

Divine Mercy Sunday, 2003: Read John 20, 19-31

I will not explain why today has come to be named “Divine Mercy Sunday”, nor recount the inspiring story of St. Faustina. I would rather sound aloud the bugle and do immediately what Jesus once said to her: “priests are to tell everyone about My great and unfathomable mercy” (Diary, 570). And indeed, I will reflect with you on only one of its resplendent qualities. It appears frequently in St. Faustina’s writings; it is, I feel, the key to opening one of the most stubbornly closed doors in the human heart, namely our crazy distrust of the mercy of God as Jesus has revealed it to us. The key quality of which I speak is faithfulness, the unfailing availability of Divine Mercy to all. God is inexorably merciful. Mercy is “love’s second name” (“Dives in Misericordia”, n.7) and Jesus is “Love and Mercy itself” (Diary of Faustina, n. 1074).

Often our distrust of Mercy is not a clear-cut decision, but a vague and heavy spirit of resistance, a gnawing reluctance. And while we would rather be free of it, and know deep peace, a number of things stops us. We procrastinate, deceiving ourselves it will lift, like a bad hangover; we are reluctant to let go of the things that cause it; we feel shame and frustration at not understanding our own humanity; we are angry at our own foibles and still more angry that we have to admit them, even to ourselves, never mind to God, and not to speak of the priest... One way or another, we all get like this. But the problem is that this heavy spirit of resistance is like a bad cold which, if left untreated, turns into a kind of spiritual SARS. It can become a dark, deep and deadly distrust if we begin to rationalize it and to justify ourselves. And it infects others very easily.

We start calling evil good and good evil; we attribute an infallibility to our own conscience that we would deny even to the Pope. We blame the Church for causing us guilt complexes, for being out of date in its moral doctrine, and we make a convenient, yet spectacularly artificial, separation between Christ and the Church, as if Christ had decided to dispense His graces without Her: effectively, we say: “Christ, yes; the Church, no.” We blame our parents, living or dead, not just for our hang-ups, but for our indecisiveness in dealing with them. We blame our siblings, teachers, the government ... We blame, we blame! The very aspect of our face comes to communicate self-righteous blame, and our actions and words smell of it, like hard liquor on someone’s breath.

At the root of this lies the mystery of iniquity and its fatally clever conniving: it is pride which resists admitting guilt and creates an inner phantasy world, a spiritual disney-land, where we play at life, leaving the challenges of reality and maturity outside. We fear the pain of renouncing our phantasies in order to embrace true healing. Pride flourishes in distrust – and ends in despair: in an amazing show of manipulation, it convinces us that we are being coherent when we contradict ourselves. For, while it persuades us that our sin is too big for Divine Mercy and our humility

more breathtaking than Christ's humiliation, it also tells us we are too important and too tragic by far to accept that by merely saying "I'm sorry", I could be restored to God. Pride would have us believe we are beyond right and wrong, grace and sin, redemption and perdition, God and devil. Indeed, Christ, Church, sacraments, heaven, hell and mankind itself: they all mean nothing when pride has its way. If you find yourself thinking and acting like this, that is like Judas, you may be lingering on this sorry path to nowhere. Thomas wanted proof of the Resurrection; Judas would simply have had no interest in it. Much of civil society and some of our lawmakers and law-care-takers would simply look the other way if the Risen Lord appeared to them to say this or that law or scientific project is not the way to go. Behind the personal and societal loss of the sense of true, objective morality lies a cancer of the soul for which even the decoded genome can present no cure: that cancer is distrust of Divine Mercy.

But how can I seek Divine Mercy if I believe I can do no wrong? How can I appeal to conscience to excuse myself from obeying the truth when, if Truth in person were to speak to me, I would promptly ignore Him? If science is the new dogma, if technicians are its high priests and physical well-being the only or principal criterion of morality, why pay lip service to God? In such a world it is no surprise that God should be kept out; indeed, it becomes an imperative to get Him out, be it of the oath of allegiance, the national anthem, the dollar bill or the classroom! The false understanding of the separation of Church and State leads to the elimination of God and, ultimately, the self-destruction of the state. But the cold of eliminating Him is far better than the lukewarmness of pretending to do Him homage and then flatly provoking Him to His face: "what you do with your Mercy is your concern, what we do with science is ours!" Distrust of Divine Mercy manifests the full devastating effect of sin in the human heart.

Can the phoenix arise from such devastation? Can my crazy distrust of the mercy of God be raised to life? Can the Church and society speak of and to God with its heart and actions on fire and not only with cold lips?

The answer is yes! And the power to say and mean yes is Christ Jesus our Lord. As if to prove how well He loved us, He absorbed in His own humanity our sins and afflictions; He died for us while we were still sinners and rose for us that we might become just and holy in Him. His act of love for sinners is definitive and irreversible. On the Cross He spoke of our craziness: "Father, forgive, for sin has made them crazy, they don't see what they are doing." On the Cross, Jesus accepts us in our very act of rejecting Him and still says: "I forgive you, peace be unto you." He confounds the logic of pride with the wisdom of mercy. He takes the power out of sin by forgiving it so that we no longer have to cling to our shame before Him for it is no more! In the beautiful words of St. Thomas Aquinas: "mercy is to have a pain in our hearts over the pain of another and to take pains to relieve that pain": mercy is the heart of our relationship with God and each other.

There is never any time when we cannot hope for His Mercy, there is never any

situation of moral or spiritual misery, however grievous, from which we cannot be rescued by the Mercy of God in Jesus. His Mercy hounds us, seeks us out; like rays of light seeping through tiny cracks in the closed door of a darkened room, it draws us to that door, outside of which He is gently calling and knocking in the hope that we will open to Him. His mercy is unrelenting, unabating, ever persistent, unhaltingly faithful, always vigilant, longanimous. Like the air we breathe, like the very consciousness we have of ourselves and of our beating hearts, Divine Mercy is just simply always there. Mercy is revolutionary because it renders rebellion and duplicity meaningless. Jesus turns sin against itself by making it a chance for the sinner to experience the depth of His love. This does not mean that we should sin to know His love; think of Our Lady. Mercy is there to justify us, not to justify our sinning. Knowing it is there means that we need not feel cornered or check-mated by sin.

Moreover, Divine Mercy does not exist in abstract: it's not a thing. It is the powerful bond of spiritual love born in the personal encounter between the faithful God of compassion and the sinful human being. Mercy recreates our unsullied relationship to God, passing first and necessarily through the Church and through Jesus. The entire treasure of Divine Mercy exists in the flesh of Jesus, poured out for us in blood and water on Calvary and transmitted to us across the centuries by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of priests in the confessional and at the altar. The Pope calls the Eucharist "the great mystery, the mystery of mercy" ("Ecclesia de Eucharistia", n.11), but explains how communion in the Eucharist requires sacramental confession at least in those who are conscious of mortal sin. This is so logical in the supernatural realm! No-one's rights are being violated; rather, no-one's sin is being blessed. How can I be truthful in the act of holy communion if my life in Christ's eyes –which see me through the Church– is sick with the deceit of mortal sin? If my soul is not disposed to receive mercy, and change my life according to the demands of mercy, how can I sincerely receive communion? To take communion in such a state is to partake unworthily of the Body of the Lord and to aggravate one's own sinfulness. And yet, the beauty of mercy is that even if I do make that terrible mistake, in sacramental confession, if I truly repent, I can receive complete and total forgiveness even of that mistake. The mystery of Mercy in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of Reconciliation calls me to maturity and seriousness in all my relationships. And as is true in any solid relationship of love, maturity and commitment can be built only on the solid rock of unconditional trust.

Strangely, we may fear to approach the overwhelming beauty of Divine Mercy. We fear the tears which unleash the terrible pain and absurdity of our own sin, buried tragically inside. We do this despite that fact that it is sin itself which is the source of that pain, which saps our strength and energy like a parasite, which steals our peace, wipes away joy from our countenance, frays our temper and our nerves, disturbs our

sleep. And yet, and yet ... God Himself weeps with us with divine tears of compassion and empathy. Jesus wept at the sins of Jerusalem; He wept aloud and in silence to be delivered from death. God's mercy empathizes with us and enters into our suffering. Realizing this then brings tears of consolation because it makes us understand we are not alone in our suffering nor are we condemned to live in it for ever. They are tears of relief from the tension we build up in fearful hiding of ourselves from others, from God and even from ourselves. The tears of admission and confession flush out the chaotic waters of sinfulness and leave our hearts open to receive the living waters of Divine Mercy which will restore all those things stolen by sin. How many marriages and homes, how many relationships between couples, parents and children, would be preserved and strengthened if we had but the courage, the simplicity and the trust to pour forth our pain, sorrow and guilt before the Heart of Jesus and so learn to forgive one another!

So, I encourage you not to be fearful when approaching Him. It is in the confessional that the greatest miracles take place and are incessantly repeated (Diary, 1448). Perhaps the greatest of these miracles is the ability, even after long years of sorrow and pain, to pardon myself in the strength of Divine Mercy. If I try to forgive myself without Divine Mercy, it does not satisfy my psycho-spiritual need to confess, and self-absolution does not remove my sins. I need acquittal before God my Father and the Church my Mother. And if I sin again, the Father through the Mother mercifully and faithfully adapts His divine power to my faltering steps of conversion: it gradually wears down my resistance to His peace. His mercy can never be outwitted, either by my self-deceiving vanity or by my self-condemning cruelty. It will not play game to the former, nor will it be intimidated by the latter. It transforms the humiliation of sin into the humility of grace. It exorcizes the ghosts of past guilt and breathes in the Spirit of refreshing forgiveness. It allows me to reinterpret my past life of shameful rebellion in terms of the unimagined opportunity given now for joyful obedience in the future. To err is human, to forgive divine, but we can never err in forgiving, for in being forgiven and in forgiving we become divine. Divine Mercy's faithful persistence, its never-failing availability restores hope to the desperate even if weakness leads to repeated falls. For no number of falls is more powerful or greater than the eternal readiness of God to forgive: no doubts or distrust can undo the faithfulness of God.

Jesus said to Sr. Faustina: "let the greatest sinners place their trust in my Mercy. They have the right before others to trust in the abyss of My mercy" (Diary, 1146). Mercy makes it possible for us at least to creep gradually towards the ideals of holiness. Every little act of mercy, every attempt to show mercy will attract the lost, the abandoned, the lapsed back to Christ in His Church. A practical way of sustaining a life of mercifulness is also to pray the chaplet of mercy. In this parish as many as 200 people form an unbroken chain of prayer for mercy by praying the chaplet over 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Speak to others of the mercy of God, share with them your

own experiences of that mercy, be Divine Mercy witnesses, apostles, secretaries, spokespersons and all the rest!

“If the bugle’s sound is uncertain, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Cor 14:8). If our faith in Divine Mercy is weak, who will fight the battle against sin? For the lost to return to the Heart of God we must be strong and unflinching in our trust in that Heart’s Mercy. So, at the intercession of St. Faustina, let the bugle sound loud and clear and let the battle of the Church of Christ continue until the King of Mercy returns to judge the living and the dead. He will reward with eternal life those who have lived, fought and died awaiting and trusting in His faithful Divine Mercy. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have mercy shown them.”

Msgr. Peter Magee

St. Raphael’s, Rockville, MD: 3.00 pm Mass of Divine Mercy

Sunday, April 27th, 2003