

Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2020

Divine Mercy

Today is the Second Sunday of Easter and the last day in the Octave of Easter. “Octave” comes from the Latin “*octavus*” meaning eighth. It reminds us that the Church looks at these last eight days – from Easter Sunday until today – as if they were one single day. For it is a prolonged reflection on a single event: the resurrection of our Lord.

Christmas too has its octave days. Long ago the Church realized that we need more than just a single day to contemplate these sublime mysteries and to celebrated these chief feasts of our faith.

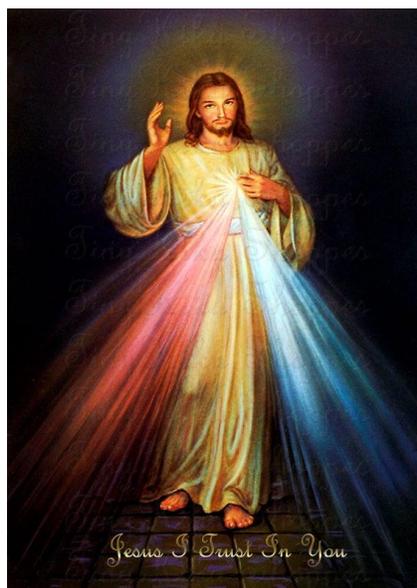
Maybe the idea of an extended celebration comes from Old Testament practice? In Leviticus we find that the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths/Sukkot) lasted seven days but was followed by a solemn celebration on the eighth day (23:36). Covenantal circumcision was performed on the eighth day after a son’s birth (Lev 12:3), and certain sacrifices were also prescribed for the eighth day (Lv 14:10,23; 15:14,29; Nm 6:10).

The feast of the dedication of the First Temple under King Solomon (2 Chr 7:8-9) as well as its purification under Hezekiah (2 Chr 29:17) both lasted eight days. The re-dedication and purification of the Second Temple under Judas Maccabeus (1 Mac 4:56) also lasted eight days; from which comes the feast of Hanukkah.

And the Jewish Passover itself – during which our Lord died and rose from the dead – was celebrated for seven days (Ex 12:15), but for Diaspora Jews (those living outside Israel) it has long included an eighth day.

And it was “on the eighth day [that] Jesus came once again into the Upper Room and showed His wounds to Thomas, so that he could touch them as he had wished to, in order to believe and thus become himself a witness to the Resurrection” (Pope Francis, Divine Mercy Sunday, 2015)

But for the last 20 years this Sunday has also had another designation. It has been called “Divine Mercy Sunday.” That is the title Pope St John Paul II gave it in the year 2000 when, on this day, he canonized a Polish religious and mystic named Sister Faustina Kowalska, who had died in 1938 at the age of 33. St. Faustina had kept a diary in which she recorded visions and dialogues she claimed to have had with Jesus. This painting and the words under it, “Jesus, I trust in You,” are based on one of those visions.



(“This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood” – 1 Jn 5:6).

St. Faustina wanted to highlight the truth of our faith about the mercy of God, entreat God’s mercy for the whole world and particularly for sinners, and initiate a movement promoting devotion to the Divine Mercy.

St. John Paul II died on the vigil of (i.e. the evening before) this great feast in 2005. His final message was read out the following day, Divine Mercy Sunday:

“As a gift to humanity, which sometimes seems bewildered and overwhelmed by the power of evil, selfishness and fear, the Risen Lord offers His love that pardons, reconciles and reopens hearts to love. It is a love that converts hearts and gives peace. How much the world needs to understand and accept Divine Mercy!”

“Mercy”: *Misericordia*. The Latin is composed of two words. “*Cordia*,” from which we get words like “cardiologist” and “cardiac.” It means heart. The first part, “*miseri*” means to pity or show compassion.

Mercy comes as a *gift* (it is not owed) from a compassionate heart. For sinners it offers forgiveness to those who are truly, sorrowfully repentant. Mercy does not negate justice but it tempers it.

We have all sinned against God. He would be justified in excluding us eternally from His presence. But He does not. Divine Mercy emphasizes that out of compassion God refrains from punishing us to the full extent that we deserve. Instead He suffered for us in Jesus Christ.

The first gift that the Risen Lord bestowed was His mercy. When Christ appeared to the apostles, He first forgave them – *“Peace be with you”* – and then He empowered them: *“As the Father sent has sent Me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”* (Jn 20:21-23). They became agents – ambassadors – of His mercy.

The Gospel tells us that the apostles *“rejoiced when they saw the Lord”* (Jn 20:20). But notice how Christ revealed Himself to them. *“He showed them His hands and His side”* (v. 20). The disciples recognized Christ through His wounds! And the same thing happened with Thomas. He too wanted to see and touch the marks in Christ’s hands and side. And after seeing, he believed.

What is it about the wounds? Yes, they are evidence that the Risen Lord is truly the crucified One. But they are also something else. They are signs of the redemptive power of His sacrifice. Even in His resurrected body He still bears the scars of sacrifice. Now in glory in Heaven He still bears the scars.

As He once presented the wounds to His disciples, He now presents the wounds to His Father, in supplicating on our behalf. The High Priest

who “*by virtue of His own Blood* [His own wounds]” has obtained for us eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12). Looking upon those wounds, the disciples were gazing into the very depths of Divine love.

To enter into our Lord’s wounds is to contemplate the boundless love flowing from His heart. It is to realize that His heart was pierced for you and me. That His heart beats for you and me.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, in a commentary on the Song of Songs, says that “through these sacred wounds we can see the secret of [Christ's] heart, the great mystery of love, the sincerity of His mercy with which He visited us from on high”.

Gaze into the wounds of Christ, contemplate their mystery, and know something of the depths of Divine love, of “the God of unfathomable mercy” (*Diary of St. Faustina*, 1183).

Let us pray with St Faustina: “O Blood and Water, which gushed forth from the Heart of Jesus as a fount of mercy for us, I trust in You” (*Diary*, 84).

Amen.