

# Mercy in John 20:19-31 and Its Actualization

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine whether the Gospel of John 20:19-31 contains a theology of mercy. This theology is actualized in the Catholic Church's tradition, especially in the liturgical celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday, where it uses John 20:19-31 as the third reading in the Eucharist. The passage of John 20:19-31, in fact, does not employ the word "mercy" or "love." It narrates the appearance of the risen Jesus to the frightened disciples. Applying synchronic and diachronic approaches to the text, this article will show that John 20:19-31 contains theologically "mercy" described in the acts of Jesus Christ: His appearance, his presence, and his forgiveness. Mercy belongs to God; it depicts the character of Jesus Christ, and it was taught by Jesus for His disciples to practice. Even though in the Church Fathers' writings and the Ecclesiastical Documents, John 20:19-31 has been related to the theme of mercy, in this article it will be observed textually to find that it richly reflects the theology of mercy.

**Key words:** Mercy, resurrection, appearance, presence, forgiveness, hand and side.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Background

No institution, including the Church, can exist without law. Since its inception, the Church has enacted laws that all members must follow. Code Canon Law, promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1983, is proof that the Catholic Church is governed by law. However, in the life of the Church, the law is created not to hinder God's mercy and grace but to create discipline and order, from which God's mercy and grace can work and be more fruitful to everyone and humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the role of law is indeed very important, the Church is aware that her substance lies in living and animating mercy and love; this cannot be replaced by a Church of law.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the Church has never stopped preaching mercy in every age. One of the ways to proclaim mercy in the liturgy is to celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday once a year. This liturgical celebration that intends to honor God's mercy chooses the reading from the story of the Lord's resurrection according to John 20:19-31 in the Eucharist. The selection of the text of John 20:19-31 is interesting to be observed because, for example, the proclamation done by a number of ministers in the Catholic Church who celebrate the Eucharist on Divine Mercy Sunday only focuses on the story of the appearance of the risen Jesus and does not emphasize God's mercy contained in the Gospel reading.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in the text of John 20:19-31 there is no terminology used by the evangelist to explicitly denote mercy; that is "love", which comes from the Greek words "*phileō*" or "*agapao*". However, Moloney stated that the theme of mercy in the Gospel of John is not only found in accounts that explicitly contain the terminology of "love".<sup>4</sup> The theme can also be found in acts of love.

### B. Problem Formulation

Based on the background, the problems of this study are:

1. How does the Gospel of John 20:19-31 contain the theology of mercy?

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Yosef, *Sakramen dan Sakramentali menurut Kitab Hukum Kanonik Volume 1* (Obor: Jakarta, 2014), p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, Judul asli: *Barmherzigkeit: Grundbegriff des Evangeliums*, diterjemahkan oleh William Madges, (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Leks, *Sabda Tuhan kepada Faustina Jilid 1*, (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2014), p. 225.

<sup>4</sup> Francis J Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical Theological and Literary Study*, (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), p. 19.

2. How is the theology of mercy in John 20:19-31 is actualized in the Catholic Church's tradition?

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study will observe textually John 20:19-31 in two stages, namely the exposition and actualization stages, as explained by Wilhelm Egger in his book entitled "How to Read the New Testament: An Introduction to Linguistic and Historical-Critical Methodology" and also according to the Papal Document on the Interpretation of the Holy Scripture. The exposition stage consists of analysis with a synchronic and diachronic approach. The actualization focuses on the interpretation of John 20:19-31 in the Church's tradition and the daily lives of the Christians.

## III. DISCUSSION

### 1. Synchronic Approach

#### 1.1. Semantic Analysis

John 20:19-31 narrates Jesus' appearance to his disciples after his resurrection. The setting where the risen Jesus came to see his disciple is in a house with locked doors when "the disciples were together" (John 20:19, 26). Jesus can enter the room even though the door is locked. It proves that Jesus' presence is not limited by anything. If, in the incarnation, God is present to bring light to the world (cf. John 1:14), in Jesus' appearance, God continues to be present in the midst of his people. In John 3:16, the motivation for Jesus's incarnation into the world is God's great love for the world. Thus, the presence of Jesus both in the incarnation and the appearance is to show his mercy.

The evangelist explicitly writes that Jesus's disciples were in fear of the Jews (cf. John 20:19), so they were in a house with locked doors. In that situation, Jesus came to the midst of the disciples and gave a greeting of "peace", and showed them his hands and side (cf. John 20:19-20). That "peace" dispelled fear and brought real joy to the disciples. In his farewell, Jesus indeed promised joy to his beloved disciples (cf. John 15:9). When Jesus returns to his disciples, he does not convey rebuke and disappointment to them because they left him at the time of His arrest, but he does convey a greeting of peace. Therefore, the peace that Jesus brought must first be interpreted as forgiveness.

In John 20:19-31, it is told that just as the Father "sent" Jesus, so Jesus also "sent" the disciples. The mission of the disciples has its basis in the mission of the Father to Jesus (cf. John 17:18). The mission of Jesus from the Father is to bring forgiveness to the world (cf. John 1:29; 5:14; 8:11; 9:14). Thus, the mission of the disciples is to bring forgiveness from God to the world. The disciples are trusted by Jesus to participate in spreading the word of God's love to the world. The word "has sent" used to describe the Father's mission to Jesus is "*apostellō*" in the perfect form. Meanwhile, the word "send" in Jesus's mission to the disciples is "*pempō*" in the present form. The use of the word "has sent" (*apostellō*) in the perfect form shows that the Father's sending to Jesus still continues. The disciples do not carry out a different mission from the mission of Jesus. It should also be noted that the disciples who receive the mission to bring forgiveness to the world are those who, in fact, have failed to keep their commitment to Jesus. God's choice to send them reveals his mercy in forgiving them. The experience of being reconciled by the merciful God becomes the basis for the mission of the disciples.

In John 20:23, Jesus said to his disciples, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven". Whereas the only ones who can forgive sins are God and Jesus himself: "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Thus, the power to forgive sins received by the disciples must be understood as a gift from Jesus. The use of the passive word "forgiven" (John 20:22) indicates that the disciples are sent to do God's mission and not their own.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that there are two possibilities for what the disciples can do based on the power they received from Jesus, namely "forgive sins" and "retain the sins". Stating that people's sins still exist naturally flows from Jesus himself. Declaring that people's sins still exist is a form of God's mercy, because God does not want his people to fall into continuous sin.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Francis J Moloney, *Glory not Dishonor: Reading John 13-21*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> Surip Stanislaus and Arie Saragih, "Belaskasih dan Keadilan Allah", *Journal Logos*, Vol. 17/2 (Juni 2002), p. 54.

God's mercy is shown in the meaning of Jesus' actions, showing the scars on his hands and side. Jesus's wounded side is reminiscent of the blood and water that flowed from that side when he was crucified (cf. John 19:34). The blood and water flowing out of his side symbolize the giving of his life with love and the outpouring of his Spirit for the faithful.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the wounded hands and side are proof of Jesus' mercy.

With the statement of his faith, "My Lord and my God" (cf. John 20:29), Thomas has found the crucified Jesus as his Lord. He encountered God's mercy in Jesus, who was crucified, died, and rose again. This can be seen in his personal confession with the pronoun "my" in the statement "my Lord and my God".

### **1.2. Narrative Analysis**

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18), to his disciples (John 20:19-25), to Thomas (John 20:26-31), and to his disciples and Peter (John 21:1-14). In these appearances, Jesus came to the disciples, who were in fear and despair. Jesus' coming to them shows his mercy since he will be present in every situation involving his disciples. His presence makes them free and strong.

When Jesus appears, the disciples do not immediately recognize him. Mary Magdalene recognizes him because he first addresses her as "Mary". Thomas also recognizes him after he offers to put his finger in the hand where the nails were and his hand into the side. Jesus' greeting and seeking out of Mary and Thomas shows that he truly recognizes his disciples. It also shows that the disciples' recognitions of Jesus are always preceded by his initiative.<sup>8</sup> His initiative makes them believe in his resurrection.

In his appearances, Jesus always gives a mission to his disciples. Mary Magdalene is sent to inform his disciples of his resurrection. The disciples are sent to bring forgiveness as the fruit of Jesus' victory to the whole world. The same thing happens to Peter. Jesus' appearance to Peter terminates with the commission to feed Jesus' sheep (cf. John 21:15-17). It means that a personal encounter with the risen Jesus should not stop at just personal experience but must be shared with others.

### **1.3. Pragmatic Analysis**

According to Rudolf Bultmann, the Gospel of John was written around 80–120,<sup>9</sup> thus after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70. Peter Ellis argues that John's Gospel was addressed to the Jewish-Christian community, which experienced persecution from the Jews because of their faith in Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>10</sup> Because of their faith, they were expelled from the synagogue (cf. John 5:9:22; 16:2). The Gospel of John was written to strengthen the faith of Jewish Christians. In that situation, the Gospel reflects on the historical conflicts that led to the judgment and death of Jesus. In Jesus' death, while the Jews were still thinking of the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. John 2:19-21), the Christian community had found a New Temple from which living water flowed (John 19:34; cf. Zechariah 13:1). The body of Jesus is the New Temple of God (cf. John 2:20-21).

The imperative verbs "put", "see", "put out", "place it", and "believe" in John 20:27 are conveyed by Jesus to Thomas. These imperative words are part of Jesus' initiative to make Thomas believe in his resurrection. Just as Jesus took the initiative for Thomas to recognize and then believe, so does Jesus take the initiative for the readers to recognize and believe that he is Lord and God. This belief is a condition for obtaining eternal life. Eternal life comes from the mercy of God, as manifested by giving his only begotten Son (cf. John 3:16). Thus, the invitation to believe is an invitation to obtain God's mercy.

### **3. Diachronic Approach**

John 20:22 says that Jesus "breathed on" the disciples with the Holy Spirit. The word "breathed on" (*enephysēsen*) in John 20:22 is *hapax legomenon*, a word that occurs nowhere else but

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<sup>7</sup> F.X. Marmidi, "Simbol dan Simbolisme dalam Injil Yohanes: Lambung Darah dan Air dalam Yoh 19:34", *Journal Wacana Biblika*, Vol 20, No 4, (Oktober-Desember 2020), p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> Glenn W Most, *Doubting Thomas*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: Commentary*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Peter F Ellis, *The Genius of John: A Composition-Critical Commentary on The Fourth Gospel*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1985), p. 6.

here in the whole New Testament. Its meaning can be related to the breathing of the Spirit in Ezekiel 37:9. The Lord stated that the vision regarding the breathing of the Spirit is related to the prophecy about the Israelites, who will become the people of the New Covenant (cf. Ezekiel 37:26). Thus, the moment when Jesus breathes the Spirit on the disciples is to declare that Jesus' appearance is the realization of the New Covenant. The fulfillment of the New Covenant relates to God's activities, which will be present in the midst of his people, give peace and joy, clean his people from sin, and outpour a new Spirit in his people. The things promised in the New Covenant are fulfilled in the risen Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

In the New Covenant, God promises to be present among his renewed people (cf. Isaiah 51-56; Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36-37). The sign of his presence is known in the existence of a new temple where God "stood among them". The presence of Jesus in the midst of his disciples becomes the realization of the new God's Temple promised in the New Covenant. This is an evidentiary aspect of the statement that Jesus "stood among them" (John 20:19). The word "stood among them" in Aramaic is understood as "rise up", which can mean "standing up physically" as well as "rising from the dead". So, that Jesus "stood among them" is the moment when he rises as the New Temple of God.

According to the prophet Jeremiah, the New Covenant would make the people "know YHWH" (31:34). The word "know" is meant to have a very personal and intimate relationship.<sup>12</sup> In the story of Jesus' appearance, after seeing him, Thomas finally recognizes and knows him and says, "My Lord and My God" (John 20:28). The prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah have prophesied that the New Covenant is God's initiative to re-establish relations with the people of Israel, even though they have been unfaithful (cf. Ezekiel 36:25-27; Jeremiah 31:33-34a). In this sense, Jesus is the fulfillment of the New Covenant since he takes the initiative to come into the midst of the disciples and renew relations with them.

#### **4. John 20:19-31 and Mercy in Ecclesiastical Documents**

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, John Chrysostom states that since the early Church, the power of forgiveness mentioned in John 20:23 has been manifested through the ministry of confession by the priests. This ministry shows Jesus' mercy. Meanwhile, St. Cyril from Alexandria links Jesus' offer to Thomas to touch his hand and side to touching his body in the Eucharist.

In *Dives in Misericordia* (DM) no. 2, Pope John Paul II teaches that God's mercy is expressed by his presence in the history of his people. This teaching harmonizes with John 20:19-31. Just as, because of his love, God is present in every journey of his people and finally incarnates in the midst of a sinful world, so it is because of his mercy that Jesus is present to appear in the midst of his disciples, who are in a situation of weakness and fear. The presence of God is a manifestation of mercy.

In *Misericordia Vultus* (MV) no. 5, Pope Francis states that God's mercy reaches out to all people, both believers and those far away. Therefore, it is universal. In the light of John 20:19-31, the universality of God's mercy can be seen in Jesus' attitude, which does not neglect anyone. When Thomas has not yet experienced his presence, Jesus returns to the disciples. He doesn't want anyone to be lost.

DM and MV explain that there is no limit to the readiness and power of forgiveness, which flow continually from the marvelous value of the sacrifice of the Son. John 20:19-31 is one of the accounts in the Bible that shows how mercy is expressed in forgiveness. In his presence among the disciples, Jesus does not judge them, although they have been unfaithful. On the contrary, in his mercy, Jesus is present to bring forgiveness to the disciples.

Pope John Paul II stated that the Church really asks for God's mercy on the world (DM no. 2). In the light of John 20:19-31, the plea for God's mercy may be answered in the wounds of Jesus. Jesus' invitation to Thomas to touch his wounds is actually an invitation to experience his mercy. In this current context, the wounds of Jesus are also found in those who suffer.

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<sup>11</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth of Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Surip Stanislaus, "Dekalog dan Perjanjian yang Baru", *Journal Diskursus*, Vol. 18/2, (Oktober 2022), p. 264.

In God's mercy, the eternal, self-communicating love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is mirrored and revealed.<sup>13</sup> John 20:19-31 also provides light to understand how mercy is a reflection of the Trinity. In Jesus' appearance, the Father's mercy to the world is fulfilled by the Son through the breathing of the Spirit on the disciples.

Pope Francis states in *Misericordia et Misera* (MM) no. 5 that God's mercy transforms humans into fullness and joy. John 20:19-31 shows that the disciples, who were in fear at that time, then rejoiced because they experienced God's mercy in Jesus, who was present to appear to them. Therefore, in the current world situation that longs for joy, humans really need to experience God's mercy, which is in Jesus.

The Easter mystery is closely related to God's mercy. In DM no.7, Pope John Paul II explains that the Easter mystery is the culmination of revelation and the manifestation of God's mercy. God's mercy can be found more richly when looking at the meaning of every act and word that Jesus conveyed in John 20:19-31, that is, his presence in the midst of the disciples, the greeting of peace he delivered, the breath of his Spirit on the disciples, the offer to see and touch his scars, and also from his words, which contain the mission of the disciples.

The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims God's mercy and when she brings people close to the sources of the Savior's mercy (DM no. 13 and MV no. 4). One of the services of the Church as a messenger of mercy is actualized in the service of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 1442 and 1439 writes that John 20:19-31 is one of the institutional bases of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This was first established at the Council of Trent, where the Church faced the reform movement of Martin Luther, who rejected the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Even though the Church says John 20:23 is seen as the institutional base of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the task of bringing forgiveness described in John 20:23 is not only realized through the Sacrament of Reconciliation but also should be manifested by the Church through various works of physical and spiritual mercy.

#### **5. John 20:19-31 in the Celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday**

The Church has a tradition of celebrating God's mercy on the second Sunday of Easter, which is known as Divine Mercy Sunday. John 20:19-31 functions as the gospel read in the Eucharist of that celebration. Even though the text of John 20:19-31 does not contain the words "mercy" explicitly, the theme of mercy is richly contained in this text, including the relation to the resurrection of Jesus and the mystery of mercy. Mercy can be seen in the presence of the risen Jesus in the midst of the disciples, in the greeting of peace that he delivered, in the breath of his Spirit on the disciples, in the offer to see and touch his scars, and also in his words, which contain the mission of the disciples.

#### **6. Image of Divine Mercy as a Visualization of the Mercy of the Risen Jesus**

The image of Divine Mercy shows Jesus as narrated in John 20:19-31, that is, the risen Jesus who appears to his disciples after he has suffered and died. The meaning of each element in the image of Divine Mercy increasingly shows its connection with John 20:19-31.

John 20:19-31 says that Jesus comes through the darkness. In the image of Divine Mercy, a dark black background symbolizes the fear of the disciples.<sup>14</sup> Just as the appearance of Jesus made the disciples who were initially afraid become rejoicing, so Jesus in the image reveals God's mercy, which brings the joy of peace and forgiveness to those who are in their own darkness.

The image of Divine Mercy portrays Jesus Christ walking and giving a blessing while showing the scars on his hands and feet. Jesus' left hand pointing to his heart invites everyone to see the highest source of mercy, namely his own heart. Jesus' raised right hand is about to declare that he is not a judge who punishes with a whip of punishment but the King of Mercy who blesses everyone who trusts in Him. This is in accordance with the narration in John 20:19-31, where Jesus is present in the midst of the disciples, not to punish them because they have left him but instead to bring his mercy to them.

John 20:19-31 tells us that Jesus, in his mercy, takes the initiative to come to his sinful disciples. In the Image of Divine Mercy, this is shown in Jesus' bare feet stepping on the floor, not on

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy...*, p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Gaitley, *The Divine Mercy Image Explained: Includes Enthronement Prayers*, (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 2013), p. 15.

the clouds as is often depicted for the Divine figure. Thus it is shown that Jesus is willing to come and touch the earth even though the earth has been stained by sin.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus showed the wounds on his side to the disciples. By this action, Jesus is referring to the event of the cross when soldiers pierced his side and then blood and water flowed (cf. John 19:34). In the Image of Divine Mercy, it is described that Jesus' left hand touches the area of his heart from which two rays, the red and the pale, come out. These two rays symbolize the blood and water flowing from his side, which reveal God's mercy that was poured out for mankind.

In the image of Divine Mercy, Jesus wore a white garment without a cloak. It symbolizes that Jesus is the High Priest who has been resurrected and glorified by the Father. Since he is the High Priest, he has the power to forgive sins. The white garment also shows that Jesus is the healer. The meaning of his white garment is closely related to John 20:19-31. Indeed, he has the power to forgive sins, and that's why he also has the power to entrust it to the disciples. He is also a healer who really knows and is able to heal his disciples, especially Thomas. He truly knows the inner depths of his people, and in fact, only he is able to heal every wound in his people, even the deepest and worst wounds.

In the image of Divine Mercy, there is an inscription, "Jesus, I trust in you." Its meaning is in accordance with John 20:19-31. In John 20:19-31 it is shown that Jesus invites the disciples to truly trust in him. The invitation conveyed to Thomas and the other disciples is also conveyed by Jesus, at this time, to everyone. Those who see this image of Divine Mercy are invited to trust in Jesus, acknowledging him as "my Lord and my God," as Thomas did in his confession.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

John 20:19-31 does not contain the word "mercy" at all. However, it does not mean that the theme of mercy is not found in this text. On the contrary, the text contains the theme of mercy in a very rich and profound way. It has been discovered by the Church even since the time of the Church Fathers. With the discovery of the theme of mercy, which is quite rich in John 20:19-31, the question of why this text is appropriate to be used as the gospel reading on Divine Mercy Sunday is answered. The theme of mercy in John 20:19-31 may inspire the Church to display God's mercy while remaining faithful in carrying out every applicable law.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Stackpole, *Pillars of Fire in My Soul*, (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 2003), p. 40.

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