apparently merciful, by in reality he does not take seriously the problems of the conscience by minimizing them. True mercy takes the person into one’s care.”

In talk on the second day, he described the conversion to Divine Mercy (though not to Christianity) of Albert Cohen, one of the greatest humanist of the 20th century. Two years before

he died, Cohen wrote in his diary about the experience. He grew up with a father who was an alcoholic and physically abusive to his mother. When he died, his mother asked Cohen to forgive him, saying, "If you had gone through the same trials as your father, what would you have become?" But he would not forgive him. Years later, Pierre Laval, a French politician, was sentenced to death for his collaboration with Hitler. Cohen, himself culturally Jewish but not believing in the faith, applauded the court decision. But then the words of his mother came back to him. Fr. Pierre said, "His being was crossed by this stream of tenderness of piety and I was led to forgiveness." Not only did he forgive Laval, he forgave his father as well. Divine Mercy reaches out not only to Christians, but atheists, agonists, and people of other religions as well.

He also talked about St. Faustina. When she experienced her first vision of Jesus she asked if he was real or a delusion. His answer was, "Faustina, love and mercy never disappoint." We become vessels of mercy, and when we surrender to it we can say, "Jesus, I trust in you."

Another prominent speaker at the conference was Sr. Inga Kvassayova, OLM, the same order as St. Faustina. She shared several humorous and touching stories about the time she spent caring for cancer patients and for the elderly, describing the importance of human and Divine mercy in the lives of families and of the sick. Also Fr. Tadeusz Pacholczyk (Fr. Tad), from the National Catholic Bioethics Center, discussed complicated situations in pregnancy as well as the moral issues surrounding brain death. Every year the conference includes a panel discussion to answer questions from the audience led by Bishop McManus.

Just before beginning his second talk, Fr. Patrice revealed his surprise. He had with him the relic of the incorruptible heart of St. Vianney. All those who attended the closing Mass could venerate it. He brought with him not only the message of Divine Mercy, but the very heart of someone who encountered God's mercy himself and then gave it to those around him, leading him to sainthood.