

“Whose Sins You Forgive Are Forgiven Them”

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April 8, 2018 – Second Sunday of Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday

Readings: Acts 4.32-35; 1 John 5.1-6; John 20.19-31

A Challenge for Us

Today’s passage from Acts is likely somewhat challenging for most North American Catholics. Everything was held in common? No private property? All the more troubling is the fate of Ananias and Sapphira in the passage just after this one. It seems clear that they die (are struck dead?) because they claimed that they were giving everything to Peter but were actually holding back a portion for themselves.

Catholics in North America are quite well off, with food in abundance and personal comfort beyond what most people on earth ever hope to have. Have we earned these great benefits? Are they “ours,” really?

No one should deny that when it comes to charity, the generosity of Americans is quite impressive. Yet it may be fair to say that most who give are giving from their surplus. We are pressed to understand that the abundance we have, and even our very selves, is given for the sake of the whole community and for the sake of each person in the community. About this passage from Acts, Saint John Chrysostom wrote: “For they did not give in part and in part reserve: nor yet in giving all, give it as their own.” And Saint Basil the Great urges prudence; don’t “give to every vagabond,” but give we must.

This reading also challenges a common understanding of free enterprise and private property, and it may appear to argue for some type of socialism. We should be careful not to misinterpret the passage, however. For example, it does not say that we should give everything to our political leaders to use according *their* priorities and interests. In other words, we should be attentive to the tension between the scriptural understanding (“we are united in faith and share everything”) and some secular views that may sound like what this reading is asking of us but are in fact hostile to our Catholic faith.

Many Catholics are quite generous in giving to the Church in order to support good works that individuals cannot accomplish on their own. Their trust that the Church will use their financial resources well can be quite humbling. Yet even more is being asked of us: We should try to see, as the Good Samaritan does, that “giving of self” means going beyond usual expectations and giving ourselves completely, in prayer and in action.

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI writes:

And now the Samaritan enters the stage. What will he do? [Unlike the expert in the Law who had just been questioning Jesus] he does not ask how far his obligations of solidarity extend. Nor does he ask about the merits required for eternal life. Something else happens: His heart is wrenched open. . . . Seeing this man in such a state is a blow that strikes him “viscerally,” touching his soul. . . . Struck in his soul by the lightning flash of mercy, he himself now becomes a neighbor, heedless of any question or danger. The burden of the question thus shifts here. The issue is no longer which other person is a neighbor to me or not. The question is about me. I have to become the neighbor, and when I do, the other person counts for me “as myself.”

We should note well: The Samaritan does not ask, "What are the rules? Am I obligated? How much do I need to do to get into heaven?"

Conquering the World

In today's second reading we are reminded that the commandments of God "are not burdensome, for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world." The commandments do *feel* burdensome to those whose appetites are disordered, in the way that we can find ourselves loving the taste of foods that are unhealthy for us. So we must explore what changes we can make to lessen the feeling of "burden." Fasting more often? Less internet or television? More time with virtuous friends?

We should also recall that "conquering the world" involves more than simply following the commandments: We must also love God. Fr. Walter Ciszek was an American Jesuit who was imprisoned for many years in the former Soviet Union, under the harshest of conditions at times. In his writings, he described being completely broken, to the point where he signed a document "admitting" that he had been spying for the Vatican. He felt great shame and guilt for having failed to be the man he thought he was.

I had asked for God's help but had really believed in my ability to avoid evil and to meet every challenge. . . . I had been thanking God all the while that I was not like the rest of men. . . . I had relied almost completely on myself in this most critical test – and I had failed.

In despair and stripped of his own sense of worth, Fr. Ciszek pleaded with God. In a blessed moment, he saw "the grace God had been offering me all my life."

I knew that I must abandon myself completely to the will of the Father and live from now on in this spirit of self-abandonment to God. And I did it. I can only describe the experience as a sense of "letting go," giving over totally my last effort or even any will to guide the reins of my own life. It is all too simply said, yet that one decision has affected every subsequent moment of my life. I have to call it a conversion. . . . It was at once a death and a resurrection.

At no point does Fr. Ciszek suggest that he had not been living the ten commandments. Rather, more was needed. "This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood."

God allows each of us to be where we are at this time, each with his or her particular history. How will I use my freedom in relation to those who are now before me? My children, my parents, my students, the elderly, the people at the coffee shop, etc. How will I receive and offer Christ's mercy, through my thoughts, prayers, and actions? Mother Marija, who may have been the last person to talk with Fr. Ciszek, recounts his message for her Carmelite novices: "If they want to have peace at the end of their lives, tell them to do God's will every day. Tell them to give God's will their lousy best."

Forgiving Sins

Only God can forgive sins. Yes, and those to whom he gives this power. What happens in the confessional is a profound gift, as many who have committed great sins are now filled with peace and hope. "I had no reason to expect and I did not deserve this, but God has made me whole again!"

Ironically, doubt about true forgiveness may be one of the reasons why there is such hatred for the Church. Sinners who have not repented, and who do not believe it is possible to be forgiven, may hate the Church for telling them that what they did was evil. Perhaps this happens because they are aware only of God's commandments and not of his mercy. If I don't believe in real mercy, then I may resent or reject the reminder that I have done wrong.

Christ died for our sins, however, to do what we are unable to do by ourselves. Justice is done, but not by us. Pope John Paul II's 2001 homily on today's gospel includes this passage:

Our attention focuses on the gesture of the Master, who transmits to the fearful, astounded disciples the mission of being ministers of divine Mercy. He shows them His hands and His side, which bear the marks of the Passion, and tells them: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20: 21). Immediately afterwards "he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20: 22-23). Jesus entrusted to them the gift of 'forgiving sins,' a gift that flows from the wounds in His hands, His feet, and especially from His pierced side. From there a wave of mercy is poured out over all humanity. . . . A simple act of abandonment is enough to overcome the barriers of darkness and sorrow, of

doubt and desperation. The rays of Your divine mercy restore hope, in a special way, to those who feel overwhelmed by the burden of sin.

“Peace be with you.” Christ comforts his disciples and entrusts them to proclaim his merciful love to all the world. We are to do the same in his name.

Divine Mercy Sunday

On April 30, 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska and officially designated the second Sunday of Easter “Divine Mercy Sunday.” Saint Faustina (1905–38) was a Polish nun and mystic. The intensity of the current Catholic devotion to Divine Mercy can be traced in large measure to her apparitions of Jesus.

Pope Benedict XVI has said that the mystery of the merciful love of God was at the center of the pontificate of John Paul II, noting that devotion to Divine Mercy “is not a secondary devotion, but an integral dimension of a Christian’s faith and prayer.” John Paul II died on the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday in 2005. He was beatified and then canonized on this feast in 2011 and 2014, respectively.

God is always ready to forgive. A sin is unforgivable only for those who refuse to seek forgiveness. This is why the “hard sayings of Christ” should be put forward clearly and firmly, but in the context of true hope for forgiveness. Humans have the capacity knowingly to do great evil. Sin involves an injustice. But Christianity is profoundly radical: Christ’s sacrifice “pays for” this injustice. Importantly, his forgiveness, his mercy, does not deny his justice. Far from an escape, our faith allows us to make sense of reality and to have hope that we can be made whole through God’s mercy.

It does not help the sinner to tell him that his sin is “no big deal.” Divine Mercy is needed precisely because sin is a “big deal.” Recall: “If we say, ‘we are without sin,’ we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing” (1 Jn 1.8-9).

There is a widespread temptation, perhaps heightened in our time, to be unclear about what is morally permissible. To proclaim God’s Divine Mercy can be misunderstood as suggesting that “all sins are unconditionally forgiven, period,” or that what we call sin is not really all that bad. This is a serious error. To deny the evil of sin is to fail to repent, and hence to fail to receive God’s mercy and forgiveness. To be “made whole” begins in my acceptance of the evil I have done, repenting, and being merciful to others. To suggest that clear teachings are somehow ambiguous is to nullify God’s law. Those who offer mercy under this guise do great harm and leave sinners in their sins, away from God.

We may pray as Saint John Paul II did at the conclusion of his homily on the first celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday in 2001:

Mary, Mother of Mercy, help us always to have this trust in your Son, our Redeemer. Help us too, Saint Faustina, whom we remember today with special affection. Fixing our weak gaze on the divine Savior’s face, we would like to repeat with you: “Jesus, I trust in you.” Now and forever. Amen.

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For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##1422-1439](#)

Walter Ciszek, S.J., [With God in Russia](#) and [He Leadeth Me](#)

St. John Paul II, [Dives et Misericordia](#)

St. John Paul II, [Homily at the Canonization of Saint Faustina](#)

["What Is Divine Mercy?"](#)

In Short . . .

- ***The abundance we have, and even our very selves, is given for the sake of the whole community and for the sake of each person in the community.***
- ***"Conquering the world" involves more than simply following the commandments; we must take notice of the condition of our neighbor and be prepared to offer him mercy.***
- ***Sin involves an injustice, but Christianity is profoundly radical: Christ's sacrifice "pays for" this injustice.***
- ***It does not help the sinner to tell him that his sin is "no big deal." Divine Mercy is needed precisely because sin is a "big deal."***
- ***To be "made whole" begins in my acceptance of the evil I have done, repenting, and being merciful to others.***