

2nd Sunday of Easter - Divine Mercy

Introduction

Yesterday Pope Francis formally announced an extraordinary Holy Year dedicated to God's Mercy. He timed his announcement for this Second Sunday of Easter, Mercy Sunday, as it has been known since the days of St. John Paul II. And in the very first words of his announcement, Pope Francis invites us to look upon the face of Risen Lord Jesus as the Face of God's Mercy. It is this Jesus of Nazareth, God's Eternal Son, born of Mary, who has revealed the Father of Mercies to us "by his words, his actions, and his entire Person..." MV, 1.

In the same breath, Pope Francis invites us to contemplate God's mercy "as the wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace..." "Mercy", he says, is "the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us". "Mercy", he says, is "the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life." "Mercy", he says, "is "the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness..." MV, 2.

With those opening words, Pope Francis lays out how this special Holy Year will be celebrated in Rome and around the world. He then proceeds to open our minds to the understanding of Scripture as the revelation of God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ. Like his predecessors, St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis does not present God's mercy merely as a soothing ointment, designed to make us feel better about our sins while still living in them. Rather, mercy is God's way of reaching out to us, offering us a new chance to look at ourselves, to convert, to believe. Mercy is also the foundation of the Church's life: God's mercy is what the Church preaches, his mercy is what the Church dispenses in the Mass and the Sacraments, his mercy is what the Church practices in works of charity, healing, and education, and we, all of us, are called, to be authentic signs of God's mercy,

indeed missionaries of God's mercy because we are becoming "merciful like the Father" ... in a world that all too often chooses violence and severity over mercy.

A Special Resonance for the Knights of Columbus

Since the document announcing the Holy Year just came out yesterday, I can't claim to have studied it in any depth. But even a cursory reading of the Pope's words has convinced me that this special holy year resonates so beautifully with who we are as the family of the Knights of Columbus ...and let me tell you why I think so.

In his announcement, Pope Francis recalls the words of St. John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council when he said that the Church preferred "the medicine of mercy" to "the arms of severity". Even more to the point, he recalls what Blessed Pope Paul VI said when he closed Vatican II in 1965: "We prefer to point out how charity has been the principal religious feature of the Council ... the old story of the Good Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the Council..." MV, 4. Elsewhere in the document, Pope Francis recalls what St. John Paul II said, namely, that we always experience God's love, his charity, as mercy.

We can instantly see that that this special holy year is tailor-made for an organization that claims charity as its first principle. Following the lead and inspiration of Father McGivney, the charity which Order puts into practice is not cold and impersonal. It is not a charity which is bureaucratically dispensed to nameless, faceless people. Rather, the charity of the Knights of Columbus has a neighborly quality to it ... whether it's reaching out to a brother Knight and his family in time of trouble or disaster relief, wheelchairs, or scholarships, or the protection of unborn life. Finding its source in God's mercy, the charity of the Knights of Columbus seeks to restore and affirm our wounded humanity dignity. As I read through Pope Francis' words, I could not miss how he challenges all of us to be practitioners of mercy, not merely in a programmatic way, but in our personal lives.

The mercy of God as expressed in our works of charity is both the messenger and

the message of the Gospel. Indeed, as we have observed many times during these days, the Order is most attractive to the men and families we hope to recruit when it engaged “in service to one and in service to all.” And it is often through the practice of charity that we lead others to Christ and the Church.

The Personal Dimension of Mercy

If the Order would take full advantage of this special holy year, the first step is for us who are in the leadership of the Order to open ourselves personally to the God who is “rich in mercy”. I thought about this in my own life as I read the Pope’s words in light of today’s Gospel where the Risen Lord appears to the doubting Thomas.

Understandably all the Apostles were slow to believe the astonishing reality of the glorified Lord’s bodily Resurrection, but Thomas seems to have been the last hold-out. In today’s Gospel, the Risen Lord pays a return visit, clearly seeking out the doubting Thomas and desiring to make him a believer.

What was Jesus asking Thomas to believe in when he invited him to touch the wounds of his glorified body? Was he asking Thomas to believe in one miracle among many or in a reality so astonishing we cannot take it in twenty centuries later... In touching Jesus’ wounds, Thomas encountered the mercy of God whose Son assumed our humanity so that God could suffer with us and for us, so that he take upon himself the wounds of humanity... In touching Jesus’ wounds, Thomas, as it were, touched the very fonts of mercy from which pours forth into any willing heart that love which is “stronger than sin and more powerful than death”, as St. John Paul II said so often.

Jesus looked at Thomas with the eyes of mercy and now he is looking at you and me with the eyes of mercy. He is asking us to believe in him. He is asking us to trust him. He isn’t merely asking us to assent to a series of abstract truths, but instead to entrust our lives and our destiny to him, confident that he will forgive our sins and open for us the door of mercy of the house of his heavenly Father. What reveals the mighty power of God is not so much the moon and stars and nature in all its magnificent array and terrible power – but really it’s God’s mercy, it’s his endless

capacity to forgive our sins and to raise us up to live a life made new by his own eternal newness. When I reflect on my own life of faith, sometimes I think the hardest thing for me really to believe, really to take in, is that God loves me so much that he even forgives my sins. Maybe that's because I find it so hard to forgive and forget, maybe that's because we're all living in a world, which, as Cardinal George famously said, "permits everything & forgives nothing."

Conclusion

One final thing. Sacrament of Divine Mercy is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We often associate it with Lent, and rightly so, but successive Popes have made it clear that this Sacrament of Mercy must be a regular part of our lives. The more we are forgiven, the more we expand our capacity to forgive.

May this Divine Mercy Sunday and the Holy Year that begins on December 8th, be for our beloved Order and for each of us personally be a time of grace and joy. And may Mary, the Mother of Mercy, accompany us along the way! Vivat Jesus!