

The resurrection of mercy

Many years ago, I asked a pastor to host a diocesan celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday in his parish. His answer was disappointing. Even though this devotion was thoroughly approved by the church and avidly promoted by St. John Paul II, he told me that celebrating divine mercy was out of keeping with the joy of the resurrection. "Begging for mercy, going to confession – all those penitential things – belong to Lent," he said. "At our parish Easter is a time for rejoicing!"

I sometimes ponder that priest's response to my request – not merely because of his unwillingness to accede to my request (a neighboring parish happily hosted the event) but more importantly because of his faulty understanding of the Easter mystery. It is as if, in the twinkling of an eye, as Holy Week gives way to Easter, our need to do penance, seek forgiveness and ask for mercy vanishes. With the dawn of Easter, or so we're told, comes the unconditional love of the Savior, a love that affirms us without challenging us, a love that makes few, if any, demands on the way we live our lives.

A similar misunderstanding can surface even in the lives of very faithful Catholics who take the discipline of Lent very seriously. One person may have given up smoking for Lent but lights up on Easter Sunday and continues to smoke like a chimney. Another may have observed the discipline of fasting but come Easter Sunday and beyond, life becomes a protracted smorgasbord. Yet another may have given up gossip but come Easter Monday, the dirt is dished. In other words, Lent is seen as the time for penance; Easter, a time for rejoicing but a rejoicing signaling that it's business as usual. Respectfully, I don't think that's what the Lord or the church have in mind for the season of Easter.

Paying close attention to the liturgy itself we see a different picture. Scripture, liturgy and doctrine are unanimous in holding together as one dynamic movement the Incarnate Lord's suffering, death, resurrection and exaltation in heaven. These events in the Lord's life are known as the Paschal Mystery. Here the word "paschal" or "Pasch" refers to the Lord's passage from death to life. Jesus the sinless Lamb of God took upon himself the sins of humanity. Having done so, he made the passage, an "exodus" from death, a death that epitomized our sinful condition, to the glory of

the resurrection. In his merciful love, he triumphed over sin and over death and opened the way of mercy for the whole of humanity.

Easter does not presume that we sinful human beings no longer need God's mercy but rather that in the crucified and risen Lord, divine mercy is abundantly available. The Lord loves us with a love stronger than sin and death! He has made possible our passage from the death of sin to the new life of grace and, ultimately, to the fullness of life in heaven. This is why we rejoice even as we continue to seek his mercy.

There is no doubt that the Lord has won the victory over sin and death by his cross and resurrection. The question confronting each of us is whether or not we will participate in his victory. In other words, will we allow the Lord in his grace and goodness to engage our freedom? Will we allow the Lord's victory to be applied to our sinfulness, to wound our hearts with love, to soak into the pores of our sinful being so as to reach our inmost soul wherein the darkness of sin still lurks? Or will we remain disengaged in the face of such tremendous love? Will our love remain superficial?

On Divine Mercy Sunday (April 28 this year), the Gospel relates how the risen Lord appeared before the Apostles and bequeathed to them the power to forgive sins. There is no better day to go to confession than Divine Mercy Sunday. On Divine Mercy Sunday, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy is prayed in common. What a wonderful way to express to the risen Lord our need for his mercy! And Divine Mercy Sunday always includes eucharistic adoration and Benediction. What a beautiful way to allow the risen Lord, truly and substantially present in the most holy sacrament of the altar, to gaze upon us with the look of love, the look of mercy!

At Easter may we know the fullness of joy because we experience the fullness of mercy!