

S. UTMAN

COLLECTED WORKS OF
ERASMUS

SPIRITUALIA and PASTORALIA

DISPUTATIUNCULA DE TAEDIO, PAVORE,
TRISTICIA IESU

CONCIO DE IMMENSA DEI MISERICORDIA

MODUS ORANDI DEUM

EXPLANATIO SYMBOLI APOSTOLORUM

DE PRAEPARATIONE AD MORTEM

edited by John W. O'Malley

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A SERMON ON THE IMMENSE MERCY OF GOD

Concio de immensa Dei misericordia

translated and annotated by
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The *Concio de immensa Dei misericordia*¹ was first published by Froben at Basel in September 1524, together with an enlarged version of the *Virginis et martyris comparatio*. It had apparently been commissioned by Christoph von Utenheim, bishop of Basel, who had recently founded a chapel dedicated to the Mercies of God. Although described as a sermon, the work is far too long to have been actually delivered at the consecration of the chapel. On 20 June 1524 Erasmus had sent a draft for comment to Bishop Christoph, who replied three weeks later, approving of the work but urging Erasmus to be cautious: 'No further matter should be added beyond what I suggested, and in particular nothing that might excite the Lutherans or those who observe the genuine old-fashioned faith.'²

We do not know what Utenheim's suggestions had been, though he goes on in this letter to recommend that some potentially controversial additions at the end of the work be removed. But it appears that Erasmus took heed, since there is little polemical material in the book. In later correspondence Erasmus several times cited *De immensa Dei misericordia* as a work whose pious aims could give offence to no one. He considered it very suitable, along with the *Virginis et martyris comparatio*, the *Modus orandi Deum*, and his commentaries on the Psalms, for the widest possible diffusion through new editions and translations.³ Though published in the same month as *De libero arbitrio* and soon after the *Exomolosis*, *De immensa Dei misericordia* seems to have aroused little controversy, no doubt because here Erasmus' concerns are pastoral rather than doctrinal.

As an example of ideal Erasmian preaching, grounded in Scripture and designed to uplift the hearts of the faithful, *De immensa Dei misericordia* could hardly be bettered. Erasmus describes his sermon as an encomium of that mercy of God through which eternal salvation is prepared for all. Gently but insistently he urges the necessity of humility and hope, worship and repentance. While his strictures on human pride awake echoes of the satirical past, the exhortations against despair that dominate the second part of the sermon show Erasmus at his humane best. No doubt the book owed

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¹ This is the title generally used. However, LB entitles the work *De magnitudine misericordiarum Domini concio* ('A Sermon on the Magnitude of the Lord's Mercies').

² Ep 1464:14-16; Erasmus' letter of 20 June is Ep 1456. See also Ep 1341A:782-4.

³ See Ep 1581:116, Allen Epp 1746:17, 1968:62, and 3049:40. However, in a letter of 1529 (Allen Ep 2165:39) he puts this *Concio* in the more dubious company of the *Institutio christiani matrimonii* and the *Paraphrases* as a candidate for vernacular translation.

much of its popularity to this inspiring litany of consolation. Erasmus addresses his imaginary audience in an invigoratingly direct style, avoiding both the arid intellectualism of the scholastic sermon and the otiose rambling of the monastic preachers. His discourse mingles the free homiletic style of the Fathers, based on copious scriptural quotation and exegesis, with elements of the classical demonstrative and deliberative rhetoric that he was to recommend in the *Ecclesiastes*.⁴

As Erasmus points out, *miser cordia* (mercy, pity, compassion) is an elastic term in Holy Writ.⁵ God's mercy can encompass generosity, punishment, clemency, forgiveness, reward, and finally redemption; Christ is mercy incarnate. Divine mercy is given the contrasting functions of elevating humanity towards God in a properly humble spirit and of consoling and healing the desperate. Erasmus' pastoral advice is directed against the twin evils of pride and despair, the Scylla and Charybdis of the fallen world. He seeks to humble pride through examples of punishment and forgiveness, such as the contrasting fates of Pharaoh and David, and through an analysis of human frailty, both physical and spiritual. Despair, exemplified by the exile of Cain and the suicide of Judas, is countered by evocations of the multitude as well as the magnitude of God's mercies.

Erasmus thus assembles abundant scriptural evidence of God's compassion and of his encouragement of the human aspiration towards salvation. Interestingly, the most detailed passages of exegesis draw on the 'minor prophets' Joel, Habakkuk, and Micah. Erasmus expounds not only their evocations of divine mercy but also their prophecies of the Incarnation, its most sublime expression. Erasmus' copious quotation, throughout this work, of the Old Testament tradition of mercy⁶ suggests a desire to redress an imbalance that he himself had perhaps helped to perpetuate. Against the persistent Christian perception that the God of the Israelites was more just than

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4 On Erasmus and preaching, see Jacques Chomarat *Grammaire et rhétorique chez Erasme* 2 vols (Paris 1981) II 1053-1153; John W. O'Malley 'Erasmus and the History of Sacred Rhetoric: The Ecclesiastes of 1535' *ERSY* 5 (1985) 1-29; and Manfred Hoffmann *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus* (Toronto 1994) 28-60. Some editions of *De immensa Dei misericordia* identify in the margin the rhetorical techniques being used.

5 On the complex matrix of Hebrew and Greek terms used in the Scriptures to convey the concept most often translated *miser cordia*, see C.R. Smith *The Bible Doctrine of Grace and Related Doctrines* (London 1956).

6 Shimon Markish counted 102 references in *De immensa Dei misericordia* to the Old Testament, against a mere 60 to the New: *Erasmus and the Jews* trans A. Olcott (Chicago and London 1986) 46.

merciful, he argues that the Old Testament is as much a testament of mercy as the New, especially since mercy is justice in a higher form; how often in early times was God's power tempered by mercy! Indeed, the two may most fruitfully be combined: 'Let us worship his merciful power and delight in his powerful mercy' (101).

However, the sermon does not deal only with the mercy of God. In the final part Erasmus moves on to discuss human mercy, defined by Augustine and the schoolmen as the compassionate will to alleviate another's misfortune, and one of the essential forms of Christian charity.⁷ Indeed, for Erasmus charity and mercy are virtually interchangeable: 'What is charity towards one's neighbour, if not mercy?' (135). In this last section the underlying premise is the Beatitude, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (Matt 5:7). The act of bestowing mercy on one's neighbour is a means not of earning merit but of calling God's mercy to our assistance in a manner preferable, Erasmus hints, to more formal spiritual exercises. Again the Old and the New Testaments are reconciled in Matthew's quotation of Hosea: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice' (Matt 9:13; Hos 6:6). In a sense our charitable works must be as gratuitous as God's bestowal of gifts upon us, as we obey Matthew's injunction to be perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matt 5:45). It is not merit but faith that obtains mercy.

There are already traces here of contemporary doctrinal disputes, and it is in fact possible to read parts of *De immensa Dei misericordia* as an oblique contribution to the debate over free will, and more specifically as a commentary on the role and operation of divine grace in justification. The conventional Thomist view was to see grace as the action of God's mercy,⁸ but Erasmus makes the two virtually synonymous. 'What is the grace of God, if not the mercy of God?' (102). Again, in reviewing the different categories of divine mercy on display in the Old Testament, he refers explicitly to terms applied by scholastic theologians to grace rather than mercy: prevenient, consoling, elevating, and medicinal, among others. However, he does not enter into the old controversies over created and uncreated grace or the related contemporary debate over inherent and infused grace that preoccupied Luther and his opponents.⁹

In general terms Erasmus, aware of the dangers of Pelagianism, held the view that 'the Christian was saved in and through the grace that Christ

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⁷ Cf Thomas Aquinas *Summa theologica* II-II q 30 art 1 obj 3 citing Augustine's definition in *De civitate Dei* 9.5 PL 41 261.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas *Summa theologica* I q 2 art 112 obj 1

⁹ For a succinct discussion of these points, see the articles 'Grace' by E.M. Burke in the NCE VI 658-72 and by J. vander Meersch in DTC VI-2 1654.

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brought to earth and in no other way,¹⁰ and that God's grace is thus the first cause of salvation. It is a position that Luther could have approved. But in *De immensa Dei misericordia* Erasmus' identification of mercy with grace and that the human will enjoys a certain freedom. Humanity must choose to cooperate with grace, as David did; the invitation can be rejected, as it was by Pharaoh. As in the formal debate with Luther, Erasmus seems to accept a certain efficacy of the human will, while acknowledging that the effect of divine grace is far greater. Man is weak, according to Erasmus, rather than evil, as Luther held. Erasmus cherished the free human response, through faith, hope, and especially charity, to the divine motion involved in the bestowing of grace on humanity. In *De servo arbitrio* Luther had taken the extreme position: 'Here we must bow down in reverence for the God who is full of compassion for those whom he justifies and saves without their being in any way worthy of it.' Erasmus accused Luther of praising God's mercy towards some so excessively that God was made to appear more cruel than just towards others.¹¹

It may be that Erasmus' insistence in *De immensa Dei misericordia* on the mercy of the God of Israel is also a covert reproach to Luther. Although in this sermon (117) Erasmus explicitly condemns only the ancient heretics, the Manichees, for making the God of the Old Testament capricious and ultimately evil, Erasmus had revealed elsewhere his suspicion that Luther's view was similar.¹² But if there are echoes here of the controversy with Luther, Erasmus did not entirely avoid the wrath of his own church. Two passages were later singled out for censure by the Roman Inquisition, the one (104-5) a restrained and partly veiled attack on the trade in indulgences, the other a phrase (115) that the Roman authorities presumably understood to hint at the superfluosity of auricular confession, though Erasmus had been far more outspoken on this in his detailed treatise on confession, *Exomologesis* (March 1524).

In such a work of pastoral piety it would be idle to expect a display of Erasmian wit or classical scholarship, but there is room, early on, for the occasional humanist aside. The ancient Giants and the sacrilegious Salmoneus are enlisted to illustrate worldly pride, though Erasmus half apologizes for appealing to mythology. Ancient history supplies exemplary

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10 John W. O'Malley in *CWE* 66 xxiii; he points out, however, that the problem is made complex because of Erasmus' reluctance to use technical language.

11 For references and a concise recent discussion of these issues, see C. Augustijn *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence* trans J.C. Grayson (Toronto 1991) 141-4.

12 *De libero arbitrio* *LB IX* 1242F; see also *Ep* 1881.

tyrants, from Alexander to Trajan, but Erasmus fears that his audience may find the evidence of secular history unconvincing and reinforces the lesson with scriptural counterparts such as Pharaoh and Ahab. An anecdote concerning Socrates' self-restraint is topped by a similar story of St Francis of Assisi. In each case Erasmus distances himself from the 'foolish philosophers' who prefer Plato and Aristotle to Christ. Greek fatalism has no place in the voluntarist system evolved by the Fathers, and no doubt contemporary enthusiasm for ancient Stoicism is being reprovved when Erasmus asserts that God's compassion knows no bounds, being 'excessive and immoderate, the sort of thing that passes for a fault among humans.'¹³ The literal meaning of the adjective in Erasmus' title, 'unmeasured,' is a constant reminder that when it comes to divine mercy the Golden Mean of the ancients is irrelevant.

De immensa Dei misericordia was reprinted in October 1524 by Froben, and further printings were issued that year at Antwerp, Strasbourg, and Cologne. The book was soon translated into German, Dutch, English, Spanish, and Italian.¹⁴ It was first translated into English by Gentian Hervet 'at the request of Margaret Countess of Salisbury,' and this reasonably full and accurate version was published in London by T. Berthelet, probably in 1526. Two modern versions are in fact less reliable.¹⁵

My translation is based on the text in LB, checked against the first edition and the *Opera omnia* of 1540. The text in the latter has been lightly edited¹⁶ and the concluding prayers are omitted, as they are from LB, but otherwise the text remained virtually unchanged. Translations of Scripture are my own, as no English version exactly matches Erasmus' text.

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¹³ 89 below. Erasmus was perhaps inspired by Augustine's chapters on the passions in *De civitate Dei* 9.4-5 PL 41 258-61.

¹⁴ See Allen v 509 and F. vander Haeghen *Bibliotheca Erasmi* 3 vols in 1 (repr Nieuwkoop 1961) I 72-3, which also lists later translations into Czech and French. On the Spanish translation of 1528 and the popularity of the work in Spain, see Bataillon *Erasmus et l'Espagne* I 304-6 and 542n, and on the three different Italian translations, see Silvana Seidel Menchi *Erasmus in Italia*, 1520-1580 (Turin 1987) 95-9, 142, and 155.

¹⁵ *The Immense Mercy of God* trans E.M. Hulme (San Francisco 1940) and *Concerning the Immense Mercy of God* trans John P. Dolan in *The Essential Erasmus* (New York 1964) 222-70

¹⁶ This was perhaps done in the October 1524 Froben edition 'reviewed by the author' (Allen v 509), which I have not seen; improvements in spelling and punctuation and the correction of two scriptural quotations (130 and 138) suggest a fairly vigilant reader.

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MJH