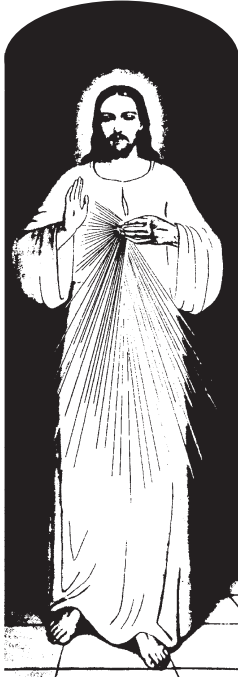


TOWARDS A NEW IMAGINATION OF MERCY



LIBRARY OF MERCY





*Towards a New
Imagination of Mercy*

LIBRARY OF MERCY
Serial B, Volume VII

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Towards a New Imagination of Mercy

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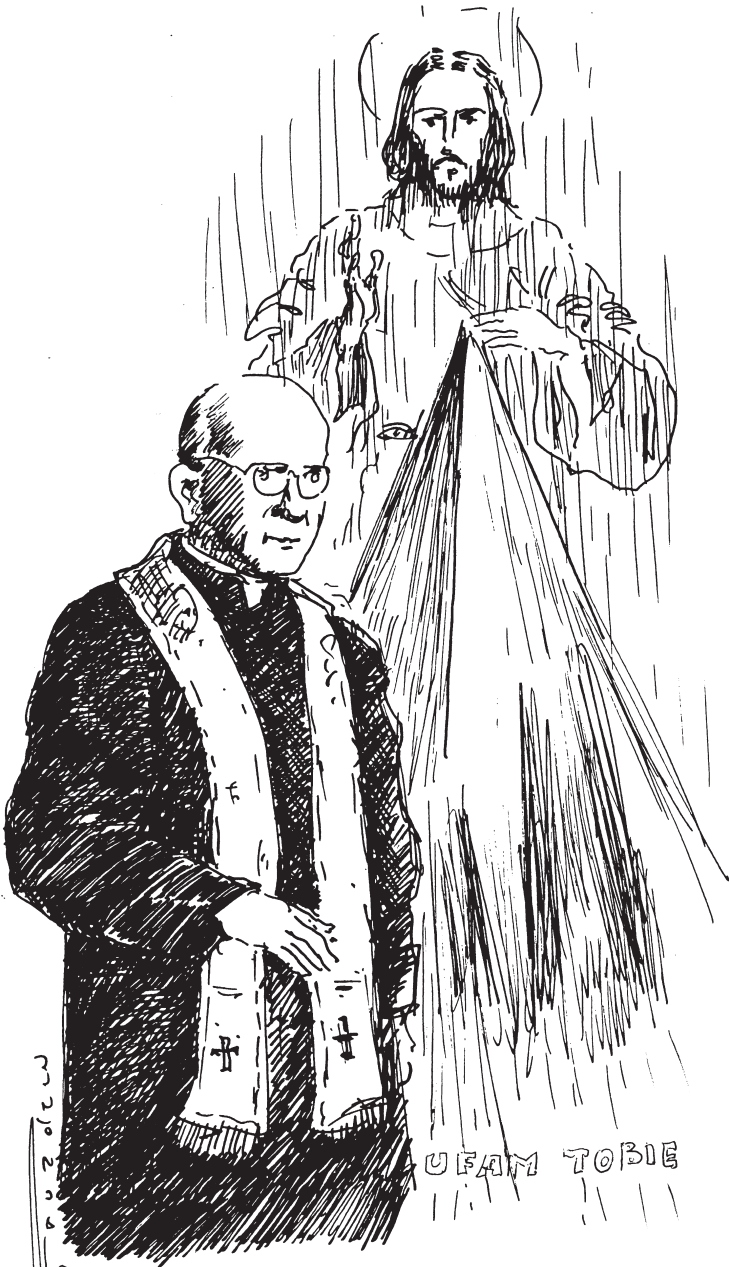
Los Angeles

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UFAM TOBIE

2020

Divine Mercy constitutes a fundamental notion for the understanding of the Mission of Jesus Christ, His life, death and resurrection. The Resurrected Christ is the Merciful Christ! In His revelations after the resurrection, Christ shows the apostles the depth of the Mercy through His presence (until death), teachings, love to humanity as it is. It is not the teaching but the Resurrected Christ who tells us: “This is me”. You too can follow me”. Mercy is Christ himself! The Church is encouraged to re- live and proclaim this saving reality. John Paul II made this call to the church of our days. The Southern California Divine Mercy Congress is an answer to this call.

John Paul II Universal Call to the Divine Mercy

“What can we expect from the years to come? How will be the future of men on earth? It is impossible to know. It is true, that next to the accomplishments, unfortunately we will also have painful experiences. But the light of the Divine Mercy that God wanted to give to the world through Sister Faustina, will light the human roads in the third millennium.” (John Paul II homily at the canonization of Sister Faustina in 2000)

“How the World Needs Divine Mercy Now! In all continents, from the depths of the human suffering, we seem to hear the call of mercy. In places where there is hate and desire of revenge, where the war bring pain and death of innocents, the Merciful Love of God is needed to give the light that illuminates and shows the infinite value of each human being. Mercy is needed so that any injustice in the world find its end in the light of the truth.” (August 17, 2002 homily in Lagiewniki). Mercy is the “measure that eliminates evil” which is now part of the history of humanity. (see John Paul II, “Memory and Identity”). Today Mercy is more than ever “An Exceptional Hope” for the world.

Mercy itself opens the doors to a true spiritual relationship with God. Lets pay more attention to the relationships of the people with Our Lord, as well as the Liturgical and Sacramental life. The Spiritual mercy of the Priests could give a new dimension to the Sacraments, especially to the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation (*leiturgia*). Mercy guides us towards a true community and constitutes a strong element for the unity in the diocese. This true unity is called mercy (*koinonia*). To enter to the “school of Mercy” it is indispensable in the ecumenical work. (compare documents from the preparation for the second Ecumenical Group in Europe in Graz 1997)

The Mercy of God has the power to change the world. It is a revolution of love that puts a stop to evil and sows goodness. Pope Benedict XVI says: “Mercy, thanks to which God received the human form in the person of Jesus, could bring back balance to the world and separate the good from the bad, starting with a small ‘world’ , but very important, that is the human heart.” The Mercy of God will be the Light that will take the human race to the third millennium. Let us pray to Our Lord to help us to understand what it is that He expects from us so we can realize His plan of mercy.

This publication which we offer to you is the fruit of the Sixth Southern California Divine Mercy Congress which took place at Christ the King Roman Catholic Church in Los Angeles in November 19 & 20, 2011. We include also the Conference of Archbishop Edward Ozorowski from Bialystok – City of Mercy, Poland. He is asking us the question: “Is There a Need to Talk about God’s Mercy Theses Days?” We hope that the reflections from our Congress will answer this question and bring you closer to the understanding of the Divine Mercy as the way of Life. God Bless You.

Father George J. Bobowski
Father John-Paul Gonzalez
Lelis Cruzata
Volume Editors



ARCHBISHOP EDWARD OZOROWSKI

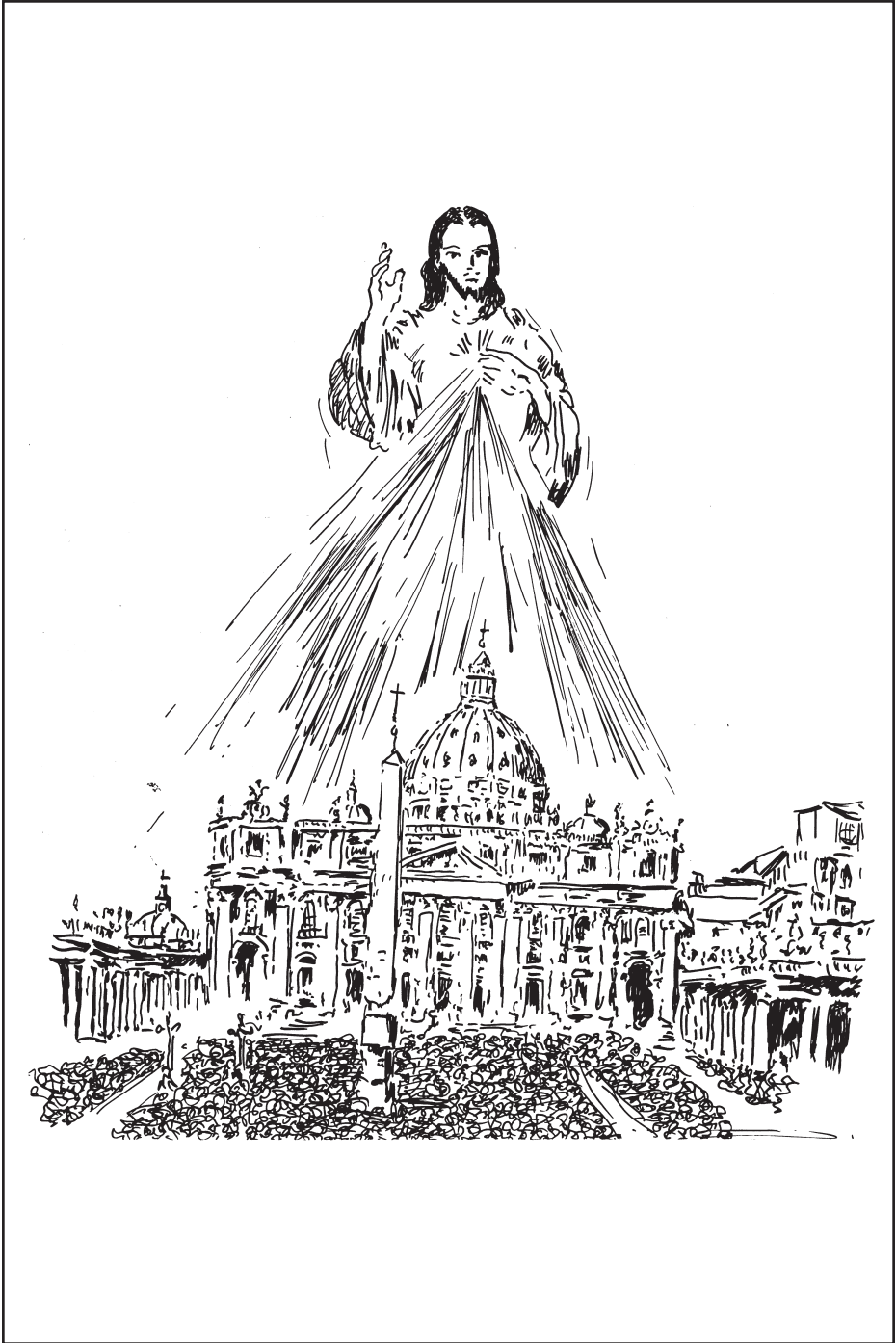
*Is There a Need to Talk
about God's Mercy These Days?*



**Most Reverend Edward Ozorowski
Archbishop Metropolitan
of Bialystok, Poland**

Archbishop Edward Ozorowski is a well known Theologian, Professor and Writer. He is the author of 1500 books and publications. Archbishop Ozorowski is the first Bishop to be elected during the Pontificate of Blessed John Paul II, on April 29, 1979.

In 2005 he was a delegate of the Polish Conference of Bishops for the IX Bishop's Synod in Rome. His statement about the Eucharist as a sacrifice was warmly welcomed by all bishops. "Thanks to the Eucharist, the Divine Mercy is accessible to men. He eats it and drinks it. Mercy penetrates and changes men. Men becomes this, what he eats and what he drinks" said Archbishop Edward Ozorowski.



The question asked in the title seems to be a rhetorical one. For most people are satisfied with solving their everyday problems and they receive the messengers of God's Mercy as sellers of unpopular goods. However, such a situation is the result of subjective conditions of human thinking rather than the objective state of affairs. The truth, even forgotten, depreciated or rejected, is always good and has its value. In our case, it is the truth about man and God, about human community with its all inner and outer conditions. Without this truth the existence of man would be incomprehensible and thus a tragic one.

1. Man – a being who asks questions

Man, born into the world, has a desire to know the world. As an infant, he follows moving objects with his eyes, reacts to the smile of his mother, and cries when in danger. When he starts speaking, he exhausts the others asking the question: What is this? And when he grows older, he starts asking more and more complicated and difficult questions. As a teenager, he asks existential questions, among which the most important is the question about the sense of life.

The question about the sense of life consists of some auxiliary ones: Why do I live? What do I live for? How shall I live? Each of them is crucial for the very existence of life. Each of them calls for a sufficient objective answer, without which life loses its sense. These questions cannot be suppressed, neglected or rejected. They seize a man even in the moment of his greatest bliss. They cannot be replaced by any makeshift. Even the greatest disinterest will not survive in the face of senselessness. This usually leads to a suicide or vegetation at the level of an animal.

Of the three questions – Why do I live? What do I live for? How shall I live? – the most important is: What do I live for? For this is a question about the purpose of life. Purpose – is the final point to which the road leads. For a man this point is marked by death. It comprises the greatest mystery of human fate. Man does not choose his death, he is condemned to it. Death is a tragedy in itself. It puts an end to all human joys, and while it ends human suffering, it does not explain its sense. Man is – as it was eloquently expressed by M. Heidegger – existence towards death. Left to himself, man would be dying of the paralyzing conviction: – I do not know what I have lived for. He would die with this idea not accepting the answers proposed to him by the world.

This state is not external for man. It is defined by the reality of a human being. Man exists in himself not only as a free and rational being, but also as a being directed towards other persons. A person is an existence in relation to the other being. This means that the purpose of man may only be personal and not material. One can be a gift only for a person and not for a thing. Man – according to the Ecumenical Council – “cannot entirely fulfill himself unless through a disinterested gift of himself” (*Gaudium et spes*, 24)

The question: “What do I live for?” thus changes into the question: “Who do I live for?” The profound answer is given by love. Every man wants to love and be loved. There are several kinds of love: brotherly, betrothal, marital, motherly, fatherly love, etc. Each of them comprises the statement: – “I owe my life to you or I live because of you. When a man has nobody to live for, he loses the desire to live, feels unneeded and lonely. He has been like that since the beginning and he is like that today. Human nature is not susceptible to changes, only the circumstances of life change. Such is the human being as a person, and everybody born as a man, from the moment of conception is a person and has a need to live in a communion of persons.

Another man does not entirely explain the sense of life. It is always defined by time, that is, it has its beginning and its end. When a man positively accepts his existence in the world, he still has to accept his passing away. The question: “And what is next?” crosses time and enters eternity. It cannot be satisfactorily answered neither by the theory of reincarnation nor by the encouragement to live for the future generations. Man is and wants to be a person. Man wants to love and be

loved eternally. Life, love, communion of persons as the indicators of human existence do not cease at the threshold of time, but they want to cross over to enjoy the fullness without end. Without this “human soul is cast down” (Ps 42, 6) and the human heart becomes uneasy (St. Augustine). It can be satisfied only by God in His merciful love. The depth of human existence invokes the depth of God (Ps 42, 8). The ends attract each other mutually. Man as an accidental existence may be happy only in the union with the Absolute Existence.

2. In the fetters of inability

According to the Bible, man is an image of God (Gen 1, 27). As the image, he participates in the reality of the Archetype and this determines his dignity. Man rises above the animal world, and has only God above him. God calls man and man, with his entire being, is directed towards God. He could head for God like rivers head for the ocean, were it not for the fact that he is free and since the beginning, he has been in a situation of temptation. One of the features of freedom is the ability to choose. The first parents, yielding to the temptation of evil, turned away from God and turned to the creation. Thus, they brought upon themselves the breach of the father-child bond with God, hurting themselves, ruining the relation between man and woman and misleading the management of the world. The Church calls this state the original sin, which through birth is inherited by every man.

Original sin increased the tragedy of man. Not only does he carry inside questions to which often he does not find the answers, but he also crashes into obstacles that he cannot conquer with his own strength. The Bible tells man: “If you do well, you can hold up your head; but if not, sin is a demon lurking at the door: his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master.” (Gen 4, 7), but man knows the taste of sin all too well. Sometimes he truly defeats evil, but so often he fails in the fight.

The memory of paradise and experiencing its loss day by day expose human imponderables. Human history is a thick book, consisting of human achievements and failures. Pains of birth giving, diseases, man’s perception of man, pressure, arguments, wars – these are only some of the fractures in the image of man. Man of all times possesses them, and contemporary man also is not free of them.

It even seems that today's evils reach measures bigger than ever. The twentieth century was written in human history with greatest atrocities. Two world wars and revolutions brought death to millions of people. As a matter of fact, killing never ceases, it only moves from one place to another. It also has at its disposal more and more efficient instruments of crime, and as the place of crime it uses public squares, buildings and hospital rooms. Terrorism is spreading; evil is used to fight evil.

We are witnessing an unprecedented struggle between good and evil. People achieve success in technology but they lose themselves. They increase the areas of loneliness. In civilized countries human lifespan has increased, but the elderly are not properly cared for. Retirement homes are built because there is no place for old people in the family. As the birthrate decreases, societies are getting old faster and pension funds cannot handle this. To solve the problem euthanasia is applied. A beautiful word has been given a repulsive meaning. For what etymologically means a "good death", in fact is a killing of an old person.

At the source of some processes happening in the modern world, there is an erroneous ideology. It is camouflaged so well that many people do not discern it at all. The most ominous of its manifestations is the rejection of God. The ones in control of this, act discreetly, almost elegantly. They do not claim that there is no God. They only do not ask questions about God and live as if there was no God. They impose their model of life on others by all possible means.

The consequences of such an attitude are terrible. For if there is no absolute Truth, then there is no truth at all. There are only opinions, shared or questioned. The stronger is right, statutory law is in power, natural law vanishes. When there is no moral principle present always and everywhere, then conscience stops functioning. It ceases to be the advisory voice because there is nothing to relate it to.

It is man who suffers most because of this situation. Having rejected God, he has ceased to be His image. He has lost his unique, irreplaceable place in the world. He has become a specimen in nature, subject to experiments in medicine and goods in the economy. With such systematic principles only a productive man counts, one who brings profit to others. Such a man is subject to all kinds of manipulation.

Human fetus is subject to experiments; its life is shortened or prolonged at wish. Again, there are attempts to breed a superman.

On the banners of modern societies, noble slogans are placed: freedom, democracy, tolerance and dialogue. But then, the meaning of these words have been changed. Freedom is given to the strong, while the weak are deprived of it. Where everything is allowed, nothing is allowed. Freedom without moral principles is anarchy, it is practically coercion. Democracy without stable principles, binding both the rulers and the ruled, is usually corrupt and turns to be a fight for fodder. Private welfare conceals entirely the common welfare. Tolerance is a good attitude when man is loved and in the name of this love, his different actions compared to ours is tolerated. Nevertheless, there is no tolerance for evil that destroys the common life. The boundary of freedom and tolerance is another man, his good, which is his life and human dignity. Dialogue was the way of getting to the truth even in antiquity. Today, dialogue is often conducted for the sake of dialogue, with the objective that one will not convince the other side. Such dialogue does not lead anywhere. The people taking part in the dialogue do not approach the truth, and thus, they do not change inside.

The quality of social relations influences the spiritual life of man. Spiritless civilization creates spiritless people, who lose their ideals and strive only for survival. A particularly dangerous disease among many people is the loss of the ability to love. They do not know any more what true love is, they reduce it to surrogates and then experience bitter disappointments. There are countries, where for every ten marriages seven are broken up, in other countries children are shot in the streets. One cannot touch somebody else's child without being suspected of abuse. In such relations, what is a part of a normal life among people is taken for extravagance and degeneration.

The Bible says that one day people wanted to build a tower so tall that it would reach the sky. They wanted to achieve this aim on their own, against the will of God. Then their languages were confused that they could not communicate with one another and they were scattered (Gen 11, 1-9). Today, many people do not have the desire to rise to God. They are satisfied with building on the earth, without connecting the building with the sky. One has to admit that the skyscrapers, already in existence and the new ones, are looked at with admiration.

But then, few terrorists are able to destroy a creation built by thousands of people. The world without God is a nightmare. It has no stable foundations, and there are no signposts along its roads. An even if there are some, they apply only to short stretches of the road.

3. What is faith for?

It is faith that helps people to get out of the web of inability. It broadens the horizons of understanding and strengthens the spiritual powers of man. Faith itself supports reason. Together they form the wings “on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 1). There is no controversy between faith and reason and there should be no antagonism. Faith brings understanding and guards the reasonableness of reason. For faith tells reason that the reality crosses over the borders of its natural cognition. At the same time faith calls reason to be its own witness and a judge of its own reasonableness. The Age of Enlightenment divided reason and faith and granted the right to exist only to the light of reason. Heirs of this idea can also be found today. However, nobody following the advice of common sense will proclaim such ideas.

We have said “faith itself”. The point is that faith, in its nature, is a reality different from the foundation that is based only on reason. Although reason discovers the existence of God on its own, still it is not able to transform man. Faith somehow is an extension of reason, for it passes from the discovery of the existence of God to belief and trust in God. When man includes God in his thinking and acting, he becomes a different person than before. His existential questions find grounds to look for the answers, and his “to be” finds grounds to exist.

The problem lies in this: that faith is not always of the same quality, and because of the authority on which it is based and what it teaches. People have been believers since the beginning of their existence. Atheism is a very young phenomenon. However, throughout history, people have yielded to different deviations. Their beliefs became idolatry, their image of God terrifying rather than comforting. Presently, there are a few religions in the world and many creeds, often of a sectarian character. Thus, there is a need to make sense of the great number of beliefs and determine which one is the true one.

Christians hold to Christ and propagate His teachings. They consider it to be Good News, revealing what people did not know before and bringing joy to everyone who will receive it. The Gospel is verified by Jesus Christ himself. For He sealed its truth with His own death and resurrection. In the light of resurrection, the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament and the primacy of love among all mutual relations between God and man and between people can be seen.

The truths of Christian faith have their roots in the Old Testament. Pious Jews are still bearing inside seeds that are able to sprout and give fruit. Jesus Christ developed what was in germs and let it grow. God, whom He revealed, is God of Abraham, Isaac and patriarchs. At the same time, He is the God who came closer to people in a way unheard of previously, because in His Son He became a man and shared in all the human matters from conception to death. He is Father, Son and Holy Ghost. What the Old Testament says about God adjectivally, the New Testament expresses substantively. Thus, it changes just, loving, omnipotent, etc. into justice, love, omnipotence, etc. God is not only merciful, He is mercy itself.

A believer differs from an unbeliever by something more than just knowledge. If two people were judged only according to their knowledge, it would be difficult to determine who is right in the end. For physical-mathematical knowledge is marked with obviousness different from the knowledge of faith. For what faith proposes, though it has its inner logic, it still postulates believing, so that it could gradually reveal its obviousness. The Church has always followed the principle: "Credo ut intelligam". I believe, so that I may understand.

In the world dominated by technical thinking, faith seems to be foolishness. However, those who in this world are courageous enough to believe, show that their faith is wisdom. Evangelical wisdom still surpasses the wisdom of this world. "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ...For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom" (1 Co 1, 21-25). The wisdom and power of Christians is Jesus Christ.

Christianity is not a philosophical system, ideology or a number of rules to be memorized. Christianity is life, based on belief and realized

through giving testimony of faith. The testimony is not an occupation, state, time to fill up, but it is just a life of faith, that is living every day with Christ and through Christ. "...and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me... I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Ga 2, 20).

The problem of Christianity is comprised in the question "Who?" and not "What?" The truth of God's Mercy – is God, who is Love and has shown love to people since the moment of creation and to each man since his conception. Nobody and nothing can destroy this love.

Christianity as a mental construction may enchant some, and repel others. Christianity as the realization of love between people in answer to God's love is a victorious power, which sustains but does not waste, builds but does not destroy, brings to life, but does not kill. The victorious conduct of Christians among persecutions walked the path of love, which in its heroism advanced as far as to make a sacrifice of life, "the blood of the martyrs became the seed of Christians" (Tertullian). The contemporary world – said Paul VI – needs witnesses more than teachers, and if it needs teachers, it is only when they are witnesses. Only faith confirmed by testimony has the ability to convert others.

4. For the accurate understanding of the truth about God's Mercy

Difficulties of the acceptance of God's Mercy felt by many people nowadays, result from either faith itself or incorrect attitude towards God, or finally, from erroneous cognition of God's Mercy. Faith is often met with dissent because it asks to accept what man cannot see and thus what seems to him incomprehensible, or it offers him help, which he hesitates to accept.

Then, an alternative cognition of God is often born: either God or me. Nietzsche reached the absurdity when he wrote, if there is God, how could I bear the fact that I am not God. The true faith in God does not oppose God to man, on the contrary, it shows Him as the ground, sense and purpose of human existence. It suggests conveying to God the relation between a child and its parents. A son does not ask his father why the father conceived him, does not reject help offered to him, because he knows that all this comes out of love. A child hugs

its mother and here it finds its happiness, longs for its parents when they are away, would like to be with them always, because only then it feels safe. Growing up to faith means getting more and more of the spirit of a child. In faith one goes from the beginning to the beginning (St. Gregory of Nyssa), and until one lives on the earth one cannot get further than to faith. Still, it is not a vicious circle and standing in one place, but it is true stepping forward, closer and closer to God and deeper and deeper inside.

Faith is an adventure of existence and discovery of His presence in the situations of human life. Man learns about God from Revelation and experience. Revelation is sometimes disclosed to man by the world, while man, left only to himself, would never see it. And sometimes it names only the thing that man knows from his experience. Living through faith is experiencing God and becoming convinced that what Jesus Christ taught was true.

Nobody revealed God to people more than Jesus did. For He tied the faith with what is seen. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (J 14, 9). Since then the sight of body should lead to the sight of faith, and seeing in faith should help the seeing of senses. For faith does not stay inside man but it gets out and shapes the whole human life.

The truth of God's Mercy is dominant in the Old Testament. The inspired authors showed it as fatherly faithfulness to once given promise (hesed) and as motherly tenderness for a child of her womb (rahamim). Jesus Christ confirmed and imaged God in His Merciful Love. For in Him the promises given to people in Eden were fulfilled. They were confirmed in subsequently repeated covenants. Jesus Christ is the awaited Messiah. Salvation came through restoration, and not through annihilation of the old creation. Conception and birth, which meant the passage of the first parents' sin, in Jesus Christ became the beginning of a new life, which we receive in Holy Baptism. Thus, the order of creation has become the order of salvation.

However, people have often exchanged the image of Merciful God for the image of a merciful man. And since man is imperfect, his mercy is also imperfect, and it has brought humiliation instead of salvation. Human dignity has suffered and man has hesitated to accept mercy of this kind. Man has asked God for mercy not to be needed any more. Mercy in the eyes of man was not love but pity. In exercising

mercy upon man, people have often forgotten to follow God and thus distorted what in itself is beautiful and good. Christ said, “Be therefore merciful as your father is merciful” (Luke 6, 36). People have kept the first part of this command, and lost the second, and this is why often their mercy has been grotesque.

Mercy must not be separated from love. In God, love is a attribute of His existence. Everything He does comes from love. The creation exists as He loves it. Man lives because God embraces him with His love. Everybody experiences this love, even the greatest sinner. The love of God is able to do everything except depriving man of freedom. This is why hell exists. Hell is not a denial of God’s love. God does everything to prevent man from choosing hell. However, He stops in the face of human freedom because He is faithful to himself. Resorting to God’s Mercy is for man a chance, a line that rescues him even from the greatest depth.

To sum up, let us answer the question asked in the title. Always, and particularly now, there is a need to speak to the contemporary man about God’s Mercy, for in God lies the solution of all of the most difficult human problems. Man can live not through suppressing them but through struggling with them and solving them. Faith, as God’s grace, strengthens human powers. The grace is given by the Merciful God, in order to help man to get to participate in the wholeness of God’s love. Not every image of God satisfies man. If God were only wise, where would a stupid man hide from Him, if God were only powerful, where would a weak man escape from Him. God is Wisdom, Omnipotence and Love. This is why He can be close to everybody and everybody can find shelter in Him. All these features together mean that He is also Mercy, and thus, Justice. The more people will believe in this, the safer place the world, in which they live, will be.



2011 Sixth Southern California
Congress of Divine Mercy

*Towards a New
Imagination of Mercy*

Los Angeles
Christ The King Roman Catholic Parish
November 19 – 20, 2011



Short History of Southern California Divine Mercy Congress at Christ the King Parish in Los Angeles

In 2006, in memory of the One Hundred Anniversary of Saint Faustina Kowalska's birthday, in commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Encyclical Letter "Dives in Misericordia," and the Death Anniversary of Blessed John Paul II – Father Antonio Cacciapuoti, Father George J. Bobowski and Father John-Paul Gonzalez, convoked the first Southern California Congress of Divine Mercy at Christ the King Parish. The first to respond to the call were the parishioners of Christ the King, supported by the Lay Institute of Divine Mercy and One Heart One Mind in Christ Community.

Under the auspices of The Lay Institute of Divine Mercy, bishops from all over the world have presided over the annual Congress these included: Most Rev. Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, Archbishop of Minsk-Mahilyow, Belarus; Most Rev. Edward Ozorowski, Archbishop of Bialystok, Poland; and Most. Rev. Edward Clark, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles. Other bishops who have taken part in the annual congress are Most Rev. Oscar Solis, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles and Most Rev. Teodoro Bacani from the Philippines.

The annual Congress at Christ the King gathers hundreds of faithful Catholics throughout the Archdiocese of Los Angeles: Our inspiration were the words of Blessed John Paul II: "To entrust the world to Divine Mercy... so that the message of God's Merciful love proclaimed through Saint Faustina, may be made known to all the people of the earth...May the binding promise of the Lord Jesus be fulfilled: from here must go forth, the spark which will prepare the world for His final coming" (Homily of Pope John Paul II, Krakow, 2002).

2006 Congress

"Divine Mercy, Transform Us to Be Your Vessel of Hope"

Three-Days Congress took place on April 28- April 30, 2006 at Christ the King Parish. Most Reverend Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, Archbishop Metropolitan of Moscow presided over our Congress.

The 2006 Southern California Divine Mercy Congress was a success! Our hearth full thanks goes to Merciful Jesus. He is the Lord.

2007 Congress

“Divine Mercy: The answer to a troubled World”

The Second Divine Mercy Congress – September 14–15–16, 2007. The 2007 Southern California Divine Mercy Congress was a special call to be a Witness of Divine Mercy. May Merciful Jesus be glorified. He is the Lord. Most Reverend Edward Ozorowski Archbishop Metropolitan of Bialystok, Poland presided over our Congress. Archbishop Ozorowski is a well known Theologian, Professor and Writer. He is the author of 1500 books and publications.

2008 Congress

“Christ, the King of Mercy”

Saint Faustina, wrote in her Diary: “He desires everyone to know this before He comes again as Judge. He wants souls to come to know Him first as King of Mercy” (Diary 378). 2008 Southern California Divine Mercy Congress took place on November 21 – 23, 2008. On November 23 was the Feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King – our Parish Feast.

His Excellency Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, Archbishop of Minsk and Mahilyow, Belarus, presided over the Congress. Among our speakers were His Excellency Bishop Teodoro C. Bacani, Jr. from Philippines, Ms. Nancy Reeves, Sister Caterina Esselen, OLM, Fr. John-Paul Gonzalez, Deacon Eudoro Benalcázar, Ms. Ana Maria G. Guzman, Sister M. Teresa de la Fuente, OLM, Fr. George J. Bobowski and others.

2009 Congress

“Divine Mercy – The Source of hope for the Modern Family”

The Fourth Southern California Congress of Divine Mercy took place on November 20, 21, & 22, 2009 at Christ the King Church. The Congress was organized by Christ the King Roman Catholic Parish under the supervision of the Pastor Father Antonio Cacciapuoti and the Lay Institute of Divine Mercy.

His Excellency Bishop Edward W. Clark, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles opened the Congress. Among our speakers were His Excellency Bishop Teodoro C. Bacani, Jr., D.D. from the Philippines, Deacon Ricardo Villacorta, Dr. Nancy Reeves, the Sisters from the Congregation of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus, Fr. John-Paul Gonzalez, Fr. George J. Bobowski and other speakers.

2010 Congress

“Is There a Need To Talk About God’s Mercy These Days?”

The Fifth Southern California Divine Mercy Congress took place on November 19, 20, & 21, 2010 at Christ the King Roman Catholic Parish in Los Angeles. At a time when there is so much anxiety and confusion over economic affairs and global conflict, only in Divine Mercy will the world find refuge and the light of hope. And we Christians believe that our reason and our hope for existing is to be found only in the heart of God’s Mercy. Bishop Oscar Solis was our min Speaker.

2011 Congress

“Towards A New Creativity Of Mercy. The Message Of Merciful Love Needs To Resound Forcefully Anew.”

Sixth Southern California Congress of the Divine Mercy was held on November 19 and 20 , 2011 at Christ the King Church. The Congress was organized by Christ the King Roman Catholic Parish under the supervision of the Pastor Msgr. Paul Montoya and the Lay Institute of Divine Mercy. Among our speakers were: Most Reverend Oscar A. Solis, D.D., V.G., Monsignor Charles Chaffman, S.T.L., J.C.D., Father Leo Ortega, Father John-Paul Gonzalez, Father George J. Bobowski, Fr. Maurice Harrigan., Deacon Salvador Ramirez, Deacon Felix Rac. The Conferences during the Congress were in two languages English and Spanish. The Holly Masses and prayer services were also Bilingual.

Father John-Paul Gonzalez

MSGR. CHARLES J. CHAFFMAN

*Towards a New Imagination
of Mercy: An Examination
of Mystical Imagination
and Sacred Memory*



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JEZU, UFAM TOBIE

In order to grow in the spiritual life, it is essential to learn how to use one's "mystical imagination" and the gift of "sacred memory" to bring one into the embrace of the Trinity. It is only in this embrace that one can find mercy and give mercy. For when one uses imagination and memories in the wrong way; that is to say, a non-spiritual way, one can get caught up in a negative "reality" that takes one out of the embrace of the Trinity; and when we leave that embrace mercy cannot be found. As disciples of our affectionate God who is joyous and life-giving, we are called to a "custody of the mind and heart" that rejects any negativity from entering us through an undisciplined imagination or negative memories which rob us of the gift of mercy and keep us from providing mercy to a broken world.

Permit me to illustrate this concept by a simple personal experience. Years and years ago, one of my colleagues had just moved into an apartment and needed to move a TV set. I volunteered to go to the apartment to move the TV. The colleague responded to me by saying, "You do not mean it." The response upset me.

Months later I was in Paris. I was walking down the street and looking at all the beautiful buildings and I said to myself, "That is a very nice apartment." The word "apartment" triggered a negative memory in me. I began to obsess about how my colleague had doubted my sincerity about moving the TV. Here I was in Paris, I had spent X amount of dollars to be in Paris and I was no longer in Paris. I was again reliving the past experience. It made no sense to waste the time and opportunity of being in Paris because of a past event. AA calls it, "stinking thinking." You know it is really foolish being in Paris and thinking of that past event. My memory and imagination took over. I need a solution. What does a good Italian do when he is upset? Yes, I did therapeutic eating. I went to a nice restaurant because usually I am cheap when I travel. I had a big spaghetti dinner to take me out of the

mood I was in: a mood that was triggered by a misuse of my memory and imagination.

I would dare to say that my experience is not uncommon. Many allow their memories and imagination to take them to places where they do not want to be. You could be walking down a street, you could be in your car, you could be at Mass, and all of a sudden, your memory and imagination take over and drive you crazy; even bringing you to depression and anxiety.

The mystical imagination and sacred memory are essential in spiritual life, but we hardly talk about these two sacred gifts. Often a discussion about memory and imagination in the spiritual life focuses on the need to avoid “impure thoughts.” In the human and spiritual formation of most of us there is little or no explanation of how to use one’s memory and imagination to bring one into a spiritual reality: into the embrace of the Trinity. It is amazing that something so essential gets so little attention.

Why are memories and the imagination important? First of all, it can mess up a trip to Paris. That is enough. But theologically, memory and imagination are essential because they are gifts from God that allow us to experience His saving embrace and power. We get this concept from the people of Israel. When present day Jews enter into the celebration of Passover each year, it is not just a warm “fuzzy” memory. The Jewish concept of memory and imagination is that the believer experiences the Passover now: not as a past event, but as an event made present. As Catholics, when we celebrate the Mass, which is so connected to the Passover, the priest says, “Do this in memory of Me.” It is a reminder that when we celebrate the Mass, it is not just a nice little *kumbaya* experience for the moment. No. We are taken out of the present time and we are brought to Calvary.

In the same way, whenever one misuses the powers of memory and imagination in daily life “past events” are made present and take one out of the embrace of the Trinity. What we remember and what we imagine takes control of us. These two powers make the past real. This happens in so many ways. For example, when you may think of that “cousin” who got the ring and you did not; when your aunt died; or when you think of that parent who hurt you; or when you think of

that teacher who called you “stupid;” etc. those memories and your imagination make the past real for you.

When we remember something inappropriate or hurtful, it brings sadness. When we spiritually remember God’s love and mercy, it is a fabulous experience, it is earth-shaking; that is to say it is ecstatic. Each one of us needs to train our memories and imagination. This is what it means to be a true disciple. It is essential to live a life based on the principle of “the custody of the mind.”

The tradition of sacred memory and mystical imagination can be found in the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola. With great wisdom he prayed:

Take, Lord, and receive all my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will. All that I am and all that I possess, You have given all to me: To You, O Lord, I return it. All is Yours. I surrender it all to You to be disposed of according to Your will. Give me only Your love and Your grace; for this is sufficient for me.

You notice that St. Ignatius says he wants to give to God “his memory.” Wouldn’t you like to give your memory to somebody and say good-bye to it? You know...just wrap it up and put it in a little package, make it really nice and say, “These are my memories, you can have them. I do not want to live with them any more.”

It is essential for us to understand that if we could get hold of our memories and the gift of imagination and learn how to use them in a spiritual way, we would be much happier people. The past can be very hurtful. All of us have been hurt by others and all of us have fallen short of the love of God. John Paul II in *Novo Millennio* called the Church to the “purification of the memory:”

To purify our vision for the contemplation of the mystery, this Jubilee Year has been strongly marked by the request for forgiveness. This is true not only for individuals, who have examined their own lives in order to ask for mercy and gain the special gift of the indulgence, but for the entire Church, which has decided to recall the infidelities of so many of her children in the course of history, infidelities which have cast a shadow over her countenance as the Bride of Christ.

For a long time we had been preparing ourselves for this examination of conscience, aware that the Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, “is at once holy and always in need of being purified”... during the course of the first two millennia, the Gospel spirit did not always shine forth. How could we forget *the moving Liturgy of 12 March 2000* in Saint Peter’s Basilica, at which, looking upon our Crucified Lord, I asked forgiveness in the name of the Church for the sins of all her children? This “purification of memory” has strengthened our steps for the journey towards the future and has made us more humble and vigilant in our acceptance of the Gospel.

I remember years ago Fathers Matthew and Dennis Linn, both Jesuits, talked about the healing of memories. As a young seminarian I was touched by their call to a “healing of memories.” We need to understand that our memories and our imagination can destroy us. One of my mentors, Henri Nouwen, was very susceptible to depression. While on retreat in France, his spiritual director said to him, “You are not going to feel better until you think better.” This truth is essential for those who want to live a happy, joyous and free life in the embrace of the Trinity and not be mired in the past. We must learn to think with the mind of Christ; for, thinking with the mind of Christ will change our feelings and affect our behavior.

We must understand that mystical imagination and sacred memories are gifts from God that stem from the fact that we are made in His image and likeness. He is the “Great Imaginator,” the “Great Creator,” the “Great Inventor” of all things visible and invisible. John Paul II on his trip to Poland, reminded the people of Krakow the sacredness of “imagination.”

Faced with contemporary forms of poverty, which I know we also have in our country, we need today an imagination of mercy in the spirit of solidarity with our neighbors. Thanks to rich hope we will be witnesses of our brotherly community of goodness. The citizens of Krakow and our entire Fatherland never lack this imagination.

It is important to remember that our sacred memories and mystical imagination are from God and allows us to share in His gift of creation. While living in His likeness we are able to love, to think, to reason, to

forgive, and to show compassion. All of these are essential. But there is something we do not often think about. God is the Great Imaginer. While it is important to love like God, and forgive like Jesus, our imagination makes us like God the Father. If we want to be true images of the Father we must learn how to use our mystical imaginations and sacred memories to live in His embrace, to think with His mind, and to see with His eyes. If we do this, we are able to be co-creators of a world that is caught up in his original plan for humanity.

If we want to live the ecstatic life of divine creativity, we must think with His mind and not fill our minds with values and thoughts that are foreign to God. These negative memories rob us of the connection with the “Great Imaginator.” If we want to be like God, we have to heal our memories and imagination. If we do not think with the mind of God we will continue to live in “imaginary worlds” of fear and resentment. God invites us to think like Him, to imagine like Him, and if we do that we will feel better and live better. He will change our hearts of stone to hearts like His.

Let us for a moment use our Ignatian mystical imaginations and sacred memories and enter into a meditation on the Garden of Paradise. Let us enter the garden, place ourselves there in all its beauty. Smell the flowers. Hear the birds. Taste the clean water. See the beauty. It is Paradise. Everything is all right: it is paradise. Watch the snake slither in. Listen to his lies: “Is it true that you cannot eat any of the fruit?” “No,” you say, “just that one tree. We cannot eat it because it is dangerous. It will kill us.” And Satan says, “No, no, no. You got it wrong. You will become like gods.” Imagine: How do you feel? Don’t you want to be a god?

I have always thought of original sin as a temptation of pride: Do you want to be like God? While I still hold to this fact, I have come to believe that it is also a temptation to believe that ‘I am less than.’ Adam and Eve were in Paradise: with all the preternatural gifts; that is to say Adam and Eve had no problem thinking correctly or willing and doing what was right. In other words, they had their “act together.” Things were good in Paradise. But Satan says, “You are less than. You could be a god.” So many temptations revolve around tempting us to believe that we are less than. We constantly get the message that we are not enough: “You got to get this product.” “You need liposuction because

you are too fat.” “You need more things.” “You are not smart enough.” It goes on and on. It is this fear of “being less than” that causes a sense of anxiety. Satan in the story caused Adam and Eve to believe that they were less than. But they were in Paradise! How can this happen? Easily, because they began to misuse their memories and imaginations to create a “fantasy” that robbed them of the truth of being beloved and blessed. They placed in their minds and hearts the lie that they were “less than.”

We do the same. I know from experience, if I imagine “a non-truth” and keep remembering the lie, it takes over me and I get caught up in the “non-truth.” For example, when you believe that you are less than your sister who had those beautiful little curls and you did not, you find yourself in anxiety. When you believe that you are less than your brother who is a great athlete, your anxiety level increases. When you come to believe that you are less than because your dad said that you are a lazy bum, you find yourself in need of some “pain-killer” to ease your sadness.

If you are filled with these “untruthful” memories and imaginings, you cannot be happy. When you walk down the street and you cannot have a peaceful day, it is because you “imagine” that you are less than you should be, when in fact, most of the people in the world would love to be in your situation. It is all a misuse of your memory and imagination.

If you are using your memory and imagination all throughout your day saying “I am less than,” and thinking poorly, you are going to feel poorly. You are going to end up acting out and sinning. Anxiety is Satan’s greatest tool. My theory is that all Satan needs to do is get you upset and he can leave the room. That is all he has to do. Once he gets you upset, he knows you will go and do something to relieve your pain: get drunk, sleep with somebody, snort something, watch pornography, etc.; and he can just move on to the next person.

How do we become good custodians of our memory and imagination? It is not easy to learn because of the bad habits related to our thought process that we have acquired in life. I think that it is helpful to look first at the power of “images” and “icons” in our lives. We are a visual people. Images, forms, people, etc. trigger in us the “fight or flight” process and the quick decision process of which helps aid a person to

decide if the “new object” in our sight should be “eaten,” “mated with,” “killed,” or just ignored. The quick response that is needed for survival can also mislead us. If we don’t learn how to understand our reaction to “iconic images” we will remain on an “animal” or “primitive” level and not be able to enter into the spiritual reality to which all are called.

Let’s look the many “iconic images” that confront us on a daily basis. Satan, the world and the flesh are constantly telling us: “If you eat this fruit, use this deodorant, use that hairspray, buy that car, buy that house you will “be more than.” These dark powers want you to believe that the many “iconic images” will make you more than “you are;” wanting you to believe the lie that you “are less than.” These invitations to hold on to these iconic images cause you to forget that you are “enough,” you are “beloved,” you are “fabulous,” that you are in “Paradise.”

This dynamic occurs especially when we are confronted with the “iconic images” of the “ideal person.” Let’s say you are walking down the street and you see this “ideal” person, this “icon.” Without even opening his or her mouth your knees go weak: you become captivated by their “image” without even knowing his or her name, let alone knowing his or her history, hurts, or values. The power of the person’s image can trigger so many things within you. Maybe you are jealous of their looks, maybe their looks remind you of some past hurt, or maybe their looks remind you of a need that you have. We have all experienced this. Imagine you are at a party and you will say to yourself, “I like that person;” “I do not like that person;” “I would like to take that person home;” “I would never take that person home;” “I would like to attend a prayer meeting with this person;” “I would like to go to a bar with that one.” They have not opened their mouths but these iconic images come to your mind and what do they say to you? “I am less than. I need to be fixed.” The end result or effect is an overwhelming feeling of being “less than.” The powers of darkness want to convince you that you are less than, because if it does then you are susceptible to these iconic images and darkness can control you.

When our memories and imaginations are out of control we begin to lust over money, power and most often over “iconic persons.” A person with no control over memory and imagination can enter into a “fantasy world” in which they find themselves saying: “I lust over that person, that certain look, that certain nationality, that certain

appearance, etc.” In reality those “iconic images” take control and say, “You are less than. We can fix you.”

Let us go back to the garden by means of your memories and imaginations. There is nothing wrong but Satan wants to convince our first parents that they are “less than.” Satan says, “If you take this iconic apple, this fruit, and you eat it you will be fabulous.” Use your memories and imaginations and walk down the street, and enter a restaurant or a church, all of a sudden you are confronted by an iconic image of a person. You say to yourself, “Oh, I wish I was like this person, or I wish I had that hair, or any hair, whatever.” Men and women do this. The envy that people have for other people’s bodies is unbelievable, and it is because of that same inner dialogue, the same misuse of memory and imagination. And once again you begin to believe that “you are less than.”

How can we heal our memories and imagination? At the core of the healing is the “rewiring” of the brain that can happen in contemplative prayer. In contemplative prayer we gaze into the loving face of the Father who says to us: “You are my beloved.” We should have seen that gaze and heard those words from our parents. It is from our parents that we need to get our first sense that we are good people and that we are alright. The gaze between mother/father and child is a mirror in which the child comes to understand himself or herself. We need to understand that we do not know ourselves until someone tells us who we are. As infants in our mother’s and father’s gazes we learn about our value. Psychologists tell us that it is in those first few months of life in the mother’s gaze and the father’s gaze that we get a sense of trust, that all is going to be alright: that we are alright. When a baby wets his or her diapers, the mother does not say, “Did it again, huh, dirty little thing. I do not want you to do that.” No, a good mother says, “That is alright. Good job.” When the child cries, the parents comfort their child through a loving gaze and kind words: “It’s all right, it will pass. It’s not the end of the world. You are my beloved.” When a child makes a mistake, the mother and the father are supposed to say, “Yes, we all make mistakes. You’re alright, it’s all going to work out.”

The first psychological stage of our development revolves around learning to trust in God, in our family and our own ability to handle situations in this world. Most people feel less than and lack a sense of

trust in themselves. Isn't it beautiful that the Divine Mercy has as its main theme "Jesus, I trust in You."

For each one of us, icons or statues have been beautiful ways of experiencing the loving gaze of God. These iconic images of God and His saints can become tools of healing: tools to heal our lack of trust. Many of our trust issues stem from our family of origin. Many "good" parents did not have the tools, the time, energy or the means to gaze into the eyes of their infant children and declare his or her belovedness. I think of busy parents or immigrant parents, trying to make ends meet, sometimes they have two jobs, they have a number of kids: where do they have time to be "present" to their infant children. I think of my immigrant grandparents: ten kids, work, sickness, death, not knowing the language, the depression, no food, no coal for the furnace. Are you kidding me, be present? I have to ask myself, did my grandparents have the time and knowledge to tell my mother, "You are my beloved!" I doubt it. Yet, I know and believe that they did the best they could.

Henri Nouwen, again my mentor, had two experiences that are interesting. He had a mother who was brilliant. Before his birth she read a book by a German psychologist that basically said, "If you are going to break the ego-centric streak in a kid, what a parent needs to do is deprive him or her of touch and food: that will make an adult out of them." So, out of love, she followed this advise and said, "I am being good to this kid. I am making him a man." She apologized to him as an adult and told him that she had done that. Thus, it is not surprising that he was always a bit anxious in life. To add to Henri's issues, his father was always competing with Henri, which contributed to a sense of never being good enough.

It is sad to say that Henri Nouwen, the great spiritual writer, had a mother who was not tactile, and a father who was judgmental and competitive. As a result he always felt "less than." In his brokenness he was kind of a "victim soul" in many ways. It was by the "stripes" of his anxiety that he wrote books and gave sermons and talks that healed so many.

Nouwen had learned from Anton Boisen, a Protestant and a pioneer in the field of CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) about the value of dealing with one's brokenness. Boisen as a young man had a nervous

breakdown and through his emotional brokenness he came to meet God. For Nouwen, Boisen was “iconic,” in that he was a mirror by which Nouwen could see his own weaknesses and a window to the divine embrace of the Father. As a result of his study of Boisen and his personal struggles, Nouwen eventually wrote one of his famous book *The Wounded Healer*.

All of us need someone to answer the questions: “Who am I? I am less than?” We are all looking for “iconic people” to “fix us” and to “tell us that we have value.” Remember when you were in high school and you shared your little secrets; and when your confidant said, “I know what you mean!” And you said, “Oh, I am not berserk.” In so many ways that is what we need to hear. We need to hear that we are not less than. We are like other people.

I have come to believe that through mystical imagination and sacred memories we can get caught up in the “iconic embrace and gaze” of our heavenly Father. In that embrace we can be healed of all the lack of gazes and kind words of belovedness that we needed as an infant and still yearn for to this day. I believe the iconic image of God that is truly affectionate, that is brought to our minds and hearts through our memories and imagination can heal our lack of trust. In true iconic images of the Father, He kisses us with His kisses.

In training our imaginations and memories, we have to find the right “icon image” to enter into, in order to feel at home. Let me explain. It is a little complicated. I was in London one time visiting with a priest friend. While I was there I went to a museum, and as I was walking through the museum I was thinking about “memories and imagination.” I then came across the artwork by Millais. One work in particular hit me. It was a beautiful painting of Mary and Joseph, an adolescent Jesus and an adolescent John the Baptist. They are in St. Joseph’s workshop and Jesus has just hurt His hand. Mary is comforting Him and John the Baptist is running to him with a bowl of water. It was beautiful but it never happened. But using that Ignatian concept of memory and imagination, the artist must have read the scriptures, allowed his imagination flow and created this icon. Using his memory and imagination the artist and the viewer have the opportunity to get caught up in the love of the Holy Family.

It must be remembered that icons have two dimensions: they are windows to the divine and mirrors of yourself. The icon that you like should be seen as a Rorschach test. The Rorschach test consists of ink blots. What you see in the ink blots says something about you. What you see in an icon says something about you. You choose certain icons because they say something about you. You see yourself in them. You want them to say you are alright – not less than. The icon that strikes you says a lot about how you feel, your past, your hurts.

For an icon to be truly sacred it must also be that window to the Divine. If an iconic image does not bring you to the divine it becomes an “idol” that only mirrors your hurts and needs and does not bring you to the one true God and His embrace. Stop for a moment and look at a window. When the light is right, you see yourself in the window, you also see out. Icons do the same, they are mirrors by which we see ourselves and windows to the divine. When icons do not lead to the divine, we begin to worship them as idols. When you are caught up in ‘iconic images’ that move you to say, “That person is fabulous;” or “That house is great;” or “That car would impress people” you are probably fixated on an icon that has become an idol: an idol that says that you are less than.

When these icons come to us we need to say, “I am not going to panic about it, but I have to allow this iconic image to be a window to the Divine, for if I just get caught up in that image, I will feel less than. I will yell at it, scream at it, sleep with it, fight it, or kill it.

It is important to calmly reflect when an iconic image moves me to such an extent that I want to worship it; or when I falsely believe that in it I can find salvation. When we feel overwhelmed we must immediately say, “This icon says something about me”. “I like money.” “I like power.” “I lust for control.” Calmly face the “icon” and say, “I am going to go through you, a window and see its Creator.” It is essential for us to do this for it takes the false power away from our “iconic” images.

The healing of memories and imagination takes place when the iconic image that takes hold of you brings you to the embrace of the Father. Throughout Henri Nouwen’s life he constantly looked for iconic images that could tell him about himself. Some of those images

took him out of the embrace of the Father and became idols and others clearly brought him to God's embrace.

After many years of teaching at Yale Divinity School, Nouwen became the pastor of L'Arche Community that ministered to handicapped persons. In his depression and eventual nervous breakdown he became fascinated by the Rembrandt painting of the prodigal son which is housed at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. In his depression he "entered into" the icon. There he mingled with the father, the younger son as well as with the older son. He saw himself in the icon and saw it as a window to the divine.

In his deepest moment of depression, while he was away from L'Arche, Sister Sue came to visit him and he asks Sister Sue, "Am I more like the younger son or the elder son? She responded: "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize you are called to become father.' These words hit Nouwen. He writes: "Her words struck me like a thunderbolt because in all my years of living with the painting and looking at the old man holding his son, it had never occurred to me that the father was the one who expressed most fully my vocation in life. Sue did not give me much chance to protest." She told Nouwen:

'You have been looking for friends all your life; you have been craving for affection as long as I've known you; you have been interested in thousands of things; you have been begging for attention, appreciation, and affirmation left and right. The time has come to claim your true vocation—to be a father who can welcome his children home without asking them any questions and without wanting anything from them in return...We need you to be a good father who can claim for himself the authority of true compassion.'

Nouwen confesses to his readers ..."It has been a slow and arduous struggle, and sometimes I still feel the desire to remain the son and never grow old."In another place Nouwen writes: "A child does not remain a child. A child becomes an adult. When the prodigal son returns home, he returns not to remain a child, but to claim his sonship and become a father himself."

One can see that Nouwen found the ideal "iconic image" that allowed him to see himself and to see and experience the divine embrace. Each

of us needs to choose an “iconic image” that is both mirror of ourselves and a window to the divine. When this happens we need to stay in that icon 24/7. This can only happen through our mystical imaginations and sacred memories.

In March of 2007, while on an Ignatian Retreat I entered into my most significant icon that I ever experienced before: “My Father’s House.” On that retreat using my imagination I was listening to the words of Jesus in the Temple to Mary and Joseph, “Did you not know that I would be in My Father’s house?” And I said to myself, “You know, if I was in my Father’s house twenty-four-seven, maybe I would be all right.” So this became my icon: “My Father’s house.”

I came to understand that two things bring me out of my Father’s house: the judgment of the elder son and the pleasures of the world that plagued the younger son. It became clear to me that the most dangerous person in the icon for me was not the younger son but the older son who feels unappreciated. I often feel like the older son: “You know I work like a dog and no one appreciates me.” “I do so much work to change things around here and no one listens to me.”

Using my mystical imagination, I can hear the younger son, before he left for a distant land, saying to his father, “You love my older brother more than me. You killed the fatted calf for him last week and you did not kill it for me. The older son is always right, he is such a goody two-shoes. It is not fair the way you treat me!”

My theory is that all of us use the excuse that life is not fair to give us license to “hit the road and go to a distant country.” So for me, once I start judging people because they do not live up to my expectations, or they are not there for me, or they do not give me honor, glory and praise, I get so frustrated and I become like the younger son and go to some distant land. But for the most part all of my negative thoughts are my “imaginings,” my taking past events and “remembering” them in such a distorted way that I vilify others and make myself the “innocent victim.” When this happens it becomes clear to me that I am not thinking correctly and I will not feel better until I start thinking with the mind of Christ, the mind of the Father.

It has been a constant struggle for me stay in my Father’s House. On one occasion while preparing for a visit to Rome, I came across the book: “Eat, Pray, Love” by Elizabeth Gilbert. While being very

spiritual does not see herself as “religious.” Nevertheless, the book was very helpful to me. In this book she tells the story about when she was walking in Rome, in the Borghese Gardens and guess who showed up: two old friends: depression and loneliness. She stated, “They tracked me down in Rome like Pinkerton guards”.

I took that image, that icon with me on my trip to Rome. I did not want to have to be confronted by the same two old friends. I did not want these two old friends take me out of my Father’s house. Everywhere I went I kept praying “I am in my Father’s House.” Through my mystical imagination and memory I want to live in the joy and unity of the Trinity: hoping that I would not end up meeting my two old friends: depression and loneliness.

I remember one day, while in a Church praying I started bringing up the past, and I started getting mad. All the saints and angels around me kept telling me: “You know, you are in heaven right now, all right? The things that you are thinking about happened years ago.” They told me, “You are called to be a perpetual praiser not a perpetual complainer.” The Church was filled with images of angels with their instruments and I said to myself, “I’ve got to learn how to praise God.” When I left the Church I began to silently praise God for everything I saw: “Lovely sisters with black habits, praise the Lord. Wonderful guys in leather jackets, praise the Lord. Sun and moon, praise the Lord. Lovely people with Gucci purses, praise the Lord.” As I was walking down the street and I am doing all this praising I saw a statue with its hands raised up as if at a prayer meeting, praising God. I felt moved to get closer to the statue and find out who it was. It was St. Charles Borromeo, my patron saint. This image for me was important. I saw in it a mirror of myself and a window to the divine. I saw my need to live a life of praise and not of negativity.

To this day I try to use my sacred memory and mystical imagination to stay in my icon: the Father’s House. From my experience with the iconic images of Gilbert’s two old friends: depression and loneliness, I have learned to invite other old friends with me wherever I go. When I leave the house or go for a walk I say, “Who is going to walk with me today. Obviously, Christ! But, today, I feel like also inviting my Mom to walk with me, my Dad, Dorothy Day, or some other example of love. Every year I go to Notre Dame and I study there, I have these amazing

walks around the lake with all the angels and saints, so I am never alone. I need to do this wherever I go: the gym, Hollywood Boulevard, my room, etc. You see if I can keep this icon of my Father's House in my mind through my mystical imagination and sacred memory, I am then caught up in the reality of God's embrace.

St. Paul says we should pray unceasingly. It is hard to bring your breviary, your prayer book, your Bible, your rosary, the Blessed Sacrament with you everywhere, but you will always have your sacred memory and mystical imagination with you. Through the custody of your mind, never let anything enter your heart and mind that can take you out of your icon. I have learned that when I am nervous, I must imagine I am seeing the eyes of the image of the Divine Mercy. In that gaze I am a child again. I am in the embrace of God and He is holding me and He is saying, "All right, things are not perfect, but all will be ok! You are imperfect, don't worry, my love is perfect. It is all right. Just trust."

My prayer for you who read this brief sharing of my struggles is that you will begin to live a disciplined life that makes you good custodians of your minds and hearts. That you will learn to use the gift of mystical imagination and sacred memory as icons to help you to understand yourselves better and enter into the embrace of the Trinity. In doing so, you will think with the mind of God and you will thus feel much better and live much holier lives.

FATHER LEO ORTEGA

*New Creativity of Mercy.
From “Dives in Misericordia”
to “Caritas in Veritate”*



Father Leo Ortega

Fr. Leo was ordained on May 31, 2008 by Cardinal Roger Mahony at The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. He holds a Master of Arts in Theology, Master of Divinity, Master of Arts in Occupational Therapy, and Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy. Before ordination he was an Occupational therapist for 20 years, Clinical instructor at the University of Southern California and Assistant professor of Occupational Therapy at California State University. Current Assignment: Administrator of St. Thomas the Apostle Parish (Los Angeles).



This particular talk is entitled “Getting to Know Divine Mercy, Getting to Know God, and the Chance to Know One Another, or to Reach Out to One Another.” This year’s theme is “The Creativity of Mercy.” I did not realize when I knelt and prayed before the image of the Saint Faustina in Poland with the first class relic of her finger, that I would be a Disciple of Mercy myself. I did not realize I would be walking with people like you called by the Lord to get to know Him in ways that are new, in ways that are exciting, in ways that are creative. That is why I think the theme for this year, “The Creativity of Mercy,” resounds and resonates so deeply in my heart because that is something that we can really say about God. The love of God is always new. I think the choir mentioned earlier at the opening that His mercy endures forever. It is renewed every morning. It is true that no matter how long we are a disciple of mercy there will be new ways by which God will reveal Himself to us. There will be new ways by which God will show us how to love a little bit more, how to shine a little bit more. Why is that? It is simply because God is eternal. God is infinite. We could never ever exhaust the wealth of the love of God. And so here we are in our sixth year, and what a wonderful experience it has been for me to speak to you and to pray with you. You are blessing me in my priesthood as I talk to you and as I hear myself, and as you mirror for me the kind of disciple that I should be for the Lord.

Today we are invited, we are challenged to go forth and discover creative ways by which God’s mercy is proclaimed in our lives.

Yesterday, at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, I was approached by a young man in his mid-twenties. He holds a degree in Business Administration and is just starting out on life, and he is getting married in January. But before this, he was part of a major Latino group that held concerts at both the Staples Center and Nokia, and toured big venues throughout the U.S. making good money. He was telling me,

“Father, now I would like to settle down. My life as a musician is not stable. I would like now to settle down and get on with my life. I would like to go back to the basics. I would like to go back to my faith. I would like to go back to the old tried and true family values of children, of having a wife, raising a family, raising a Christian family.”

I think the key and magic of the basics is at the heart of all our searching, at the heart of our discoveries. No matter how many times we try to discover new things, what we need is to go back to the word of God. We need to go back to the teachings of our Fathers, the Pope, and discover new ways by which God is reaching out to the people.

Today, there will be several ways by which I propose to do this during my time with you in this congress. First of all, I would like to look at the Encyclical of John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, which is the encyclical written especially with The Divine Mercy in mind. I would like to pick out specific points and especially focus on that chapter where our Pope tells the story about the prodigal son, which for me is the best icon there is. After that we are going to reflect on what the Pope is trying to tell us, and what we can take from his letter back to our homes, back to the daily grind, back to the trenches of home, work, and school. That is how I would like to proceed.

And so we begin with *Dives in Misericordia*, *Rich in Mercy*. This was the first encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II. What is an encyclical? An encyclical is nothing more than a letter sent by the Pope not only to Christians, but also to non-Christian people of good will. And, just like any other letter, it is a source of inspiration. It means to expound on some aspects of the faith, it instructs us on how we put into practice the teachings of the church. This is one of those encyclicals promulgated in 1980, very early in the pontificate of John Paul II. I am going to stick to the main points and pick out things that stand out that I would like for you to remember because a lot in that letter is nothing new for many of us. He opens with the message that Jesus has revealed God Who is rich in mercy as the Father, that Christ crucified is the center of all. He reveals to us the mercy of the Father. When we think of the Fatherhood of God it is very abstract because that is what the Father is. Just like the traditions of the Hebrew people, the father is almost hidden, the father is unknowable. That is why they tremble and fear the father. The Jewish people said “when you see God you will die because God could not be

fathomed”. That is why their laws bind them, and to some extent clip their wings. That is why Jesus has to come for the rest of the world to see that God is mercy. The first thing that is distinct about God is that the Lord is merciful. He is the icon of mercy.

An icon is an image. An icon has many elements that point to the specific characteristic of the thing that it represents. For example, when you look at the icon of the Blessed Mother, those icons from the East, you will see stars around the head and the shoulders. It shows her eternal virginity. Those images tell us, teach us that the Blessed Mother was a virgin before and after the birth of Jesus. We see an icon with a large neck; that image is telling us that the person depicted in this icon is wise. We see an icon with curly hair, many curls. It is speaking about the nobility of that saint or the Lord that is being depicted there. Jesus is the icon of the Father. While we are not talking about painting representations of Jesus, we do have the stories of the gospels, we do have the stories from the disciples about Jesus that paints for us an image of the love of the Father that is seen through Christ.

Today, we will focus on one icon, the icon of the Prodigal Son to show us exactly what mercy is like in the Old Testament. This is not to say, however, that the people of the Old Testament did not know mercy. Of course, they did. Just read the psalms and you will realize how in times of sorrow and great desperation the people went back to God. “How long, O, Lord, will you not listen to Your people’s plea? How long, O Lord, will You hide Your face from us?” The Old Testament people knew that one of the aspects characteristic of God is that God is merciful. They called Him Father and Father is one who generates, a Father is one who gives, and so they have an understanding. It is important for us to understand how the Jews understood mercy because their understanding of mercy should and must color our understanding of Divine Mercy the way we have it now.

For the Jews, we translate the word *rachamim* and *hesed* as mercy. But the Hebrew language is so colorful, so multi-faceted that it is very much like a diamond that shows another facet, another image every time you shift it. It almost envelopes that which it stands for. So, in Hebrew, mercy is both *rachamim* and *hesed*. It is important for us to understand this because this is key in understanding the mercy of the father in the story of the prodigal son. *Rachamim*. This is the

transliteration. *Rachamim* is the instinctive attachment of one being to another. It has its seed in the maternal bosom, in the bowels. This is the instinctive feel that one has towards a brother. In any language, there is a term for this and I think every single ethnic group in this country feels that when you see your countryman, you do not have to speak to one another to have that connection. When you go outside the United States, you know when someone is American, there is that instinctive connection. That is *rachamim*, and I think more than anyone else in this assembly, the mothers are the ones who feel this the most. Mothers know by instinct what is going on with their sons and their daughters. Mothers, what you are feeling, what your intuitions are about your son, about your daughter that is *rachamim* and it is related to mercy. So, if God has *rachamim*, then God has a feminine face. When one of the evangelists mentioned, “and Jesus was moved to pity after He saw the crowd” that was *rachamim*. Jesus was moved by *rachamim* when He saw the crowd. So it is that. This is important. This tenderness, this *rachamim*, this instinctive connection to another, readily translates itself into action. It spurs someone to do something. That is why Jesus after He saw the crowd and was moved with pity and compassion, what did He do? He multiplied the bread. So one is moved to do something. That is one aspect.

The second aspect now is *hesed*. This is piety – a relation which unites two beings and implies fidelity. There is something about the quality of *hesed* that does not condescend. Now in our times when we say we feel compassion for someone, at least in the secular sense of compassion, it is about someone who is powerful and is condescending to help someone. “I am a rich person and oh, there is a poor beggar here.

Let me give him a thousand dollars.” “I am a very powerful, strong person so let me carry this kid over this bridge.” It is compassion but also condescension. *Hesed* is something more than that. It is not the recognition that this person is much lower than I, or much weaker than I. It is the recognition of the dignity of that person. It is recognition that in that person lives an image of me, that person is formed in my own likeness. We were cut from the same fabric and out of that connectedness I am going to help that person. What is the difference between the first and this one? The treatment of one who has *hesed* is one with dignity. The person with *hesed* will not give the person

leftovers because the person with *hesed* will always think what if it was me on the receiving end. The person with *hesed* treats the other person the same way he or she would like to be treated.

At the seminary, we were trained by the Vincentians who work with the poor. One of the things I learned from them is to make sure that when you give to the poor you are not insulting them. When I learned about *hesed*, I understood what St. Vincent was saying because it is not condescension. You treat them with dignity because that person is you and no other. We need to hang onto these two concepts because when we talk about the prodigal son, this will be the key to understanding the fullness of that icon.

Blessed John Paul II continues in the fourth chapter of *Dives in Misericordia* with a discussion of the prodigal son. This is the icon that I would like to propose to you for contemplation on what kind of mercy, what kind of God we have, and what are the characteristics of mercy.

Allow me to read to you the whole story of the prodigal son and this is from the gospel according to Luke. He said, "there was a man who had two sons and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country. There, he squandered his property in loose living, and when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed on the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. When he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough to spare? But I perish here from hunger. I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance his father saw him and had compassion and ran to him, embraced him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring

the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and make merry. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost but he is found' and they began to make merry." (Lk 15, 11-32)

What a beautiful image! We have to take a look at the culture of the Jewish people during that time when Jesus was relating this story. When do the men—it is not usually the women—get their inheritance? When the father dies. And here, this young man went up to the father and says, "Father, give me my inheritance now because you will die anyway. So, give me my inheritance now." It is an insult to the father. Really what the son was saying to the father is "I wish you were dead." That is what the son was saying, "I wish you were dead so I can get on with my life so I can get what is due to me." There is a sense of entitlement. But the father listening to the son gave to him what he wanted.

So he went out into another land. I would imagine this is a Gentile land where there would be a lot of impurities. That is something unthinkable for the Jews because they are a very regionalistic people. The ideal for the Jewish life is to be with their own people and to be consorting with the Gentiles is an affront to the family but that is what this young man did. He went away and partied and squandered his property in dissolute living. Then something happened. There was a great famine and he lost all he had. Now he cannot afford anything. He would even eat the food intended for the swine.

The young man had moved away from his family circle, from the purity of his heritage to live among the Gentiles. He ate the food of the animal considered unclean by the entire Jewish nation. He ate the food of pigs. The young man's dignity really went to the dogs, to the pigs. His life continued its slow, slippery decline. Then what happened? Eventually, the young man realized this and he came to his senses. He said, "Well, in my father's house, there are so many servants and they are better fed than I am. I will go back to my father." He began rehearsing his lines. Okay, when I see my father I will tell him not to call me his son anymore. I will appeal to his sense of charity. "Consider me as one of your servants. I do not deserve to be treated as your son." And so he came back. But when he came back, he found the father was there waiting for him the entire time. It seemed as if the father had been sitting there looking out onto the horizon hoping against hope that one

day he would see a shadow in the distance grow bigger and bigger, and lo and behold that shadow would turn out to be his son. That day came when this very same son came back into the fold of his family, back to the father. The father was overjoyed. The father was sitting down and then he jumped up and he ran. Now in the Jewish tradition, the father, the elderly person does not rise to greet a son. He does not rise to greet someone who is inferior, who is younger. Those who are younger go up to the one who is sitting, but this father stood up. Not only that, he ran to meet the son halfway. He could not contain his love for this son and he swept him off his feet and embraced him. Of course, the young man was now ready to deliver his line and tell him, “No, no father, do not do that. I am not your son anymore. Just treat me like a slave,” but the father did not even give the son a chance to say his lines. What was important to him was the son was there. He had come back, and so the father said, “Put a ring on his finger. Give him the finest robe.” What does this theme mean? The father restored the dignity of the son that he had lost. The father, without even listening to the excuses of the son, threw a party because for the father the only thing that was real, the only thing that mattered was that the son had returned.

What an image of Divine Mercy the Lord has presented to us because this father is also our Father. It grieves me so much every time I hear in the confessional, “Father, I have been away from Confession and Communion for so many years because I have done this, because I am afraid that I will not be accepted.” Then I remind them of this particular parable. How contradictory is our notion of forgiveness, our notion of mercy, from the mercy of the Father.

I do not know about you, but I think I still have a long ways to go as far as holiness is concerned. Maybe I would accept the son but then I would remind him about what he has done and teach him a lesson, you know. Maybe I would welcome him conditionally, like okay, you are welcome here, but you must do this, one, two, three, four. But we hear none of that in this gospel – only rejoicing, only welcome. *Hesed* - the recognition that there is something valuable, there is something important in that person, to give that person help, to acquiesce to the needs of the son is not to simply provide for his needs but also to restore him to his dignity.

In 2005, I was in Mexico an entire summer for our Spanish immersion. I saw a lot of enclaves for the poor where the people received T-shirt handouts from the U.S. It is nice that at least they have T-shirts, but oh my goodness, you would not be caught wearing those T-shirts on Hollywood Blvd. Those T-shirts were awful. T-shirts like “my (*something*) is bigger than yours” you know? Things that we do not want here, we ship it there. Where is *hesed*? The father does not do that. What did the father do? He put a ring on his son’s finger, gave him the finest robe, and killed the fatted calf to show mercy, to show compassion. We are called to give the best to the poor because when we do that, we restore them to dignity. That is the lesson I think the Divine Mercy would like to remind you and me.

It is not one of condescension. It is not a relationship of one who is powerful to one who is weak, to one who has to one who has not. It is a relationship of equality, restoring the other to the dignity that he or she once had.

I hope sometime today, sometime tonight, when you go back home, I hope you really reflect on this icon of the prodigal son so that you yourself will discover the riches of this icon that Pope John Paul II presented before us in understanding Divine Mercy.

Now what are the other lessons that we can gain from understanding mercy in the light of the Hebrew consciousness and in the icon of the prodigal son? Here we have a very lovable Jesus. Remember what I mentioned to you earlier? Jesus is the icon of the father. No more of the distant father, no more of cold, detached absolute other. Here, Jesus is presenting before you and me a father who is warm, a father who is lovable, a father we can love, a father that we can run and go to at all times of our lives.

I have been reading a book by Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận. He was the Cardinal and Archbishop of Saigon during the height of the Vietnam war. This man was a saintly man and in fact, the Vatican is opening the cause for his canonization. Pope Benedict XVI said, “I am so excited we are doing this because this is really a very holy man.”

Cardinal Văn Thuận was in charge of the entire city of Saigon but when the city fell into the hands of the communists, he was arrested and sent to a re-education camp for thirteen years. Nine of those years

were in isolation. He did amazing things. His life is one of mercy but we shall not go into the details of what he did. Suffice it to say that this man is a candidate for canonization.

In that book which I would like to share with you now, he wrote “Why I love Jesus.” I think this fits well after we have reflected on the quality of mercy and after we have meditated on the icon of the prodigal son. At this point, we ask why do we love Jesus? Why are we spending time and energy on a Saturday and Sunday sitting here talking and learning about Divine Mercy? Why are we doing this? Well, the good cardinal said because it is worth it, because Jesus is worth it, and he gave more reasons why he is a follower of Jesus, why he is a disciple of mercy, why he continued, in spite of all odds, to preach the *rachamim* the *hesed* of God in the face of all his detractors and his enemies. So, why does he love Jesus, why do we love Jesus, why are we disciples of mercy and *hesed*?

The first reason is because Jesus has a terrible memory. Once again, even though we say this in jest, these statements are pointing to the quality of mercy that tears down our own notions of mercy and compassion. The cardinal is presenting to us the heart of Divine Mercy that he discovered while in prison. The first example he gives for *hesed* is that Jesus has a terrible memory. While Jesus was hanging on the cross between two thieves, one of the thieves asked Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom,” and the only response that is heard from Jesus is, “Today, you will be with Me in Paradise.” Everything has been forgotten. There were no words like, “Yes, I will take you with Me to Paradise but you need to pray ten Hail Mary’s”. I would do that. There were no words like “Offer up your painful crucifixion for all the sins that you have committed.” That is Divine Mercy right there. God forgets. He has a terrible memory.

In the story of the woman who anoints the feet of Jesus with perfume, Simon was saying, “Oh, my goodness, if Jesus only knew the history of this woman, He would not let her touch Him,” but Jesus did not ask anything about her sordid past. The only thing that is heard from Jesus is that “her many sins are forgiven because she loved so much”. What great words for us to contemplate and reflect on. Many times, we are caught up in this heresy of semipelagianism, that we can make things right, that we have to do things to make things right. But Jesus has a

very forgetful memory very much like the father of the prodigal son. The only thing that matters is that you are here. The only thing that matters is that my son is back. The only thing that matters to Jesus is that I have him, or her, back in my arms. Will I ever forget you? Can a mother forget her infant, be without mercy toward the child of her womb? And yet even though she might forget, I will never forget you. I have written your name in the palm of My hand. That is Divine Mercy right there. That is the quality of mercy. That is the God Who has a terrible memory.

The second reason that the good cardinal says he is a disciple of mercy, why he persists on the mercy of God is that Jesus does not know math. In the parable of the lost sheep found in Luke Chapter 15, Jesus says, "I am the God Shepherd." How many of us here would leave ninety-nine sheep behind and search for that one lost sheep? How many of us here would do that? My first inclination would be not to do that because I do have ninety-nine and what is the one? Maybe that sheep got lost because he is sickly. Maybe that sheep is stupid. Maybe that sheep is not worth it. I have ninety-nine right here. Another speaker put it this way. He said, "It is like you have ten investments. Nine are doing well, and the other one is on the brink of bankruptcy. Are you going to take out all the resources of the nine and give them to the one that is going into bankruptcy?" That would be wrong. That is silly but Jesus would do that because He does not know math. Jesus would go out for you and me if we were lost because for Jesus one is equal to ninety-nine. Jesus would search high and low to find you and me. How many times do we find ourselves in that same predicament? Very much like Lazarus we die because we sin. We enclose ourselves in bandages, we hide from the world, we hide in our caves, we hide from the light of the gospels, from the light of the sacraments because we feel we are not worthy. But Jesus, the Lord Who does not know math comes seeking us, knocking on our tombs. Come forth, come out. He is willing to leave the ninety-nine behind to search for you and me.

How many of you here have families, friends, children who are problems, who are crosses for you? Be assured that the Lord looks for that son, for that daughter, that no one is really lost because Divine Mercy looks for us like the hound of heaven, following us, tracking us down, finding us and what happens when He finds us? He tenderly

puts the sheep on His shoulder because the sheep is afraid, because the sheep is cold and needs the warmth of another body, because the sheep is weak from not eating. That is Divine Mercy. It is not condescension. It is the treatment of an equal. It is the treatment to regain the dignity that has been lost.

The third reason why the cardinal loves Jesus and is a follower of mercy is that Jesus does not know logic. Now all of these stories, all of these points that I am sharing with you today run counter to our own ideas of mercy. The reason we are doing this and I am doing this to you is for us to turn down our own notion of mercy to the mercy of God Himself. That is not true because we have an erroneous notion of mercy. Many times our notion of mercy is grounded in society's notion of what mercy is and should be. Jesus does not know logic and he talks about it in the parable about the woman with the lost coin, maybe it is a penny. In ancient Israel there were dirt floors. There is no concrete, no wood, nothing but packed soil and so to cover that they would put down hay to make it livable. Now, if you lose a coin, naturally you have to remove all the stacks of hay and sweep the floor. That is what the woman did. But for a penny? Would you do that for a penny? How many times have you seen a penny on the street and just went your merry way? But this woman, who symbolizes the mercy of God, found the penny and rejoiced. Not only that, she called her neighbors to: "celebrate with me because I have found my lost coin." How much would it take to throw a feast because you found one penny? I think it would take more than one penny, at least a hundred dollars. That is the kind of rejoicing the Lord has for us. The parable is exaggerated only to bring home the point that the Lord rejoices over you just like Zechariah said, "The Lord dances over you as on the day of festivities, as on the day of a wedding. That is how happy the Lord is over you and me. How many times do we beat ourselves for wrong doings? How many times do we beat ourselves because we did not meet the expectations that we have set for ourselves? When we do that, there is a great tendency to do the exact same thing to other people.

Today we are talking about how to reach out to other people in the hope that our knowledge of Divine Mercy will strengthen us and form us in dealing with other people. Your notion of mercy should inspire you, should shape you, should form you in the way that you deal with

other people. When we are hard on ourselves, when we impose artificial notions of mercy, we will do the same thing with the people that we love.

The Lord is prodigious when it comes to His sons and daughters. I do not think I have the vocabulary or the capacity to speak enough about the love of God, but I think when John said, "God is Love," that said everything. So, the parable of the lost coin speaks to us the bounteousness of the mercy of God. It knows no logic--only that you are important, you are worthy --every single one of you, and every single one of our loved ones, sinner though they may be. All are worthy in the eyes of God. There is a phrase in the scriptures that says "you are the apple of My eye." *La niña de mis ojos* . You are the apple of my eye.

Jesus does not understand finances or economics. Recall the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The owner went out looking around 6 o'clock in the morning and saw some people standing and said, "Come to my vineyard and work there." Then at 9 o'clock, he came out again and saw people standing and said, "Come to my vineyard and work there." At 3 o'clock he did the same thing. At 5 o'clock he did the same thing and then at the end of the day, he said to the foreman, "I want you to pay everyone the same rate starting with the last one who was hired." You know for us, that is not fair, and that is why the workers in the story told the owner. "That is not fair. We were here the whole eight hours and these men came only for two hours and they are getting paid the same amount." That is the kind of mercy we give to one another. We measure. You are worth this much so I will give you this much mercy. You did this to me so I will do this to you tooth for tooth, an eye for an eye. But that is not so with Divine Mercy. Mercy is always the giving, this prodigious giving. We are restoring the dignity of the person when we do this, when we treat each other this way.

In the end, one may ask, why did Jesus do all of these silly things? Why did Jesus have all these defects? Jesus did all that because He loved. That is the simple reason. That is love.

We could talk on and on about mercy, about how we treat one another, but really it would boil down to that statement of John, "God is Love." The craziness of someone who loves, the madness of someone who loves, and I think for all of you, for all of us here who have fallen in love, understand the madness of love itself. St. Blaise Paschal once said, "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know." When someone

is in love, that person does things that are unreasonable. Only the heart knows the reason. That is almost Divine Mercy. The Lord only thinks of restoring our dignity, of giving us the best, and so He pours it out to us. It also behooves us now to really understand the kind of love that you and I are called to have. Time and time again, I have been reminding my listeners that the kind of love which the scriptures and the Church is calling us to have, is not the kind of love that we have learned from the television shows or the media because that kind of love is all about what can you do for me? What can I get out of the love? Oh, I can get eight million from that love so there you go, I am in there. That is not the kind of love that you and I are called to do. Neither is it the kind of love that says it makes me feel good. No. The kind of love that Jesus is inviting us to enter is one of self-giving. I think I mentioned it to you last year. In Greek, it is *Kenosis*, the giving of oneself, the gifting of oneself. Those examples of God's outpouring, the examples of the bounty, the overwhelming provisions that God gives the sinner is *kenosis*. The love that does not measure how much but only thinks that, this is good enough. The love that thinks what is best for you before it thinks of what is best for me, a self-sacrificing kind of love. That is the kind of love that the world needs. That is the kind of love that the Divine Mercy is inviting us into. And so, my friends, today as we spend this entire day in contemplation of the love of God for us, we are drawn back to the scriptures. We are drawn back to the image of Jesus and the many stories that He told us and shared with us. God is love, and the icon of that love is Jesus.

You and I are called to be *Alter Christos* for the rest of the world because the world is fast becoming a cold place to live. You and I are called to be that little sun of love, of mercy, that little light, that little candle. The candle does not overcome the darkness it is true, but it stands for the fact that hope is alive and the spirit is in our midst.



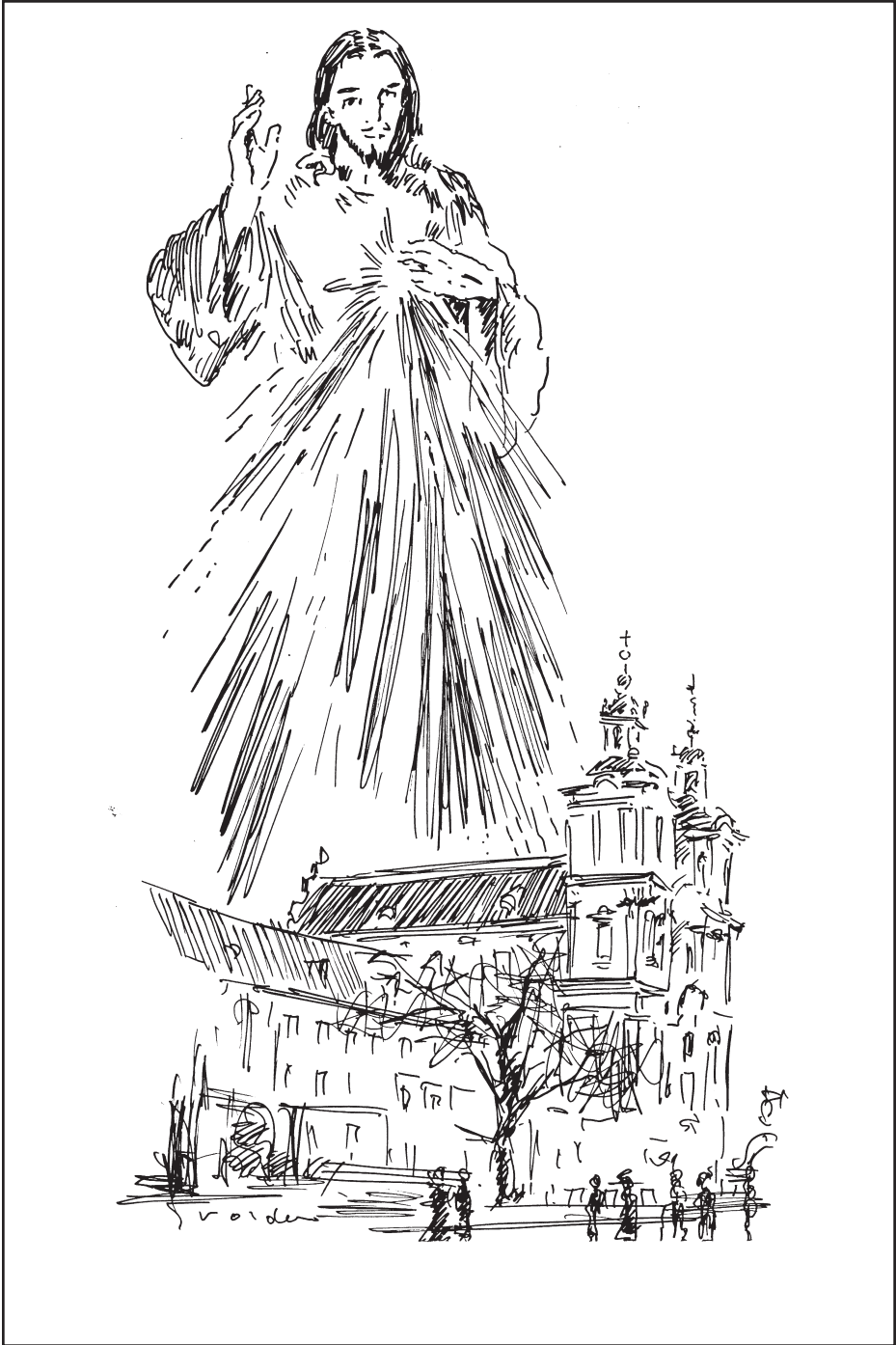
BISHOP OSCAR SOLIS

*In What Way Can a Parish
be a Community of Mercy?*



**Most Reverend Oscar A. Solis, D.D.
Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles**

Bishop Solis was ordained a priest June 16, 1984. On February 10, 2004, Cardinal Mahony ordained him bishop - the first ordained in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels and the first Filipino-American bishop ordained in the United States. He was born in San Jose in the Philippines. As Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, He previously served as head of the Ethnic Ministries and Office of Justice and Peace of the Archdiocese. On September 30, 2009 Cardinal Mahony appointed him Episcopal Vicar of the San Pedro Pastoral Region.



Last year I was invited to be a part of this Divine Congress. I think this is the 6th Congress and it keeps on going strong. I believe for most people it is a manifestation of God's mercy. The mercy of the Lord is a frequent subject in the Sacred Scriptures. In fact, the word "mercy" appears over 250 times. Mathematically, it indicates a great importance.

However, we ask ourselves what does mercy really mean. To understand what mercy is, I refer you to Luke's gospel, Chapter 10, verses 30 to 37. Can you guess what the story is about? It's the story about the Good Samaritan. In the parable, a lawyer asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus answers him saying, "A certain man went out from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and then departed leaving him for dead. Now by chance, a certain priest came down that road and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise, a Levite when he arrived at the place, looked and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was and when he saw him, he had compassion. So, he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He sat him on his animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day, before he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said to him, 'Take care of him and whatever more you spend, when I come again I will repay you.' So which of these three do you think was neighbor to the man who fell to the thieves?" And the lawyer responded to Jesus, 'He who showed mercy to him.'

Mercy in its purest sense is God's expression of love and compassion to His people. It is not just a feeling but it is an action undertaken in response to someone's needs and wants. Mercy is the constant theme in Old Covenant times. God's chosen people, having received so many favors and blessings, proclaimed that the earth is full of God's mercy.

In fact, they affirmed that God's mercy endures forever. Have you heard these scriptural passages in the psalms? "His mercy remains from generation to generation especially to those who fear Him."

The mercy of God has been manifest since the beginning of humanity. At the time of Abraham, God led his servant from the land of his ancestors and to find a wife for Isaac as recorded in Genesis, Chapter 24, verses 1-25. Throughout history, many more incidents and happenings have been recorded where God's mercy was made known to His chosen people. The mercy of the Lord is not something that is measured out. It is not something that the Lord gives sometimes. He does not grant mercy to us on a periodic basis but rather in a permanent manner. That is why Psalm 118 verse 1 says, "Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, and for His faithful His mercy endures forever." We see the constancy of God's mercy made available to God's chosen people. His mercy perpetuates from generation to generation. God's mercy abides in us from time memorable, from the moment of creation unto the end of time.

We come to understand that mercy is the prevailing theme in the inspired writings we call the Holy Scriptures, but that is an understatement because mercy depicts the characteristic of the very nature of God. When we talk of mercy, it is more than about the frequency of its occurrence but rather its meaning and significance.

The fruit of God's mercy is God's redemption of man from sin and our eternal salvation. That is the fruit of God's mercy. The Bible teaches us about the history of our salvation, about God's mercy, love and compassion. In Old Testament times, God in His goodness, love and mercy promised to send a Savior to redeem the world from sin and God's mercy did not stop there. It becomes more personalized. God's mercy was personified by sending His only begotten Son into the world. Christ Who even though He is God took human form, suffered and died on the cross that we may be saved and have eternal life. In the history of our salvation, the personification of mercy was made manifest in Christ, God's only begotten Son sent into the world to become the sign and the source of God's mercy, compassion and love. Christ is the personification of God's mercy.

If there is one divine attribute that we spontaneously associate with Christ and Christianity, it is the attribute of mercy. Whenever you think,

whenever you speak about Christianity, it is about mercy. Pope John Paul II went so far as to say that Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of Divine Mercy. Surely, Christ is the Incarnation of God. However, among the attributes, which distinguishes who Christ is as the incarnation of God none identifies Christ more completely and distinctively than mercy. If you look into the life of Christ and study how He lived His life on earth, you will see that He exudes and manifests and identifies the wonderful essence and attributes of God: mercy, compassion and love.

Read the gospel and you will find various stories of God's expression of mercy in the life and action of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Have you heard the story about the two blind men in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 9, verses 27- 31? "When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, 'Son of David, have mercy on us'". What was the result of those two blind men pleading for God's mercy? What happened to the two blind men? They did not become crossed-eyed. They were able to see. Their sight was restored because they saw God's mercy in Jesus.

How about the story of the woman of Canaan recorded in Matthew Chapter 15, verses 22-28? "And behold a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Jesus, saying, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David, my daughter is severely demon possessed' and His disciples came and urged Him saying, 'Send her away for she cries out after us.' But Jesus answered and said, 'I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Then she came and worshipped Him, saying 'Lord, help me,' but He answered and said, 'It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs.' She replied: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from the master's table.' Then Jesus answered and said to her, 'Woman, great is your faith. Let it be to you as you desire.' Her daughter was healed from that very hour." Jesus heard her plea for mercy and responded to it.

How about the story in Matthew 17, verses 15-18 about the child possessed by a demon? "The Father said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son for he is an epileptic and suffers severely for he often falls into the fire and often into the water.' Jesus rebuked the demon in him and it came out of him. The child was cured after that very hour."

There are many other stories. In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul proclaimed God's mercy when he said, "But God, Who is rich in mercy

because of His great love for us even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” (Eph. 2:4-5) The mercy of God is filled with compassion and love. The mercy of God is a source of healing. The mercy of God is a source of fullness. The mercy of God is a source of His tremendous blessings for us.

The Bible gives us many examples of Christ’s life on earth. We have learned Christ is merciful, so we must be. How do you understand that statement that as Christ is merciful so we must be? What comes to mind?

Now let me tell you about what is happening in many neighboring Church congregations. Have you heard stories about parish communities hosting homeless people during the winter season? One of the parishes that I know well partnered with other church communities to act as hosts during the winter months. They took it upon themselves to organize, schedule and put together a system so that each gated community would alternate as hosts during a particular week, preparing dinner and breakfast for the homeless people in their communities. It started out small until the group began to realize the need for more than meals and shelter. “Why not offer some other kind of help? What about counseling? Why not try and equip them with knowledge and skills to enter the work force and be able to help and support themselves?” The *gated* community made it their personal endeavor to organize these programs. They began to feel something different. It wasn’t just a project any longer, it had become a mission. There was a sense of joy and gladness that came from helping others.. Have you ever experienced that when you do something for another person, joy emanates from your hearts? An inner joy flows out and a sense of gladness, a deep, authentic genuine joy – something very different; unique. Do you know why? You feel that way because it is something that is inseparable from our core. It is our very own nature. It comes from the very essence of our being to be able to be a people of mercy. That’s why I came back to the saying that as Christ is merciful, so we must be. It is who we are as *alter Christus*, as another Christ.

So what I would like to say is that mercy then is the distinctive quality and characteristic of being a Christian. To be a Christian is to be merciful. It is one of Christ’s strong messages throughout His ministry, in His teachings and deeds. Mercy is the basic attitude of a

true disciple of Jesus. Do you consider yourselves disciples of Jesus? Are you people of mercy? Do you perform acts of mercy?

Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they will find mercy.” The spirit of Christianity then is a spirit of mercy. Mercy is the spirit of being a Christian. Mercy is our spiritual DNA. It is our very identity. What is this spiritual DNA that I am talking about? This spiritual DNA is present within us from the moment God created us. We are the *Imago Dei*. We are created in the image and likeness of God. That is our spiritual DNA. *Alter Christus*, the other Christ, mentioned in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is an important message for all of us.

I want you to browse the Catechism of the Catholic Church. This theme is one of the dominant themes particularly in Part III which speaks about our life in Christ. The very fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God gives us our sense of identity and direction and a mandate on how we conduct ourselves as human beings. Regardless of our faith, every human being is graced with this identity. The Divine Image is present within every person. The human person is the only creature on earth that God has willed for His own sake. The human person participates in the light and power of the Divine Spirit. By this reason, he is capable of understanding the order of things established by the Creator. By free will he is capable of directing himself toward this true good. He finds his perfection in seeking and loving what is true and good. What propels us in doing and performing works of mercy in our life is rooted and founded in our own spiritual identity or DNA. By virtue of being created in the image and likeness of God, the semblance of God’s attributes becomes present in us. As God is Love, God has given us the ability to love. As God is merciful and compassionate, He gives us the grace and the strength to become compassionate and merciful. As God is just, He allows us and gives us the power to exercise justice in our relationship with one another. This is our identity. This is our spiritual DNA.

In addition to this, by virtue of our baptism, God is also enriching our spiritual DNA. It is now written in our genes through the Sacrament of Baptism with the infusion of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It solidifies our connectedness with Jesus. By the fruits of our baptism God not only washed clean our sins, but He gave us the privilege of calling Him, God our Father. He infused the gift of the Holy Spirit of the Body of

Christ so that we become a member of this Body of Christ, and we are initiated to become full members of the Church. So the connectedness of our spiritual DNA that identifies us with Christ is extended and further reinforced in the Sacrament of Baptism. By virtue of this, in baptism, we are not only given the gift of a clearer identity of who we are but a sense of direction, meaning and purpose in life, a yearning to be with Christ. The path of discipleship is made clear to us. Now we have not only a sense of identity but a sense of direction of how we are to live our lives. Knowing who we are then is very vital if we want to have good direction in our lives. Oftentimes, we spend our lives reacting toward our surroundings. When you see something that could be painful, what do you do? You flee from it, right? You take off. What is our reaction when we pick up a boiling kettle or cut ourselves? What do you do? When we see something good or delicious, our mouths salivate most probably. What do you do? Do you flee? No, you run toward it, right? You run without hesitation except when you're on a diet. When you smell the aroma of freshly baked cookies, do you wonder how many calories are in those cookies, how much fat, how much grease, how many carbohydrates, how much sodium? Is that how you react when faced with something good? No. There is some kind of attraction that grabs our attention, our senses, our imagination. Instead of fleeing, we go after it. When we live our lives according to our identity, and not just in reaction to our surroundings, we begin to respond responsibly and accordingly.

For example, we know that mending a broken relationship can be very difficult and often painful, isn't it? However, we know that as Christian men and women, we are not supposed to flee. We are not supposed to flee from our responsibilities but enter the path of pain and desolation and face the challenge of achieving peace and reconciliation. Instead of avoiding often difficult and painful responsibilities, we enter the experience of being vulnerable. We do this not because we take pleasure in being vulnerable, but because we know it is our responsibility. We have to take our part as disciples of Christ and take up our cross and follow Him. This is the path to discipleship.

The key then is knowing who we are, not only as created in the image and likeness of God but as Christian disciples, as followers of Christ. We are children of mercy, of compassion and love.

Our identity is not only a source of direction, but our identity with Christ is also our source of strength. Knowing who we are gives us the strength that we need. One of the important characteristics is to become part of the mystical Body of Christ. This goes against the grain of the highly individualized way of thinking, especially in today's culture. We begin to consider the good of the entire Body of Christ, and the intent of our actions is not just for us but for the members of the entire Church. In this way, when we see ourselves as members of the Body of Christ with one common identity, one common direction, it becomes a source of strength. We know we are not alone in doing something. Our collectivity, our unity and solidarity becomes a power and it strengthens us in our resolve to pursue undertakings of whatever we want to do in life, especially works of charity, works of compassion, and acts of mercy. In doing so, we see ourselves as missionaries, not as individuals trying to crawl our way to Heaven, but beginning with a spirit of gratitude, we go out to the rest of the world proclaiming and sharing the goodness of God through our spiritual works of mercy because we know that we do not have to make up goodness. We are strengthened by the knowledge and assurance that God is always with us, guiding and carrying us along the way. The consciousness that we are not alone in our call to discipleship in the mandate of performing acts of mercy certainly gives us the strength we need, not only to become disciples of Christ, but men and women of God's mercy.

Our parish then can provide us with the community that encourages us to walk with one another along this common path of discipleship as children of God's mercy. This image of the parish gives us a greater understanding of who and what a parish should be. I invite you to examine the general well-being of our parishes. We belong to a certain parish community and there is one question we should ask ourselves. Is the face of Christ, is the love of God and the mercy of Our Lord clearly manifested in the life of each member of our parish community? Can you see it? Can you feel it? Can we experience God's mercy in our lives? It is so hard to see it in an individual, isn't it? It is difficult to see one act of mercy in an individual, but when all those acts of mercy are pooled from every individual disciple of Jesus, you see the power of such collective identity and mission. It becomes stronger when you pool yourselves together as members of the Body of Christ, constituting a geographic

area, identifying yourself as one big community, the parish. Think about the strength of your identity as God's people and people of mercy. It should showcase who we are, our identity and our mission. The parish community should be a sign of God's mercy in the midst of the needs of our world. However, we are not supposed to simply be signs. Do you know what signs do? Billboards are signs. They give information, they give direction. We are not only called to be signs of God's mercy but we should be a living testimony of God's mercy. The parish community should not only be a sign of the compassion, mercy and love of God, it should be the very essence of the life of every Christian, of every community, of every parish, of every Church. Mercy is not only to be a sign of the parish. Mercy is to be lived and carried out in our community. Identity is the foundation. The Church seeks to put mercy into practice. Jesus Christ taught that a person must not only receive and experience the mercy of God but he is also called to practice mercy towards others. What did the Lord say in the Beatitudes? "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." In other words, a call to action and practice acts of mercy.

Our Christian identity and mission are lived and carried out individually and collectively. The parish is the place of God's mercy because the parish consists of baptized individuals whose identity is woven in Christ. Do you see the connection with Christ and ourselves as imitations of Christ? We put ourselves together and comprise a parish and a body filled with mercy. It is by design that Christ shares with us His identity by making us His adopted children. By infusing the gift of the Holy Spirit we become the body of Christ. As the body of Christ, we become His lips, His ears, His eyes, His nose, His hands, but most of all His compassionate heart. Because of this, Christ shares with us not only His identity but also His mission. What did He say in the gospel? "As the Father has sent Me, so I send you." (Jn 20,21) "Teach them to observe all things what I have commanded you." (Mt 28,21). He gave us not only a mandate but a literal example of that mercy. What is interesting about that is that Christ never failed any moment of His life to be a part of that wonderful teaching of God's mercy in everything that He did. Even at the point of death, while hanging on the cross between two thieves, the mercy of God automatically, naturally came out. Remember His answer to the request of the repentant thief?

“Today you shall be with Me in paradise.” Toward the repentant sinner, the mercy of God is in abundance. Isn’t this awesome? Even at the last moment of one’s life, of one’s breath, God’s mercy is available.

The interesting part is, why wait until your moment of death when right now this is available for us. Why wait for the last moment of our breath to capture and embrace the tender, compassionate mercy of God when it is available to us now in the Sacrament of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation? How many people go to Confession regularly? How many Catholics still have that sense of awareness that the mercy of God is waiting for us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Confession?

It is not only a matter of awareness; it is a matter of conviction. How many of us are convinced to the core of our being that God’s mercy is made available to us in the Sacrament of Confession where we receive God’s absolution? When you are convinced that God’s mercy is there, you are not going to hesitate. You are not going to doubt. Instead, with eagerness, you will approach the sacrament of God’s mercy established for us on earth in the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession, so Christ sends out His call to all His children. The calling is simple. What did Christ say? “Come. Come and follow Me.” We are called to follow Him and to imitate His virtues, His way of life.

Christ teaches us to be merciful. In fact, He says, “As the Father is merciful, so you must be merciful.” And the mercy that God has taught us has no limit. In fact, as He forgives and shows mercy to others, you must also show mercy and forgive seventy seven times seventy seven. (cf. Mt. 18, 22) God’s mercy is like unlimited texting capabilities with no boundaries among people. It does not apply to the few and to the select. It is not choosy. It is inclusive. Mercy should be applied to everyone. The most inspiring about this is to understand that mercy is not only a source of blessings but a source of joy and happiness. Blessed and happy are those who are merciful for they themselves shall obtain mercy. Now we see the connection that we as members of our parish should not just be “signs” but living witnesses and testimony of God’s mercy in our world.

How can we show, how can we manifest, how can we make our parish a channel of God’s mercy in our lives? How can our parish community be a channel of God’s mercy in our world? Give me an idea. What

are the ingredients needed to make a parish that is merciful, a parish that acts in the name of God's love, compassion and charity? How are we compassionate? Some examples from the audience are to donate money and food to charities, be of service, volunteer, support each other, share, visit the sick.

The more quiet the parish community the less it is being merciful. Silence means the parish is not doing anything. What do you do in your parish community? What does it take for a parish to become a channel of mercy? Remember the saying, "Charity begins at home?" The parish is our home. It is our spiritual home. The parish Church, the parish community is like a home. It is a home that lives the saying "charity begins at home". This is our home as baptized children of God.

Trying to portray the mercy of God in our community is a challenge. For example, imagine yourself as a visitor to another parish community, and you want to go there in order to attend Church on a Sunday. When you enter the Church, what do you expect? You expect to be welcomed, to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of family and community. Now, think about your own parish community. Do you feel the welcome, loving and caring presence of God in your own parish? Do you feel the sense of warm welcome and that when they see you they jump for joy? "Oh, my God, I have a brother and a sister who is worshipping with me." Your face is radiant with a sweet smile knowing that the person next to you in Church is another in Christ, that the Image of Christ is in his or her face. He, she is my brother, my sister in Christ. We are God's children. We are members of God's family. We belong to the Body of Christ. What a joy! Such excitement! Do you feel that? Do you jump when you see strangers in your Church? Do you smile? These are some of the few questions I would like to propose to you, in order to find and realize if our parish community is truly an outlet and channel of God's mercy and God's love. A parish begins to be a channel of mercy by becoming a welcoming community that exudes the warm welcome embrace and compassion and care of our loving God. As soon as they see that church door they feel electricity in their hearts. They are filled with excitement because they are going to worship God with brothers and sisters as God's family.

As individuals, as a community, we can show the Image of God's mercy through hospitality and welcome to parishioners, visitors,

strangers, the poor, the outcast, even the marginalized, those who are unwanted, those who are the underlings, the undesired.

The mercy of God in the parish family is manifested through hospitality, and countless ways of caring, like social outreach, works of justice and compassion. Now, in your parish community, how do you treat each other and care for one another's needs? There are many collections to support the missions, to support various ministries; however, it is unfortunate that most of our ministry is from the surpluses of our pocket-books. It is easy for us to be involved in works of mercy by signing checks, by putting money in our collection envelopes. What the Lord needs is not acts of mercy from the surpluses of your bank accounts, of our pocketbooks, but the surpluses of the love in your heart. This is very crucial in making our parish a channel of mercy and charity. It is not just something that comes only from our pocketbooks, but it comes from our hearts. So let us examine, what constitutes the life of the parish community in terms of our ministries, programs, projects and activities? Do they reach out to better the lives of our brothers and sisters who are poor and needy and marginalized and unloved? What kind of merciful acts or actions do we share with them?

Remember God's love and mercy was personalized in Christ. It is the love in the Person of Christ that was established and carried out from His heart. It was His way of life. Charity and mercy likewise should be the way of life for every Christian to live by, for every member of our parish community.

I would like to add a word of caution. All our acts of mercy ultimately must be directed to Christ Himself. We don't do good to others so that other people will think highly of us. We don't give donations and ask, "Can you take a picture of me handling the check. We could put it in my Facebook," or "I would like to give a donation and I would like everyone to please line up, take a photo one more time and then I will put it on my Facebook page for the whole world to know that I give." If we do that, we are no different from the Pharisees whom Jesus criticized in those days. We show mercy, we help others and manifest God's compassion and love so that they themselves can give praise and give thanks to God. Let us evaluate our motives of mercy and charity as a parish family.

Do we do it in Hollywood fashion? Do we do it in Hollywood style for show? We must remember to carry out these works of mercy so that others will come to know our merciful and loving God. After all, our acts of mercy, our acts of love and charity, are our responses to the love and mercy that God has shown us in the very first place.

My friends, when we do everything we can as a parish family, our parish life would be filled with reminders that we are instruments of God's merciful love. We ultimately remind the world that Christ, the source and summit of our works of mercy, is truly in our midst. Live your identity, our identity as the image and likeness of Christ. Live our mission and our calling that Christ has shared with us, to share love and mercy for others. We not only do this individually but forcefully in a collective manner as a church, as the Body of Christ, as a parish family. Our spirit of mercy through works of charity as members of this parish community makes this great family not only a storage of God's blessings and grace but rather a distribution center of God's blessings.

God's mercy abounds and becomes available through kind deeds, noble intentions and heroic acts of charity. In this way, the earth becomes God's kingdom when our earth is full of mercy and the kind of mercy that God gives us now, the mercy that endures forever from generation to generation.

Allow me to close my conference with a simple prayer. We bow down our heads and lift up our hearts and minds and our being to our loving God, "Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus Christ, You are our merciful God Who became man to redeem us from our sins. Open our eyes to the depth of that love that we owe You for Your unspeakable merciful love for us. Open our hearts to give ourselves to You and to those You place in our lives so that through our works of mercy towards them, we may bring mercy from You. For this we pray in the Name of Jesus our merciful Lord. Amen."





MSGR. PAUL MONTOYA

Sacramental Dimension of The Parish Community



Reverend Monsignor Paul Montoya

Msgr. Paul was born in Wyoming. He lived in Denver, Colorado, until the age of five, when his family moved to Southern California. He attended St. John Chrysostom Elementary School and Hawthorne High School. After high school he entered St. John's Seminary College from which he graduated in 1969 with a B.A. in Philosophy. Monsignor enrolled in St. John's Seminary Theology and completed his M.A. in Divinity in 1973. Msgr. Paul has been a member of the Board of Trustees of Catholic Charities since 1989. Currently, he is Vice President of the Board of Trustees and serves on the Executive Committee and the Resource Development Committee. Msgr. Paul was named and elevated to Prelate of Honor to His Holiness on June 6, 1995. From July 01, 2010 Msgr. Montoya is pastor at Christ the King Parish in Hollywood.



The title of this Conference is about the importance of being in a parish and what that means. I want to tie it in with Divine Mercy and tie it in with what you and I do as Catholics.

What we're looking at is living out Divine Mercy. So often we can get the idea that it is way up there. Divine Mercy is really home to us as our parish is our home. That is going to be my main theme. Divine Mercy is active in our parish, active in our lives if we let it be fully active. It is the new covenant. It is the new way of living.

In Spanish speaking, when someone has a close relationship with somebody and someone is like a brother, we call him *compadre*. *Compadre* means he is my brother, he is my other self. You know them so well. In a certain sense our parish in our life is our *compadre* in Divine Mercy because if the parish reflects the love of God and is active in the love of God, then it will spread that out and live it in the Divine Mercy way. If the parish is not connected in that *compadre* relationship the parish will not grow. It will shrink. So we're looking at going forth.

For us as Catholics, there are many ways of doing this, but the pivotal way is through the sacraments. The sacraments are those deep mysterious ways in which Christ reaches out to us and energizes us in the various levels of the sacraments. I am going to ask you to define the sacraments. What is a sacrament? What is the definition of a sacrament? I am going to give you a hint. The Latin word is "*sacramentum*" and *sacramentum* means mystery, deep mystery. The Church believes there is a lot of mystery in our lives but when we are touched by the mystery of Jesus, then changes take place. New life takes place. And the mystery we are talking about is the mystery of God's love in our lives.

So often in the Church, we talk about God as if He is right next to us, and in a certain sense, that is in Jesus, the fact. But the other side of the coin is that we forget the *mysterium tremendum*, the great mystery of God. It's good to have a mystery about God, and the sacraments are

our seven mysterious ways of touching God. I am going to give you a general understanding of what a sacrament is. A sacrament is the deep mysterious touching in which Jesus reaches out two thousand years, through time and space to touch you and me in a special way with His goodness, His love, what we call it His grace. Sacraments are the deep mysterious touching of Jesus Who brings us His grace and His love here and now in a special way. Is this a satisfactory way of looking at it? Yes, it is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. We remember that from our catechism days.

But if we take that same understanding that Jesus is reaching out, in the Gospel of Saint Mathew Chapter 28 says: Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.(Mt. 28, 19-20)

He says, “Go forth and baptize all people in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and know that I am going to be with you.” These were not just polite words when He said. “I am going to be with you,” and for us as Catholics, the sacraments are the way that Jesus reaches out to us. Now when I say deep mystery, sometimes people think of certain mystery movies about who did it, and solving a problem, but I am talking about something that takes a lifetime to understand. I am going to give you a quick example.

One of the deepest mysteries you have is why you married the person you married. Isn't that a mystery? You probably shook your head and said, “Did I really do this?” And it has taken a lifetime – ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years to understand each other, to work things out to where you know each other. But when it works and comes together, the mystery is the beautiful union of love. So we are talking about the deep mysterious touching when Jesus reaches through time and space to touch you and me to give us His love and His grace.

How many sacraments do we have? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven? Okay, seven sacraments. That is wrong. There is one sacrament. That is the lesson I am going to teach and clarify. Let's say both answers are correct, but there is only one sacrament.

We are going to name the sacraments. The first sacrament is Baptism. The next sacrament is Confirmation. The next sacrament is Confession

– we are going to skip Holy Communion for now. The next sacrament is Matrimony. The next one is Holy Orders. The last sacrament is Anointing of the Sick.

Now, we look at the first two sacraments which are Baptism and Confirmation. Baptism brings us into the community of the Church and into the community of grace. Confirmation confirms our participation. Confirmation gives us the strength of the spirit to live out the baptismal promise. These are called the Sacraments of Initiation. As a baby, we are invited into the adult community to be believers. So, these are called Sacraments of Initiation. In this Sacrament of Initiation, we want to live the love of God, we want to show the love of God, but sometimes we fall down. Sometimes we do not live out that sacrament. Sometimes we fail. Now we have the Sacrament of Reconciliation to again see God's way – forgiveness. The Church uses the word reconciliation *Re-con-cile*. *Re* means again. *Con* means with. *Cile*. What does *cile* mean? *Cilia means* to see again with your eyes. So when we sin, when we have done something wrong, we become blind in spirit, blind in our eyes. But when we go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, with our eyes we can see again God's grace and love, forgiveness; reconciliation. We failed, we turned away from God's love, and now we are going to be reunited to that love.

When we are in the hospital, ill, and the doctor says "We are not too sure what is going to happen," our spirit is taken down, our body is taken down and we are again wondering, "where is our God?" And so we have the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, and that again is to reunite and strengthen us. These are called the healing sacraments. We are being healed. We are being strengthened to live the way of God's love. Baptism and Confirmation are Sacraments of Initiation. Confession or Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick are healing sacraments, to restore.

Now we have two other sacraments. Matrimony. Marriage is a deep mystery. Marriage is the bringing forth of love that brings forth life, brings forth new generations, brings forth a new spirit. So the Sacrament of Marriage is blessed to bring forth new life.

We have the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Holy Orders brings forth the life of the Church, makes the family of the Church come alive. Holy Orders brings forth new life in that way. These are sacraments

of vocation, of a call to live out love. Which is the one sacrament in the middle of it all? Holy Eucharist, Communion. All the sacraments bring us into communion, keep us in communion, send us forth in communion. There are seven sacraments, bringing us in, keeping us in, and sending us forth.

Many times when Catholics speak about sacraments and coming to the Eucharist they tend to departmentalize them from Baptism to Anointing of the Sick at the very end, and really, they are integral. They are integral because we are living the life of the spirit. We are living the life of God's love, and that is why we live that life in the church. I just taught that there is only one sacrament – the Eucharist, the common union, the main reason why you and I, as Catholics, are noted for going to church on Sundays.

About ten years ago, a priest friend and I were vacationing in England in May during “lambing time” when baby lambs are being born. While we were there we stayed in a B&B, a bed and breakfast place offering a room and breakfast inside a private home. We asked the lady owner where the nearest Church was for Sunday services. Unaware we were priests because we had made our arrangements through a travel agent, she replied, “Oh, you are going to church. Really, no one goes to church but Catholics in our town.” I said, “Oh, that is interesting.” We are noted for going to church on Sunday because you and I believe that coming to Mass every week, at least once a week, strengthens us to be in the communion of love. So all the sacraments lead us to the communion of love, keep us in the communion of love and send us forth in the communion of love, but we have to be in that communion of love. That is why when many people say, “Well, you know I can live my life well, and talk to God, be with God, but I do not have to go to church.” God does not work that way for you. The ordinary way of working is to stay connected, to be one with each other. You have to be in the communion of love, and whenever you do not stay in that communion of love and try to do it on your own, you might survive for awhile but you can not survive long because all of a sudden that love is twisted.

There are various levels of love. A little child would say, “I love chocolate candy, I love a bicycle, I love my toys,” but it is when you love a person that you really are fully loving. When you are loved by someone, and you love another person you are fully alive. For

us as Catholics, we believe and understand that the Eucharist is the communion of love which puts us in love with the person of Jesus. When we are in love with the person of Jesus then we can have the life of Jesus which is Divine Mercy. Divine Mercy says I am calling you to a new covenant, a new way of looking, a new *compadre*, to look and live God's love. But you have to stay connected.

Many times I will ask young people, "When was the last time you went to church?"

They will tell me, "Oh, a couple of months ago."

I will say, "Well, let me ask you something. Who is your best friend?"

"Oh, my friend is Tommy over there."

"How often do you see Tommy?"

"Oh, every day."

"What if you only saw him once a week?"

"Oh, we would still be friends."

"What if you saw Tommy once a month?"

"Well, we would be okay."

I said, "What if you saw Tommy once every six months? Your friendship would die."

That is why we as Catholics come to church. We come to church every Sunday so we can be renewed and strengthened in the communion of love. Divine Mercy tells us in Faustina's Diary that if we want to keep this fire of love, if we want to stay in this communion of love a new covenant is necessary. A new community is necessary, that is the church community.

So I say to you when you go back to your church and there is a need to be more loving and kind, bring the people together by coming together, live out the sacraments, live them in your parish, and live them out so that they are connected and not just isolated situations. So often in our lives, what is happening are isolated situations in our communion of love.

When we talk about love, it is interesting. How do we stay in that love? For us, the way to stay in love is an example I shared with a young couple I was preparing for marriage. A young man who was a carpenter was marrying a young lady in her mid-twenties. When I asked him, "How do you two stay connected?" he replied, "We talk to each other and we share with each other," etc.

I said, "Now you want to get married in the Church."

He said, "Yes. I want to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony."

I asked, "How are you going to live out that sacrament?"

"We are going to talk with each other, share with each other."

I said, "But aren't you leaving something out?"

He said, "Yes, we need to pray together."

I then asked him, "What is prayer?"

The young man said, "Prayer is the deepest form of communication I can do by myself, with my neighbor, and my God."

Isn't that a wonderful understanding of a young man that prayer is the deepest form of communication I can do by myself, do with my neighbor, and with my God. I have a master's degree in Theology, I could not put it any clearer than that. Then I asked him, "Do you and your fiancé pray?" And what do you think he said?... No Answer.

Many Catholics are afraid to pray because prayer calls us out of ourselves. Prayer calls us to live a new life. Prayer tells us that we are in loving relationship with God. In the beautiful understanding of Divine Mercy, we are called to pray, we are called to have that inner change. Unless the young couple growing in love for the first time prays every day, genuinely with each other, then like so many marriages, they can grow apart. But if we stay faithful to the new covenant of love, if we stay faithful to the new way of Divine Mercy, we are called to live a life of prayer. Prayer is not just forming or saying the important words we already know. Prayer comes fully from the heart so there is an opening of the heart and living that heart. That is what is occurring when we pray. We are able to come to the Eucharist, to the source that strengthens us and teaches us how to pray and how to live. Now, how deep is that prayer?

When I was a young priest, I asked to be assigned to a small parish in East Los Angeles. I told the Pastor I wanted to walk around the little neighborhood and visit the homes there. There were not too many. It was a very small parish in a hilly little area of East Los Angeles. It was a rather warm day as I walked. I approached an elderly couple relaxing on the front porch and introduced myself, "How are you? My name is Paul. I am a seminarian, and I am here to see how you are doing." They told me who they were, Jose and Maria, and we spoke in Spanish. As we were talking, Maria got up and walked into the house. I thought,

“Well, that is kind of rude, you know, just getting up and walking into the house.” She went inside. She returned later with a glass of lemonade for her husband. When she saw from the look on my face that I was puzzled, she said, “Listen, I have been with him so long that I know what he needs before he does.” That is the kind of love that you and I are trying to build. That is the kind of love the Divine Mercy teaches us to build in our lives where God and you have such recognition of each other’s needs that response to it is automatic.

An addendum to this story is that love is a constant struggle and change.

A few months later, the same couple asked me to celebrate their 50th anniversary, fifty years of being married. I said I would be delighted to. They had a beautiful celebration in church. He is rather a tall gentleman and she is quite small in comparison. She wore a gold mantilla covering her head, and he wore a gold suit. In Spanish, the honorary title of respect, is *don y doña*, Don Jose and Doña Maria, so when they turned and faced each other, I asked Don Jose, “Do you again take Doña Maria to be your wife?” He answered “Yes.” Then I asked, “Doña Maria, do you again take Don Jose to be your husband?” She answered “No!” I was stunned and everybody else was stunned. She turned and looked at me, and then looked at her husband and said, “At our 25th anniversary, you jokingly said ‘no’ to me. I’ve lived long enough to say ‘no’ back at you.”

That is the type of love the Divine Mercy calls for. Love that is an interchange, a back and forth exchange, a coming in and wrestling with each other. All the saints wrestle with God’s presence in their lives. You and I have to do the same. Many times when we have trials and difficulties in our lives, we say “God has abandoned me.” Not at all. God is calling you to a deeper love, to work it out in a deeper way. This Conference of Divine Mercy calls us to allow ourselves to be a Catholic people, to let the love of God touch you and me. Not to turn to false love.

The Greeks said there are different types of love. There is *eros* love. That is physical love; love of the body, love of the artistic body, love of the sensual body. There is *filia*, brotherly love - love in which you care for one another in society. Then there is *agape*. *Agape* is what the Church calls the Eucharist that is a full spiritual love, a full, developed

love, a full relationship love in which you give yourself completely and are received completely. That is why you and I as Catholics hold so dearly going to the Eucharist. The Eucharist is that sacrament, that core sacrament in which you and I are kept in the communion of love. Wow! Isn't that powerful! You and I are kept in the common union of love. We go to church, not because we have to, that is the minimum. We go because we get to. We get to go deeper in that love. And what are sacraments? The deep mysterious touching when Jesus reaches through time and space to touch you and me with His love and His grace.

What is grace? Many times, we as Catholics think, well, if I say certain prayers and do certain things I get a pound of grace. Many times, children say, well, it is a package of God's goodness in me. We believe grace, like the sacraments, is a loving relationship. That is what grace is. It is a loving relationship.

Let me give you an example: A few years ago if you remember we had the Olympics. I remember watching the javelin toss competition on TV. The announcer who had been a javelin thrower at one time in his youth, was describing the next step, how the next person who came forward was going to throw the javelin, what it takes to do it and all the different factors that are put together for a good toss, to make a winning toss. When the athlete came in, he threw the javelin in such a way that the announcer recognized it as a winning toss and remarked, "That is the winner. How graceful, how graceful." How grace filled was the way he did it. The javelin thrower, the athlete, practiced his way of doing it over and over and over again. Many professional golfers will go back the next day to the golf course where they made a mistake and practice that one swing a thousand times because they want to get it right. They want to overcome the imperfection, they want to overcome that which is not working, they want to hit that ball in such a way that they are one with the club and the ball. How grace-full and that is what the sacraments provide for you and me. They are grace filled moments in which you and I over and over again receive the strength of God to throw the javelin, to do whatever it takes to live the way of God's love.

The sacraments are celebrated in the parish community. You and I as members of the parish community are connected in the communion of love. If we are trying to be grace filled, we must stay connected

through Holy Communion, the communion of love. We are invited to the communion of love by Baptism and Confirmation, we are kept in the communion of love by Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick, and we live the communion of love through our vocation of Marriage and Holy Orders. Do you see how it is connected? That is why you and I as Catholics ought to be proud about coming every Sunday to Mass. We come so that we can be grace filled. Grace filled is the full living of the relationship, full knowing of each other, full completeness of each other. They are our anniversary celebrations. The communion of love is called the Eucharist. Eucharist is a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.” We are a thankful people.

There are two key parts to the Eucharist. The Church is very particular about what we do, and that is why next Sunday the Church in the United States and the English speaking world begins the new change in the language of the liturgy. Some words are being refined more accurately to the Latin for its full meaning and for us to better understand what is being said. There are two parts of the liturgy that are crucial for us. The first part is called the Liturgy of the Word. In the Liturgy of the Word, we are asked to really listen to the Word of God.

Let's say you wake up in the morning, and your best friend calls you. Maybe your best friend lives back east or lives in another country and calls you up and says, “ I don't want to be friends with you anymore. I don't like you anymore. I hate you.” Just think about how you would feel.

Let's take other situation: your best friend calls you up this morning. You were not expecting it, they live somewhere else, and they say, “I am so happy we are friends, I really care about you. I really love you. Thank you for being my friend.” Just think about that, Okay?

On the first situation, how would you feel if someone said, “I hate you”? You would feel bad. What would be some questions in your mind? “What did I do?” “Why?” Is that pretty much what we would all come up with?

In the second situation. How would you feel this morning if someone said, “I love you?” Very pleased. There would be no questions. You would love them back, you would feel pretty good about it. These are only words: “I love you.” “I hate you.” But words are powerful when they come into our hearts. “I love you” changes your day into a beautiful day. It could be a rainy day and it feels like a sunny day. It could be a sunny day and “I hate you” changes it to a rainy day. So, words can change it.

The Church calls Jesus the Word of God, When we allow Jesus into our hearts, He changes not just one day, but all of our days. That is why the first part of the Holy Eucharist is the Liturgy of the Word, the Celebration of the Word. Even though you and I hear scriptural passages repeated over and over again, it is Jesus calling out. It is His Divine Mercy that we hear every time saying “I love you, I care about you. I listen to the struggles of My people, and I have been with My people.” If we open ourselves and let the Word of God Jesus come in, if we let Divine Mercy come in, we are changed. Now it does not mean there are not any struggles, it does not mean we won’t misunderstand, it does not mean that we will fully understand. It means though we are on the right track.

What happens in modern society is that we hear so many different words. You get up in the morning, your radio is on, you turn on the TV for the news, if there are teenagers in the house, they are playing CDs and they have got plugs in their ears, you get into your car and you play a CD of some kind. There are all kinds of noises coming into our lives, all kinds of sounds coming into our lives, and it is only when something special touches us like “I love you” that we are changed. We open up our hearts, open up our minds, open up the loving relationship of grace and we are changed. That is the power of the Eucharist. That is why we give great honor to the presence of the Eucharist because Jesus is really present. That is the power we have as Catholics. Jesus is really there for us. We open ourselves to Him. He is always there for us, and in Divine Mercy, He is telling us “I’m giving you My way if you listen to My way.”

You know there are different ways of being present to somebody. I remember speaking to a young couple who had been married for about five to ten years. One time the young gentleman did something that was not the smartest thing to do. They were struggling with finances and they were just making ends meet. He came home just beaming, and he said, “Honey, I want to show you something.” He took her outside to show her that he had bought himself a brand new motorcycle. Her reaction was a little different from what he had expected. When he went into the house after that and tried to talk to her, he got the silent treatment. Now he knew he had done something wrong. Later on they did work it out.

We believe that when we are in a loving relationship we know what is going on. But we have to be in that loving relationship. We have to be connected. We have to work on it together and that is a beautiful thing.

So often in our modern society, you want to say something. Teenagers tell me all the time, “Well, I want to talk to my Mom and Dad, but they do not understand me,” and Mom and Dad will say to me, “You know I want to talk to my son or daughter, but they would not let me in.” That is because they are not talking to each other, they are talking at each other. In loving relationships, part of that talking is listening, listening deeply, and knowing the right time to say something and the right time not to say anything.

You and I are so grateful to have, because we believe, the real presence. Jesus is not symbolically here. He is really present. You and I are the ones that are so filled with anxieties, hurts and pain that we do not really know He is present. And when trials and difficulties come into our lives, we think God is abandoning us. On the contrary, He is helping us through the struggles and trials if we would listen to Who is the Word. And the Word became flesh. What Jesus did is that He overcame the chaos of the world, the disorder of the world, the darkness of the world, the fear of the world, and He brought in light. He brought in order. He brought in love. We have to listen to that. So the first part of the Eucharist demands that we listen to the Word of God, not just hear the same thing over and over again, but be renewed in that Word. Many of you here have children. When your children or your grandchildren say “Grandma, Grandpa, I love you,” even mispronouncing the word, you know it is true by the way they say it. God is constantly saying that to you and me. And that is why the Eucharist is so important for us as Catholics. That is why we come. We listen to the Word of God to change our lives.

The second part of the Eucharist is the Communion of Love.

We believe that Jesus takes simple bread and wine and in His words through His Church makes it His Body and Blood. There is a profound change here, a deep change.

Again, let’s go back to the marriage situation. I was talking with a young couple, and I asked them about the one minute before they say “I do,” in the marriage ceremony and the one minute after that. What is the difference between the two? And the young man said to me, “about

a pound of sweat.” I said, there is a whole world of difference and that is, before you were a single man, or a single woman, coming and going as you wished, but once you made your commitment of love, once you receive that grace, you are filled with God’s grace. Now you become a husband. Now you become a wife. Your very name changes to Mr. and Mrs. You are no longer the same person. Yes outside you look like the same person, outside you have the same personality, but inside, in and through the power of Jesus, you now explode with a new type of love, the love of husband and wife in the Sacrament of Marriage. So you are changed deeply and forever. That is what happens in the sacraments. That is what happens in the Eucharist. We are changed completely. That is no longer bread. It is the Body of Jesus. That is no longer wine. It is the Blood of Jesus. You and I have to appreciate that. You and I have to live that out. In each of the sacraments we are changed from being born into the world to being born into the world of Baptism, of the church, from living the way of the world to living the confirmed way of Baptism, from living in sin to grace in love and forgiveness, from being afraid in our own lives with illness and suffering in the hospital and then anointed to be healed again and strengthened again, to go forth and live the communion of love in the vocation of marriage, to live the communion of love in the priesthood, to live the family of the Church. That is what takes place in the sacraments.

So in the second part, Jesus comes and gives Himself to you and me. “This is My Body. This is My Blood.” You take it in you and you make it part of you. How do you know you have that communion of love? In the Mass reading today it says “as you treated the least of My brothers, you treated Me.” You living out your love. Oh, yes, we all have friends and neighbors and coworkers and family members that are a little tough to take, they are a little bit of a pain in the neck, but when we allow ourselves to really talk to them, to really see them, to really work it out, then we are changed.

Going back to marriage, one of the things that is so beautiful is that many times I am invited to receptions afterwards, and I try to go to as many as I can. Unfortunately, because of my parish schedule, I cannot always do that. I remember one time there was a young couple, and again, they were really different in many ways. He was really, really tall, and she was really, really short. They just did not look like a couple,

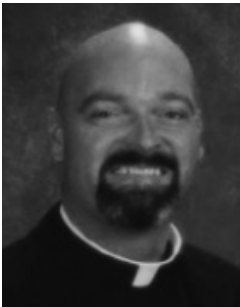
you would say, looked like they would go together. I remember hearing someone say “I do not see what he sees in her,” and the other person to their credit says, “But she sees him in love.” And there is a world of difference. She sees him in love. That is the way God sees us. In Divine Mercy, He sees you and me. Not our wrinkles, not our failings, not our fears, not our hurts, but He sees us in love. As you look at a child, your children, or your grandchildren, or your great grandchildren, and you see the innocence there, you see how loving they are. How can you not love a baby? That is how God loves you and me. That is the whole understanding of Divine Mercy, that God says live the commandment of love, live the sacraments of love, live the parish of love, live Divine Mercy. Yes, the world will say you are missing out. Yes, the world will say keep the resources for yourself. We say we are keeping the resources for those we love and by living that love we live the full love that will come in Heaven. If we want to see again the presence of God, we can only do that with what I call the focus of love.

When I was a youngster we used to have a little toy called a kaleidoscope. I Remember it had different colors on it? You had to play around with it and if you got it just right all the colors showed just perfectly. Many times, you and I are out of focus. We are out of focus because of sin. We are out of focus because of temptation, out of focus because of fear, but Divine Mercy says, put yourselves back into focus. See yourself as God sees you. See your neighbor as God sees your neighbor. When Jesus was asked to condemn a woman in sin, He said, “I am not here to throw rocks at people. I am here to see the goodness that is in them and bring that out.” Sometimes, there are those people where you have to dig deep to see their goodness. You have to, and maybe that is me too. But God sees them and He calls them back. The choice is to be like Peter whose sin was that he denied Jesus. Then he cried and asked for forgiveness and was made the first Pope. Or you can be like Judas whose sin was to deny Jesus but did not ask for forgiveness and hung himself.

With the power of love, with the communion of love, with the sacraments, the mystery of love, in Divine Mercy you and I can see each other and see ourselves. That we are sons and daughters of a loving God we call our Father, that we are brothers and sisters in His church. That in Divine Mercy He forgives and we are forgiven so that we can see our God, that is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

FATHER MAURICE HARRIGAN

*Why must we honor
Divine Mercy?
The essence of worship of God's
Mercy in the Church*



Fr. Maurice Harrigan is a Pastor of Holy Trinity Parish in Atwater Village, Los Angeles, California. He is also a very well known Master Retreat.



The Divine Mercy devotion is really an extension of the Eucharist in a sense. Every single Holy Mass is the way that God bestows His mercy upon His people throughout the world. Every good thing that happens in this world, every bit of mercy that we have in this world, every grace that comes to us through Almighty God, through the sacraments, all of it is funneled and channeled through the Holy Eucharist, the Holy Mass, to the people of God.

When the priest begins the Holy Mass in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, the floodgates of God's mercy open and it begins to flood the people in the pews of that Church, but it does not stop there. As the Mass continues, the mercy goes out the doors and begins to flood the neighborhood throughout that area. People are receiving mercy and grace and they may not even know it. They may be walking their dog and may never go to Church. They may not even be Catholic or Christian but they are still receiving mercy and grace from Almighty God through that Holy Mass, and at the end of that Mass when the priest gives his final blessing, the floodgates of God's Divine Mercy shut. They close. However, just down the road, there is another Catholic Church and another Mass is beginning with "In the Name of the Father," and those same floodgates of God's mercy begin to flood that neighborhood and soak the whole world.

I think Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen said, "There are seven Masses going on throughout the world every minute of the day, 365 days of the year, all throughout the world. God's Mercy through the Holy Mass is saturating the world.

What are the prayers of Divine Mercy? "Eternal Father, I offer Thee the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Your dearly beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world." "For the sake of His sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world." Now those prayers are Eucharistic prayers, "Eternal Father, we offer Thee the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity.

The Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity become present at the Holy Mass in atonement for our sins and for the whole world. The Divine Mercy prayers themselves are Eucharistic prayers describing the reality of God's mercy coming to us from the Mass. That is why the Mass is so important for us to attend because when we attend the Holy Mass no matter whether it is a weekday Mass or a Sunday Mass, we are soaked and saturated in God's mercy. During the Mass we are saturated and flooded with the mercy of God, but If we skip Mass, we lose out on that mercy

The Mass is the representation of Jesus Christ's death on Calvary. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear like many of the saints, we would see the crucifixion taking place above the altar. The saints see angels holding chalices, with the Blood and Water pouring out from Jesus' side. This is taking place during the Holy Mass. Now, it is not that Christ is being crucified over and over again every time there is Holy Mass. We can look at this in two ways. At the beginning of Mass, we become transported back in time because God is outside of time and space. We are standing at the foot of Calvary. Another point of view is that when the Mass begins, Calvary is transported into the future where we are today. When we come to Holy Mass, we are literally, in a spiritual sense, participating in the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. That is why we call it the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. We have to understand that the Mass is the way God gives mercy to the world. The Divine Mercy devotion and the prayers that Jesus gave to St. Faustina are basically Eucharistic prayers reminding the church, reminding us that we should have not only devotion to God's divine mercy, but to God's Holy Mass because that is where His mercy comes from.

When the Mass begins "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," the floodgates of God's mercy open, and with the final blessing at the conclusion of Mass, the floodgates close. Now, how does God's mercy continue to bless people wherever they are in the parish? How does that happen? What is the difference between Jesus' presence Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the tabernacle and when our Lord Jesus is exposed in the Monstrance? There is a very important occurrence going on when He is exposed. Remember that the floodgates close at the end of Mass. When Our Lord is exposed in the Monstrance, the floodgates remain open and all of that merit and

mercy and grace of Calvary and the Holy Mass, continuously flood the church, flood the neighborhood, literally flood the city, and flood the entire world.

Blessed John Paul II, soon to be Saint John Paul II the Great, said every parish in the entire world should have Eucharistic adoration twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week because continuous adoration would literally soak the entire world in the mercy and merits of the Holy Mass. Where the merits of Jesus, His Mass and His mercy are present, Satan and his evil cannot exist there. We would literally soak the world in the Precious Body and Blood of Christ in His mercy with ongoing adoration throughout the world. Every parish should be encouraged to have some form of continuous Eucharistic adoration. Ask your pastor if you can initiate this on First Fridays, for example. It does not have to be 24/7 at the start. The idea is to start small and gradually build up. Eventually, the merits and graces taking place will transform your parish because of Jesus' mercy. Conversions begin because of God's mercy. That is what is taking place in the Holy Mass, and that is what is taking place during Adoration. We are being saturated in His Mercy. Attending Holy Mass and attending Adoration are very important for everyone, especially if we are in trouble, if we are having difficulties. Maybe we're having difficulties with sin, or maybe we're having difficulties with family, families, friends, relatives. Maybe we are having difficulties in the workplace with our coworkers, our jobs. Whatever the difficulty might be, we are invited to come and sit before Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, especially exposed, and become saturated and flooded in Jesus' healing mercy. His mercy begins to transform us from inside and then we are able to go out into the world and carry His mercy to others. The message is about receiving the mercy of Jesus and then bringing His mercy out into the world.

I want to tell a story which demonstrates how important the Holy Mass is. In the 1950s, the country was struggling with the cold war. Russia and communism were a major threat for the entire world. Under the communistic regime, life for many people would become very difficult.

Author Myles Connolly, who lived during this period, wrote a beautiful novel, "The Story of Mr. Blue" which tells the story about

Mr. Blue's life after surviving a world-wide nuclear holocaust. Mr. Blue and approximately six hundred to a thousand other survivors lived a communistic style of existence in a futuristic domed city on earth, where everything was completely manufactured. All the people living in the city had jobs and worked under the watchful eye of the government. Cameras were everywhere, even inside the apartments, watching everyone's behavior in every room.

Mr. Blue's tiny apartment was sparsely furnished with a bed, a chair, and a little faucet which released liquid meals three times a day. Mr. Blue would have his daily liquid from the machine, and then get dressed in gray pants and shirt and begin his eight hour work day. Afterwards, he would switch on the little notch for his evening meal and then retire for the day. After his sleep, Mr. Blue would get up and repeat the same thing all over again. This was Mr. Blue's world.

One day, Mr. Blue got curious about what might exist outside the dome. He discovered an air conditioning vent that brought air in from the outside. Even though he knew he was taking the risk of being shot to death by government soldiers, he decided to take a chance and sneak out through the vent. Once outside, he began wandering around a barren landscape. He saw cities had been completely destroyed by the bombs. He saw many crumbled buildings and collapsed structures with no living people, no living animals, no birds, no vegetation—nothing. It was a horrific apocalyptic sight.

Mr. Blue went home quite depressed. After a couple of days, however, his curiosity returned as he thought to himself "Well I saw only one part. Maybe there is something more to see." So he decided to take one more risk and snuck out again. He ventured out further but only saw more of the same, more devastation. Not a single tree, shrub or plant of any kind on a burnt, scorched earth. There were no signs of life anywhere. Again he returned home very depressed.

After a week went by, he became even more curious and went out again for a third time. This time he searched and continued searching until he finally found a little patch of grass. "Oh, things are growing. That means that there is life here." He hurried back to his apartment where he had stored some wheat seeds because he wanted to make some bread. He had also saved some grape seeds because he wanted wine with the bread. He wanted to have a nice picnic. Hiding the seeds

under his coat, he went back out and planted them. He took some goop from his sink and added a little water to make a type of fertilizer which would yield some nice stalks of wheat and a vine with little clusters of grapes. He let them grow and ripen. Several months later, he slipped out again and harvested them. He gathered stalks of wheat and little bunches of grapes under his coat and sneaked back into his apartment. Then in the middle of the night when he was supposed to be sleeping and in view of the ever present cameras, he ground the wheat into flour and crushed the grapes into liquid which he poured into a little bottle with a cap. Next, he waited for the grape juice to ferment and become wine.

One day after work, he heard a little *poof* when the cork popped from the bottle. At last, it was time for his picnic. He put together a little picnic basket, complete with wine, some little flat wheat cakes he had made, a blanket and other picnic items. He then headed out for the highest building still remaining in the city where he would be able to sit down and enjoy a real picnic on the roof. He climbed the stairs to the top of the building and proceeded out onto the roof, barring the door closed. Suddenly the cameras caught him in the act of the barring the door shut and security was alerted. Immediately, military men were scaling the sides of the building and helicopters were flying overhead shooting, aiming to kill him but Mr. Blue was smart. He took cover in one corner of the roof that offered protection. He laid out a nice blanket on top of a square machine, and he brought out his wine and his wheat cakes. Firearms were raging all around him but he was not getting hit as the bullets ricocheted around him. People began pounding on the door trying to break it down. From his picnic basket, Mr. Blue pulled out what appeared to be a shirt, but it was not a regular shirt at all. He puts on his vestments because Mr. Blue was not really Mr. Blue. Mr. Blue was in fact Father Blue and the last priest on earth. This was to be the first Mass he had said in many years because he had no wine and no grapes and no wheat for the bread. Father Blue continued to recite the prayers of the Mass up to the Consecration when soldiers began breaking down the door. Forcing their guns through the door, they began to shoot at Father Blue but the bullets went whizzing by his head. After raising the Host and just as he's saying the prayers over the chalice, one of the soldiers breaks the door down. The soldiers fire on Father Blue just as he is about

to hold up the chalice. Before he can say the final prayers, a bullet goes right through his heart. Father Blue falls dead on the altar. The Mass is not said, it is not complete. The soldiers rejoiced.

The government people said, "We killed this renegade priest. Finally, we've rid our city of this ancient false religion," and the entire world rejoiced. Suddenly, a flash appeared across the sky from the east to the west, followed by the blast of a trumpet, and all the angels marched in. Then the people saw Jesus our Redeemer arriving on the clouds. It was the end of the world. Myles Connolly is the author of this wonderful story, Mr. Blue.

Mr. Blue is the last priest on earth. As long as a priest was available on earth to say the Holy Mass, God could bring mercy to the earth. The theology of this is that when Father Blue was killed, God no longer had a way to bring His mercy to the earth through the sacrifice on Calvary and the end of the world was inevitable. St. Paul says, "Now because we have the Mass, now is the time of mercy but when the time of mercy ends, must come the time of judgment- the end of the world."

The moral of the story is that as long as Mass is being said throughout the world, God can bring mercy to all of us, to our souls through the sacraments, through Confession. Mercy from the Mass is translated into Confession, mercy from the Mass is translated into Baptism, mercy through the Mass is translated into the Sacrament of Marriage, mercy from the Mass is translated into the Sacrament of Holy Orders, mercy from the Mass is translated into the Sacrament of Holy Anointing, Anointing of the Sick. As long as Mass is being said, God is giving His mercy to the world. Once that last Mass is said on this earth somewhere, some time way off in the future, judgment will have to come.

Again, I reiterate the importance of the Holy Mass, and attending Holy Mass. If you want to receive mercy, go to Holy Mass. If you want to receive healing, go to Holy Mass. If you want to receive grace, go to Holy Mass. This is it. And we must receive worthily. What does Jesus say, "Unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you will have no life in you." He was not kidding. He was very serious. The Mass and the Holy Eucharist is the way God gives us His divine life. All of the sacraments, for that matter, are the way that God gives us divine life. It is kind of like arteries. We have arteries pumping

blood from our heart to various parts of the body, keeping our body healthy and strong. If we eat too much bacon and for the Filipinos too much pancit, pork lechon and all those other things, your arteries are going to get clogged and lead to a heart attack or stroke. It is the same exact thing with the sacraments. We have seven arteries pumping spiritual graces, the precious Blood of Jesus Christ, into our souls, keeping it healthy. If we cut off one of those arteries by not going to Mass, or getting married outside the Church, or not being baptized – whatever it happens to be, then those arteries get blocked and lead not to a heart attack, but a soul attack. If you do not tend to the heart attack, call 911 and get to the hospital right away and get worked on you are going to die. If you don't tend to the soul attack, if somebody is ignoring all the warning signs of the soul attack, their soul is going to die. We call this mortal sin, death. That is what it means - death. That is why we must come to Holy Mass and receive worthily. St. Paul says to receive unworthily the Holy Eucharist is to heap condemnation upon condemnation upon ourselves. That means going to Confession. How often for the lay people? Once a year before Christmas, before Easter? No. Once at my First Communion and before I got married? No. The Church recommends once a month for lay people. Canon Law recommends that all religious-- priests, sisters, religious brothers go once a week. I go once a week. Why? Because we are under more attack than you. Satan hates us even more. Why does Satan hate the priests so much?--Because the priest does two very powerful things. He makes Jesus present and all of His mercy present in the world through the Holy Mass, and he forgives sins, especially mortal sins in confession and, therefore, breaks the chain that Satan has on that soul dragging that soul to hell. So he hates us and wants to destroy us. That is the reason why there are problems with priests throughout the country and throughout the world. Satan gets in, attacks and destroys. By striking the shepherd, his flock -- the people will scatter. That is what happens. Satan hates any faithful lay people, too. He hates the fact that you are here at this conference this weekend. He hates that you worship God and praise Him and that you have devotion to His Divine Mercy. Satan hates all of that so he is going to try to attack you as well. Satan is going to try to break up your marriages, try to break up your friendships. I dare say, as I do not know about groups in other parishes, but he will

try to instigate conflicts within the groups, groups that come together, good groups; the Divine Mercy group, the Legion of Mary group, the charismatic group, and start in-fighting within the group. He might start the fighting within your family -- anger and resentments. When it begins to grow like a cancer turns into hatred then Satan wins.

That is why coming to Holy Mass, receiving His Body worthily, His Blood worthily, and going to Confession frequently is important. Confession is the most powerful form of exorcism. It drives Satan out. Demon possession is when Satan gets hold of the body, but what does Satan really want? The soul. How does he entrap that soul? Through mortal sin. So, in the Holy Eucharist, we are cleansed of our venial sins and strengthened spiritually. We must never receive the Holy Eucharist in mortal sin. If the Holy Eucharist is the food that keeps us strong, Confession is the gym. It is like a workout for the soul against the attacks of Satan. This is Jesus' way of giving us His Divine Mercy in these two particular sacraments because these are the ones we can receive over and over again – Holy Mass and Confession.

Let's talk a little more about this great devotion that Our Lord gave to St. Faustina, the devotion of Divine Mercy.

The last century was perhaps one of the most merciless centuries known to man. Several holocausts, beginning with the Armenian holocaust, the German holocaust, the Nazi holocaust, the Russian holocaust, the Cambodian holocaust, the Serbian holocaust and many more took place. The most egregious of all holocausts is taking place now in the womb of the mother. In this country alone, since 1973, *Roe v. Wade* it is speculated that roughly fifty million surgical abortions have been performed since 1973. Around the same time, the communistic regime instituted the one child policy in that country. Mothers having more than one child were being penalized and forced to have abortions. A gentleman named Mr. Mosher from the Population Institute estimates that at about the same time, 1972, there were 400 million surgical abortions in China alone.

Russia is another example where abortion is used as contraception. Many women will have six, seven, eight abortions in their lifetime. That is six, seven, eight children that they have killed, martyrs in their own blood. Now these children are happy with God, but those women are terribly wounded. Their husbands or boyfriends are wounded as well,

spiritually. In this country as well, many wounded people are walking around. There's a bumper sticker that reads "One dead. One wounded." That's a very true statement.

All of these holocausts took place in the last century, and continue to take place in this century. Blessed John Paul II called the new century, "the century of the new springtime," and maybe we'll see an end to all of this insanity in the future. The toll that is being taken on human life alone, not to mention other problems in the world, the immorality taking place in the western world and other parts of the world, and the terrible offenses against life that are going on in China, Africa, Asia, South America, and everywhere --all of these are offenses against God's mercy.

In the 30s, God came to this earth to a little humble nun, Faustina, in Poland and revealed to the world the ocean of His mercy. He invites us to come to His mercy. He almost is begging us to come. He says the greater the sinner, the more he has a right to His mercy. He did not say judgment. He said the more that sinner has a right to His mercy. He also said something to her that gives me great confidence and hope for my own life. He says think of the greatest sin a man could commit. I think of someone like Stalin who was responsible for the deaths of maybe sixty to seventy-five million people. That's a pretty big sin. It makes Hitler who was responsible for taking the lives of eight or nine million people look like a choir boy. Jesus says think of the greatest sin that a man could commit and that is but a drop of water in the ocean of His mercy.

Now we think we are burdened with sins. We think we have committed great sins. We are not even close to being responsible for those seventy-five million deaths and Jesus says that is but a drop of water in His ocean of mercy. That is imperceivable in the ocean. That is what He wants us to come to and that is what He's teaching the world about through the writings of St. Faustina and through the devotion to His Divine Mercy. Now is the time for mercy. Once our soul leaves our body, that is the time for judgment. Now is the time to take advantage of His mercy and we do that through the Sacrament of Confession, reconciling our soul with God. We must not be afraid to confess anything. We must not hide anything.

In Confession, it is not the priest you are talking to. It is Jesus Christ you are speaking to and I have experienced this myself. A woman came

in whom I could not see behind the dark screen. I couldn't see the person, I could only hear that it was a woman. She confessed her sins and they were what I would call popcorn sins. I said, "Is that all?" She said, "Yes, that is all." "Are you sure that is all?" She said, "Yes, that is it." And I said, "What about the abortion?" After I said it, I wanted to take those words back, and I couldn't believe I said that. I just blurted it out. I had no intention of blurted it out, but I blurted it out. There was silence on the other side of the grill and I thought, "Oh, my gosh, I am going to be kicked out of the priesthood. I mean, this is unbelievable." On the other side of the screen, I heard very faint weeping. "Father, how did you know about that? That happened when I was seventeen years old. I've never told a living soul about that. I did not even tell my parents. I went by myself and had an abortion and I have never told a living soul about it. How did you know?" I said to her I did not know, but Jesus knows and He wants to forgive you in His mercy so confess it so that He can. She confessed it. I never saw her again, never heard from her again, but that soul went away rejoicing in His Divine Mercy.

Now that is an absolute example of Jesus in the confessional making sure that souls are taken care of. Now you might have a bad confession with someone. Some priests may yell at you or chew you out or something. Get over it as far as I'm concerned. If you have a bad meal, you do not stop eating, do you? You go somewhere else. If you have a bad confession with one priest, do not go back to that priest. Go to someone else and yes, pray for him. You know, priests are human. Sometimes we are having a bad day, sometimes we do not feel well. Sometimes the person who comes into the confessional happens to be the 120th person that we have heard and we are tired and we are short, maybe harsh, you know? It does not matter. Who's forgiving your sins? Jesus, and He uses earthly vestments like us priests to forgive those sins. You always are forgiven when you hear those words. "I absolve you of your sins in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen."



Mercy in Deeds

Putting mercy into action is not an option of the Divine Mercy Devotion – it is a requirement! Devotion to the Divine Mercy involves a total commitment to God’s Mercy. It is a decision to trust completely in Him, to accept His mercy with thanksgiving, and to be merciful as He is merciful. The devotional practices proposed in the Diary of Saint Faustina are completely in accordance with the teachings of the Church and are firmly rooted in the Gospel message of our Merciful Savior. Properly understood and implemented, they will help us grow as genuine followers of Christ.

The devotional practices revealed through Saint Faustina were given to us as “vessels of mercy” through which God’s love can be poured out upon the world, but they are not sufficient unto themselves.

It’s not enough for us to hang The Divine Mercy Image in our homes, pray the Chaplet every day at three o’clock, and receive Holy Communion on the first Sunday after Easter. We also have to show mercy to our neighbors. Putting mercy into action is not an option of the Divine Mercy Devotion; it is a requirement!

The gospel command, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,” this demands that we show mercy to our neighbors “always and everywhere” seems impossible to fulfill. But the Lord assures us that it is possible. “When a soul approaches Me with trust,” He explains, “I fill it with such an abundance of graces that it cannot contain them within itself, but radiates them to other souls” (Diary, 1074).

What joy to think that Our Lord is just, that is to say, that He takes our weakness into account, that He knows perfectly the frailty of our nature! Of what, then, need to be afraid? Will not the God of Infinite Justice, Who deigns so lovingly to pardon the sins of the Prodigal Son, be also just to us? He has given His Infinite Mercy, so that we can contemplate on it and live with it.

How do we “radiate” God’s mercy to others? By our actions, our words, our deeds and our prayers. “In these three degrees,” he tells Saint Faustina, “is contained the fullness of mercy” (Diary 742). We have all been called to this threefold practice of mercy, but we are not all called in the same way. We need to ask the Lord, who understands our individual personalities and situations, to help us recognize the various ways in which we can see His mercy in our daily lives.

Asking for the Lord’s mercy, trusting in His mercy, faithfully and sincerely trying to live His mercy in our lives, we can be assured that we will never hear Him saying to us, “Their hearts are far from Me,” but rather that wonderful promise, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” This reminds us, as a Church, that it is called to direct this gaze of love and mercy towards every human being, together with Jesus. We are convinced that, God’s merciful love, has been given to our time, and has to lead us to the authentic life of every Christian.

Our Lord speaks strongly about this to Saint Faustina: “I demand from you deeds of mercy which are to arise out of love for me. You are to show mercy to your neighbors always and everywhere. You must not shrink from this or try to excuse yourself from it. It is to be a reminder of the demands of My mercy, because even the strongest faith is of no avail without works”. (Diary, 742).

I hope that the Southern California Divine Mercy Congresses, as the answer to Our Lord’s desire to spread the Divine Mercy Devotion to the world, will be recognized by the world as one of the good deeds of Mercy.

Fr. George J. Bobowski

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