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Provost of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa

If there is one date that the Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa (SCML) should be proud to celebrate, it is that of the publication of the first printed edition of the *Compromisso*, adopted five hundred years ago by all the Confraternities of the Portuguese Misericórdias. Because the *Compromisso* of the Confraternity of the Misericórdia is the soul that lies at the foundation of our institution, and it has always been our guiding compass, the torch that lights our way. This is a fundamental work for understanding our origins and the very fibre of our being, and it was because of this that it seemed important to mark the five centuries since the publication of this document, not only with its re-edition, but also with an exhibition that shares the guiding principles of the SCML, which we fulfil with great pride, commitment and dedication, and that serves to publicise the mission that has been entrusted to us. This is why the fifth centenary of the *Compromisso* could not be allowed to pass unnoticed.

In the rapidly changing times that we are living through today in the twenty-first century, I believe that it is essential to remember, honour and express our gratitude for these important references from the past. But, even more than this, we should honour the *Compromisso* of the Confraternity of the Misericórdia by conducting a detailed examination of our performance and evolution as an institution. In this sense, it seems to me to be crucial to state, not out of any feeling of vanity or vainglory, but with justifiable pride and joy, that the SCML has always been concerned with going beyond the limits of the mission with which it is charged, broadening the scope of its action and seeking to find pioneering social answers to today’s problems. I have always been most enthusiastic in saying this: “the SCML must expand its horizons”. It must look for new forms, new responses and new approaches. But always, as has been the case throughout these past five centuries, with the human person, in its spiritual, emotional and material dimension, as our central concern.
We have sought to help more, to do better, to go further. And despite the adversities and challenges that have arisen, we have remained true to ourselves, to our mission and beliefs.

Today, we continue along the same path with the wisdom gained by those who have covered many miles in their struggles to ensure that the day-to-day life of the most vulnerable and needy can be made less arduous. But let no one be in any doubt: we will always strive to do more and to perform even better.

We firmly hope and believe that the twenty-first century will bring greater solidarity and equality, with the promise that we will continue to invest in the scientific and technological discoveries of new solutions for some of the great problems of our present day and age, particularly in the fields of neuro-degenerative diseases and vertebral-medullary lesions.

May this continue to be so, as long as there are those in need of our help.
Maria Margarida Montenegro

Head of the Department of Culture of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa

As we celebrate the fifth centenary of the publication of the first printed edition of the *Compromisso* of the Misericórdia, the exhibition displayed in the Temporary Exhibition Gallery of the Santa Casa offers the public the chance to look at this foundational document that marks the beginning of a history that already spans more than five centuries. Dated 1516, the fundamental text of the Confraternity of the Misericórdia transformed the printed word into a mission of charitable good deeds. This now remote gesture, not only established the identity of our institution on paper, but it also made it possible to share a framework for action that spread across the globe, offering the countless Confraternities of the Misericórdia set up all around the Portuguese territory a pioneering model that could be followed, replicated and adapted.

In its pages, the *Compromisso* contained the guiding principles of the Confraternity, mainly expressed in the fourteen works of mercy, seven corporal and seven spiritual, the compass for the performance of good deeds, in the past as well as in the present. A great deal of time has passed since these fourteen maxims were established as the great flagship of the Santa Casa, yet their pertinence has not in any way diminished, and has always been renewed in the light of the challenges and demands that each historical period has brought to bear. Their contemporary nature cannot be questioned, since they have been unceasingly updated; the way in which these works are practised has changed, but their guiding spirit remains unchangeable.

Today, the investment made by the Santa Casa in the creation of palliative care units and the funding given to research in the area of neuroscience are in keeping with one of the age-old works of mercy, namely healing and providing assistance to the sick. Just as the current efforts being made to welcome refugees may be interpreted as a new way of interpreting the maxim “to give shelter to the pilgrims”. Originally intended to provide support for people undertaking
voluntary religious journeys and who required doors to be opened to them, in the present-day political and economic conjuncture such works bring us face-to-face with the urgent need to help those who are now forced to be “pilgrims”, in a global movement of migration that involves thousands of people fleeing from war, famine, poverty and political, religious or ethnic persecution. Times may change, but not the guidelines for the commitment and determination shown by this Santa Casa. It is still the same compass of the fourteen works of mercy that continues to direct our mission.

As the starting point for a journey that explores the genesis of the Lisbon Misericórdia, this exhibition, in which the Compromisso occupies a central position, is not a mere exercise in memory, or a simple tribute to the past. It testifies to the timeless commitment of this Santa Casa to the Christian and ethical values of solidarity that lay at its origin, and which were chosen as the foundations for building a future.
The possibility of mercy is the heart of the poor man

Henrique Leitão
University of Lisbon
Guest Curator
Tile panel from the Convent of São Pedro de Alcântara (Lisbon)

Showing St. Peter giving food to an old blind man and a child.
Things have not always been as they are today. For those who lived in ancient times — at least for some of them — mercy had a more ambiguous status than it does nowadays: it was not always considered a virtue and sometimes it was not even considered to be admirable. Understood as a certain form of compassion, a feeling of pity towards the suffering of another, a human sympathy that is aroused when faced with the misery that afflicts another, mercy — although it called for noble gestures of help, a tempered judgement, the mitigation of punishments, and pardon — was not always considered to be positive.\(^1\) This was partly due to the fact that, in the Roman world, *misericordia* was sometimes considered to be a transitory disposition, an impulse, a feeling, which had to be stimulated, but which did not even have the stability that was attributed to the other virtues or dispositions with which it was frequently associated.\(^2\) For the stoics, for example, mercy expressed, above all, a certain sadness that is experienced in the presence of someone who is suffering, especially someone who is suffering unfairly; but, because of this, it was also understood as a human weakness, a weakness of the spirit, which disturbed inner peace.\(^3\)

There seem to have been objections of another type. Everything leads us to believe that, for some Romans, the practice of mercy was found to be disturbing, as it contained within itself what appeared to be a claim to superiority. The fundamental objection was formulated in the way that Seneca referred to clemency, a disposition that was very close to mercy, as a “mildness of a superior towards an inferior in determining punishments”.\(^4\) Even though *misericordia* was not totally equivalent to *clementia*, it was affected by this way of understanding the former, and thus the exercise of mercy ran the risk of being considered nothing more than the expression of a position of power, of a superior towards an inferior, with the additional problem of its being the manifestation of an arbitrary power. A power that, in the very act of mercy, manifested its discretionary character and which could often be nothing more than the result of very practical or cynical objectives: the famous “clementia Caesaris” may have been nothing more than just a consequence of his despotism. According to some historians, the Roman senatorial

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\(^2\) In the Roman world, many terms expressed feelings or dispositions that were very close to that of mercy (*misericordia*) – *clementia*, *lenitas*, *humanitas*, *mansuetudo*, *liberalitas*, *comitas*, *modestia*, *temperantia*, *magnitudo animi*, *modus*, *moderatio*, etc. – and it is not always easy to disentangle their different meanings. See K. Winkler, «Clementia», *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1957) cols. 206-231. In the ancient world, mercy was often associated with clemency, but one should note the contrast between the verbs that were used with *misericordia* (commovetur, movetur, orior, elicere, etc.) and those that were used with *clementia* (utor, ostendere, habere, etc). See David Konstan, «Clemency as a virtue», *Classical Philology*, 100 (2005), pp. 337-346 [esp. pp. 342-343]. For a more exhaustive discussion, see David Konstan, *Pity Transformed* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

\(^3\) H. Pétré, ““Misericordia”: Histoire du mot et de l’idée du paganisme au christianisme”, p. 378.

The possibility of mercy is the heart of the poor man.  

Aristocracy had been particularly critical of this way of exercising authority, seeing in Caesar’s merciful gestures the exercise of a despotic power, which did not accept the constraints of the law and manifested its total power precisely in its merciful acts. Perhaps for this reason, Cicero, on referring to Caesar, denounced his “insidiosa clementia”. Although it could be associated with acts that were recognised as good and valid – pardon, help, succour – and although a positive connotation could be identified, mercy in the ancient world also had less noble connotations, and, for this very reason, a somewhat ambiguous status.

Christianity introduced profound changes in the understanding and practice of mercy. The word was therefore invested with a range of meanings that, although they were not completely original, acquired an unexpected force and novelty. At the heart of these transformations is the double meaning with which mercy appears in the Christian doctrine. In other words, it is simultaneously considered to be an attribute of God and, at the same time, an obligation for mankind, a double meaning that is summed up in Christ’s statement: “Be ye therefore merciful, as your father also is merciful” (Luke, 6, 36). Mercy began to be understood, above all, as a disposition of God himself and the way in which God related with mankind. It was the responsibility of men, above all, to imitate this divine characteristic in their relationships with one another. Christian mercy therefore calls for a response to suffering and hardship that is similar to the one that God has already shown towards us.

In its more external aspect, Christian mercy begins with a recognition of the weakness and needs of others, and of the distress that we feel when faced with such suffering. St. Augustine explains: “What is mercy? It is nothing other than feeling a soreness of heart caught from others. It gets its Latin name, misericordia, from the sorrow of someone who is miserable; it is made up of two words miser, miserable, and cor, heart. It means being heartsore. So when someone else’s misery or sorrow touches and pierces your heart, it is called misericordia, or soreness of heart.”

But the commotion that we feel is more complex, because this soreness and the desire to help others does not only derive from a suffering that can be seen and which disturbs us, but, first of all, from the recognition of something that we ourselves lack; it springs from our having previously been the beneficiaries of the mercy of God, who, on seeing our weakness, came to our aid. As a scholar recently explained: “in St. Augustine’s writings, the word “mercy” expresses, first and foremost, the experience that a man has of God when he is converted and thereafter the experience that he has of his neighbour in his moments of need”. While, for the ancients, mercy did not contain this aspect of looking in upon oneself, for Christianity, however, this inward gaze and the recognition of having already been an object of mercy oneself are the starting point for engaging in its practice.

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5 This is, for example, the position of Ronald Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958); see D. Konstan, «Clemency as a virtue», p. 338.


The possibility of mercy is the heart of the poor man. The possibility of mercy is the heart of the poor man. This was the path through which Christianity announced the need for practising mercy as an imperative for believers. Over the centuries, that imperative came to be embodied in the definition and practice of the works of mercy, which should now be remembered: The seven corporal works of mercy: 1. To feed the hungry; 2. To give drink to the thirsty. 3. To clothe the naked; 4. To shelter the homeless; 5. To visit the sick; 6. To visit the imprisoned; 7. To bury the dead; and the seven spiritual works: 1. To counsel the doubtful; 2. To instruct the ignorant; 3. To admonish sinners; 4. To comfort the afflicted; 5. To forgive offences; 6. To bear wrongs patiently; 7. To pray for the living and the dead.

The history of Christianity in Europe and the world has as one of its most distinctive features the history of the implantation of the “works of mercy”, expressed in quite different forms and evolving over time in response to specific situations from each period. This history is indissociable from, and frequently overlaps with, the history of the foundation and development of the Misericórdias. Besides the institutional aspects and the effective performance of the “works” on behalf of those most in need, it can also be said that, with these actions and these gestures, the Christian notion of mercy began to be spread, thus becoming part of the heritage of the western world. But it would be a little optimistic to expect the very core of what this Christian mercy means to have been captured perfectly at all times, which also explains why, over the centuries, there have been repeated appeals made about this subject by Popes and the Church’s magisterium. It is at this point that we should raise the question of the modern-day relevance of the works of mercy, not only as the modern realisation of these gestures of aid towards those most in need in today’s world, but also as a way of recovering a more profound and intimate understanding of what mercy is. Perhaps the example of a famous text will help to clarify this matter.

A famous and dramatic appeal for exercising mercy is to be found in William Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*, in the passage known as “The Quality of Mercy”, in Act IV, Scene I. The situation is well-known, and therefore just a brief summary is sufficient for our purposes here. Antonio, an honourable merchant from Venice, had been named as the guarantor of a loan that Shylock, the Jew, had made to Antonio’s friend, Bassanio. Trusting in the profits that he would make with the arrival of his ships laden with riches, Antonio had given as his guarantee for the loan a pound of flesh from his own body. But there was a terrible storm and all the vessels were shipwrecked, which meant that Antonio was unable to guarantee the payment within the stipulated time. Shylock therefore claimed the pound of Antonio’s flesh to which he was entitled. The matter was taken to court, where Shylock simply demanded that justice be done and that Antonio should comply with what had been agreed. Shylock does not ask for more than he is due, and requests nothing more than the simple exercise of justice. In the
court, Portia, in disguise, attempts to dissuade Shylock from pressing ahead with his claim, requesting him to show mercy towards Antonio. Portia’s speech is the famous passage known as “The Quality of Mercy”: 

The quality of mercy is not strain’d; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven; upon the place beneath: it is twice bless’d; it blesseth him that gives, and him that takes: ‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes; the throned monarch, better than his crown; his sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty, wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above this sceptred sway, it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God’s, when mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew, though justice be thy plea, consider this, that, in the course of justice, none of us; should see salvation: we do pray for mercy; and that same prayer doth teach us all to render; the deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much; to mitigate the justice of thy plea;

It is difficult not to be moved by these words of Shakespeare: “in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation: we do pray for mercy”. The Christian message, which influenced Shakespeare’s work so deeply, is clearly expressed here.

The theme of mercy is very frequently addressed in Shakespeare, who considers it to be a virtue of the “mighty” and of kings, and who notes that good government demands more than justice, as is made evident in this passage. There is naturally a great deal that could be said about this episode, but the only point that needs to be stressed here is that the tension that Shakespeare highlights, that of justice versus mercy (although here this is demonstrated in a particularly sublime fashion), is a dichotomy that has since been treated in many places and by many authors from many historical periods. The passage from Shakespeare therefore describes a certain conception of mercy, one that is widespread and regarded as a moral position “above” justice (above the sceptred sway) – in other words, a conception that contains respect for justice, but which also demands something higher, imposing on it an even more superior, “more moral”, conception. Quite rightly, as a Christian, Shakespeare does not forget that mercy “is an attribute to God himself” and that it manifests God’s power in a special way. In this respect, he follows the tradition of the Church closely; St. Thomas Aquinas had already remarked upon this: “Further, it is said of God that He manifests His omnipotence especially by sparing and having mercy.”

Yet, throughout the passage, the willingness to exercise mercy would thus be the sign of a moral superiority. This is why Shakespeare considers it to be the attribute of the great and the powerful, of kings.

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8 *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene I.

As we saw earlier, this conception of mercy has its roots in the classical world, and it is one that has become particularly common in our societies and in public discourse: we are all called upon to exercise mercy towards the weak and the unprotected and the fact that such mercy is exercised by a king indicates a special sensitivity and moral integrity. But nor can we deny that, although it is not an equivocal conception, it seems to be lacking something, perhaps something essential. Furthermore, as can be immediately understood, by constituting an appeal to a certain higher power, it contains in itself the possibility of being considered a vanity, and, in this sense, of becoming a mundane form of mercy.

It was not in this way that Pope John Paul II regarded the matter when, in 1980, he presented his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia — Rich in Mercy*, where he wrote: “The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy.” 10 This is an unexpected and even surprising diagnosis because, if there is one thing that modernity insistently claims about itself, it is that it is fairer and more moral than the past. Do our societies and our culture not permanently insist on our obligation not to commit the same immoral acts as those of our ancestors and our opponents? Are we not, ourselves, fully convinced that, despite all our defects and limitations, we are, in fact, more moral than those who preceded us? And is it not true that, as a confirmation of this fact, we publicly exercise gestures of mercy and that, in our societies, there are ever more institutions and initiatives offering help to those in need? Yet, curiously, Pope John Paul II seems to have had a different opinion. According to him, it seems that the contemporary mentality, seen from this point of view, represents a step backwards in comparison with the past. And the same Pope went on to explain: “The word and the concept of “mercy” seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it. This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy.” 11

Once again, we are faced with a passage that is highly surprising and which points to a largely unexpected understanding of what mercy is. Here, mercy appears as a negation of the impulse for dominion. It is true that, later on in this encyclical, the Pope returned to the more traditional question of the relationship between justice and mercy, drawing a picture of the concept of mercy, beginning in the Old Testament, and questioning whether “justice will be enough”, but it is equally true that his most direct concern is directed towards these conditions of present-day life, which seem to have made today’s men and women – in other words, we ourselves – incapable of showing mercy. In the reading of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, there seems to be, in the present-day situation, and especially

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in the richest and most developed societies, a real difficulty in living in a merciful way, and furthermore it appears that this difficulty is rooted in a belief in dominion and power over the world, in a certain “rich” heart of the modern man.

The understanding of what really is at stake in Christian mercy was powerfully expressed in a passage from Pope Benedict XVI that was afforded widespread coverage: “Mercy is in reality the core of the Gospel message” and then he went on to say: “it is the name of God himself, the face with which he reveals himself in the Old Testament and fully in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of creative and redemptive Love. This love of mercy also illuminates the face of the Church, and is manifested through the sacraments, in particular that of reconciliation, as well as in works of charity, both of the community and individuals. Everything that the Church says and does shows that God has mercy for man.”

By reminding us that mercy “is the name of God himself”, Benedict XVI insisted on a central point of the Christian understanding of mercy, and, just like Pope John Paul II, he invited us all to reflect more deeply on the human situation.

That mercy is in reality “the core of the Gospel message” and that “it is the name of God himself” are characterisations that appeal directly to all believers, but not only these people. Everyone, whether believers or not, is obliged by these formulations to at least engage in some reflection. What do these expressions mean exactly and in what way are they related with the “works of mercy”? What were these popes seeking to tell us by reminding us that mercy does not refer just to “works of charity”, but also to the sacraments, “in particular that of reconciliation”?

As is well known, a very particular insistence on the central importance of mercy, as a way of understanding the divine, and on the relationship that modern men have with their neighbours, has come to be a distinguishing feature of Pope Francis’s Pontificate. In his interview with Andrea Tornielli, later published in a book whose title “The Name of God is Mercy” marks a return to Pope Benedict XVI’s famous expression, Pope Francis had the opportunity to develop his thinking about the subject.

After reminding us that the centrality of mercy in the life of the Church “is Jesus’ most important message.” (p. 23), and that, according to its etymology, “misericordia (mercy) means opening one’s heart to those who are unhappy” (p. 26), the Pope rapidly moves on to his essential point, noting that “when someone feels the mercy of God, he feels a great shame for himself and for his sin” (p. 27). Yet, according to the Pope, this is the central nub of the question, since “only he who has been touched and caressed by the tenderness of his mercy really knows the Lord. For this reason […] the place where my encounter with the mercy of Jesus takes place is my sin” (p. 48).

In reminding us of the situation of hardship faced by the agent of mercy, the Pope makes it clear that there is a close connection with what the Christian

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The possibility of mercy is the heart of the poor man, and although, as is well known, he seeks to avoid the formulations and terminology that are traditionally used, he does not offer any doubt that this is his intention. When the Pope speaks insistently about the need for us to be merciful, if we make only a superficial reading of his words, we might be led to consider that he is simply inviting us to be “more moral” – something that modern people have always claimed that they are. However, the appeal goes much deeper and, in a certain sense, it is more uncomfortable for all of us, since what the Pope is inviting us to do is to live with a poorer heart and one that, by being conscious of its own weakness, consequently becomes more attentive and sympathetic to the suffering of others. The link between poverty and mercy is, in fact, made explicitly by Pope Francis when he states that “the poor are the privileged of the Divine Mercy”\(^\text{14}\). Simply, what might not be clear at first glance is that these poor people are not just those towards whom we direct our merciful actions; these poor people are us ourselves.

With this, we are led to the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, so beloved by Pope Francis, and so directly implicated in his texts and speeches, especially in the encyclical \textit{Laudato Si}, in which he dramatically denounces the excesses committed by present-day societies in their dominion over the Earth. If we look closely at the personality of St. Francis of Assisi, we finally understand why Pope John Paul II associated the modern difficulty in living a merciful life with “the enormous development of science and technology” and with a humanity that has “subdued and dominated” the Earth. The two most famous traits in St. Francis’s personality – his radical way of living in poverty, and his profound love for the world created by God, for nature, for each animal and for each plant – are generally presented as precisely this: two traits of a rich and complex personality. What the encyclical \textit{Laudato Si} reminds us is that these two aspects are just one. St. Francis’s poverty and his enchantment with, and respect for, the beauty of the natural world are one and the same thing. What Pope Francis once again reminds us is that the only way of correctly using the goods and resources of Nature and of the Earth is if we use them with the heart of a poor man, who knows that everything was given to him, who does not have his hope or his heart placed in transitory things, and who makes use of everything with the happiness, freedom and respect of someone who knows that, at root, he depends on God for everything.

The possibility of mercy is the heart of a poor man, precisely because the wish to be merciful springs from the wish to be with others as God was first with us. It springs, therefore, from a sense of disproportion, and the awareness that, in an essential way, there is a complete equivalence between ourselves and our neighbour who stands before us in a state of need. The hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and the afflicted that the works of mercy speak of are also we ourselves, and, if we take action in defence of the more unprotected that are around us – as we must necessarily do – it is because we recognise ourselves as equal and as also

being in need of mercy. What lives in the heart of the merciful is not the ambition to attain a purer morality, nor even a more complete ethical correctness, above and beyond justice. What lives there is the compassion of the poor heart, which sees a gift in everything and in life, and which gives to others because it knows that, in the final analysis, everything that it has was also given to it.

*Um Compromisso para o Futuro* is an exhibition commemorating the fifth centenary of the first printed edition of the *Compromisso* of the Confraternity of the Misericórdia, and the current relevance of its message. Published for the first time in 1516, this document corresponds to what today would be referred to by the name of “Statutes”, establishing the regulations for the organisation, activities and functions of the Confraternity of the Misericórdia and making it a fundamental element in the history of the Misericórdias in Portugal. Together with its normative aspect, the *Compromisso* was also the formal announcement, in print, of the moral imperative of the Works of Mercy and of the commitment to provide material and spiritual aid to those in greatest need. In the words of the text itself, “[so that] all the works of mercy, both spiritual and corporal, may be fulfilled, insofar as possible, to succour the tribulations and miseries that are suffered by our brothers in Christ”. The *Compromisso* therefore served the purpose not only of structuring and organise the Confraternity of the Misericórdia, but also of establishing the ideals and practices of the Misericórdias over the centuries, continuing until the present day.

The exhibition *Um Compromisso para o Futuro* reminds us of the crucial importance of the first edition of this document. The first section presents not only a copy of the first printed version of the *Compromisso*, but also copies of all the sixteenth-century editions, as well as other subsequent editions until the nineteenth century. In this way, an attempt has been made to highlight not only the present-day relevance of the works of mercy, but also the various typographical features of the different copies.

The second section is devoted entirely to the iconography of mercy and contains an important group of art works from Portugal and abroad, including, most notably, two fifteenth-century paintings that have never previously been shown in Portugal: *Opere di Misericordia: Seppellire i morti*, which forms part of a group of six panels depicting the Works of Mercy painted by Olivuccio de Ciccarello, in 1404, for the Church of Santa Maria della Misericordia, in Ancona, which was destroyed during the bombing of the city in the Second World War. This painter was considered to be one of the leading artists of the late-Gothic Ancona school, which was active between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In fact, this situation was clearly demonstrated when he was commissioned to paint the frescos of the Santa Casa di Loreto and was given the title of *Magister Alegutius Cicarelli* of Ancona. Because of the richness and originality of its iconography and its remarkable technical quality, the *Virgen de la Misericordia* (Our Lady of Mercy), attributed
to the “Master of Teruel” and belonging to the Museo de Arte Sacro in Teruel, Spain, is considered to be one of the most significant works of Gothic painting from the Spanish medieval kingdoms, which explains why, until now, permission has never previously been granted for the painting to be exhibited outside Spain. Among the Portuguese works on display is the magnificent sixteenth-century painting of *Our Lady of Mercy*, attributed to Gregório Lopes and belonging to the Santa Casa da Misericórdia in Sesimbra. This painting underlines the great quality of the works commissioned by the Portuguese Misericórdias.

The last section of the exhibition includes a series of photographs commissioned from young Portuguese photographers, which illustrate the modern relevance of the works of mercy, highlighting the support that the Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa continues to give to Portuguese culture and artists.

In marking the fifth centenary of the publication of the *Compromisso*, our intention is not only to give visitors to the exhibition an opportunity to appreciate the historical and symbolic value of this text, but also, through it, to demonstrate the current relevance of the practice of the works of mercy in view of the great challenges that we now face in the 21st century.

The Exhibition is accompanied by this Catalogue, in which, following the introductory texts by Dr. Pedro Santana Lopes, Provost of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia, and by Dr. Guilherme d’Oliveira Martins, you can find a series of studies by some leading specialists in the areas that are dealt with. The study by Helga Jüsten, as well as the one by Francisco d’Orey Manoel and Nelson Antão, deal specifically with aspects linked to the typographical and editorial history of the first printed version of the *Compromisso* and its subsequent editions. The studies by Isabel dos Guimarães Sá and Lisbeth Rodrigues deal with questions linked, above all, to the history of the Misericórdias in Portugal, while those by Celso Mangucci and Pedro Hernando Sebastián deal with more specific themes related with art history. Together they constitute a group of academic works of great value, substantially adding to the already rich corpus of studies about the Misericórdias and their history.

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The invitation that was addressed to me by the Provost of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia, Dr. Pedro Santana Lopes, to act as the curator for this Exhibition, was a great honour, but, in a certain way, also a surprise. There is no question that my academic interests and research into cultural and scientific history have always been centred, above all, on the sixteenth century in Portugal and that, because of this, I often came across the history of the Misericórdias in our country and the
text of the *Compromisso*. However, my familiarity with these subjects has never been such that I would consider myself to be a specialist on this matter. But then I understood that it was exactly this challenge that the Santa Casa was seeking to issue by inviting me to serve as the curator of the exhibition that celebrates the 500th anniversary of the publication. They were looking for someone who, although they had some contact with the subject, could, at the same time, bring an “outside” look upon the matter. If I had any initial doubts about accepting such an invitation, these were immediately dissipated in the first meetings that I held with the Cultural Department, headed by Dr. Margarida Montenegro, and with Dr. Francisco d’Orey Manoel and Nelson Antão, from the Historical Archive, whose professionalism, profound knowledge of the history of the *misericórdias*, and total dedication to this project, overcame all my failings; they are the true architects of this initiative. I have also had the good fortune to be able to rely upon the backing of a remarkable group of academics – specialists in the various themes touched upon in this exhibition – who so promptly agreed to contribute to the event with immensely valuable studies, transforming this catalogue into a document that henceforth will be considered indispensable for any future study, not only of the *Compromisso*, but also of the history of the Misericórdia in the sixteenth century.