

HOMILY HELPS

These homily notes are provided to help priests and deacons bring the message of God's infinite mercy to their parishioners. Although heavily drawing from the readings of the Sunday of Divine Mercy on April 19, 2020, these notes can be used at any time—for example, during a *Prayer Service for Forgiveness and Healing*.

A passing reference to abortion allows those in the pews who suffer from their participation in abortion to know God's mercy is available to them. By the age of 45, as many as 1 in 3 women have had an abortion, and a similar number of men and family members have been involved. Many of those present in our parishes inaccurately believe that abortion is "the unforgivable sin." They need to hear that God desires to forgive every sin, including the sin of abortion.

Additionally, "*Homily Considerations Regarding Healing after Abortion*" can be found in Appendix B or online at respectlifeprogram.org/april.

Other ministry leaders can also use these reflections to help spread Christ's message of Divine Mercy, such as in a Bible study on the weekly Sunday readings, in a small group or a faith formation setting, or as part of any other appropriate ministry gathering.

Sunday of Divine Mercy | April 19, 2020

First Reading: Acts 2:42-47

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24

Second Reading: 1 Peter 1:3-9

Gospel Acclamation: John 20:29

Gospel: John 20:19-31

Each year, on the Second Sunday of Easter—the last day of the Easter Octave—the Church celebrates the Sunday of Divine Mercy. On this day, we contemplate the fullness of the Paschal Mystery—Christ's Passion, death, and Resurrection. The basis of the whole Easter Mystery is the merciful love of God. From the beginning of creation, throughout Scripture, and most perfectly in the life, Passion, death and Resurrection of his Son, Jesus, God has been revealed as love itself. In His infinite love for us, God desires nothing more than to forgive our sins and offer us His mercy.

Our world's need for the message of Divine Mercy took on new urgency in the 20th century. It was during this time that the world witnessed the rise of Nazism and communism and experienced the horrors of the world at war. Civilization was losing the understanding of the sanctity and inherent dignity of every human life.

As these evil ideologies were taking shape, Jesus appeared to a humble Polish nun, whom we know as St.

Maria Faustina Kowalska. As Jesus continued to appear to St. Faustina, she recorded His messages to her in her *Diary*. On one such occasion, Jesus said to St. Faustina:

My daughter, tell the whole world about My inconceivable mercy. I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners. On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the Fount of My Mercy (Diary 699).

Jesus appeared to the humble Faustina and asked that we celebrate the gift of His mercy today. Our celebration of this Easter Octave is a celebration of the mercy and forgiveness that are now available to all of us, by virtue of Christ's Resurrection. We must only run toward the outstretched arms of Christ.

In the First Reading, we are told that the early Church "*devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers*" (Acts 2:42). Already in these early days of the Church we see that the followers of Christ committed themselves to prayer and participation in the Sacraments. The way they lived out their relationships with Christ helped others to also encounter Him and receive salvation: "*And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved*" (First Reading, Acts 2:47).



In order to be saved, we must first admit that we are in need of saving. While God wants nothing more than to give us His mercy, in order to receive it, we have to admit that we are sinners in need of God's forgiveness. We must be willing to look at the ways we have failed to love God and our neighbor, so that God can raise us to the heights of His love through His great mercy.

For, as the psalmist writes, *"His mercy endures forever"* (Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 118:2). We may often feel that we are unworthy of God's love and mercy. We can fool ourselves into believing that God's mercy is for everyone else. We might believe the lies of the Evil One as he tries to convince us that our sins are too great, that our sins are unforgiveable. But God desires to take the greatest of sinners and transform them into the greatest saints. No sin is beyond His mercy. He makes *"all things new"* (Revelation 21:5).

Let us recall the words from the Second Reading that tell us God, *"in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you"* (1 Peter 1:3-4).

No matter how we have failed, the Resurrection of Christ is an assurance of *hope*. Christ's mercy is constantly available to us, if only we reach out in faith and confidence.

In the Gospel, we hear the story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples after His death. Jesus comes to them and exposes the wounds of His hands and His side—the wounds He endured for our salvation. And as the Resurrected Lord stood in their midst, the first words He spoke to them were, *"Peace be with you"* (John 20:19).

Many of these disciples had abandoned Jesus during His Passion. During Christ's moment of greatest need, they scattered, leaving Jesus alone in His sacrifice. Many might think what the disciples had done was unforgiveable. Yet Jesus appears to them and offers them His *peace*. And then He breathed on them and gave them the power to forgive sin, to extend His own mercy.

Now, Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared, and he refused to believe the disciples when they told him the Lord had appeared to them. Thomas needed to *see* to believe, and so Jesus returned and revealed himself eight days later, on the Octave of Easter. Jesus showed Thomas His hands and His side, saying, *"do not be unbelieving, but believe"* (Gospel, John 20:27).

How often have we doubted the Lord like Thomas? How often have we hidden in fear, unable to bear the shame of our mistakes and failures? What sins have we painfully buried in our hearts rather than exposing them to the healing light of God's mercy? Have we failed to confess and seek reconciliation for sins of adultery, violence, hatred, or participation in an abortion? Have we rejected the Church's teachings on contraception, sexuality, or marriage? Have we hardened our hearts, giving ourselves over to envy, greed, or dishonesty?

No sin is unforgiveable, and no sinner is beyond redemption. We have all failed and are in need of God's mercy. It is for this very reason that Christ suffered, died, and rose again. Christ came to offer us His infinite love and mercy, and we can receive it in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

When we enter the confessional and seek God's forgiveness, in a way, Christ breathes on us as He did the disciples, wiping away our sins and offering us His peace. We don't need to hide in fear or shame. Christ's mercy is freely given to a repentant heart. He will reveal to us the saving wounds of His hands and feet. He will take away our pain and replace it with His peace. And as we receive the gift of His Divine Mercy, may our hearts cry out with the joyful words of Thomas, *"My Lord and my God!"* (Gospel, John 20:28). May we *"not be unbelieving, but believe"* (Gospel, John 20:27).

St. John Paul II, who canonized St. Faustina, said in his 2001 homily for the Sunday of Divine Mercy, *"Divine Mercy! This is the Easter gift that the Church receives from the risen Christ and offers to humanity."* Today we celebrate that Easter gift of God's unending, merciful love for all his children. This is at the heart of the Gospel. Let us never fail to seek the mercy that God desires to freely give us. *Jesus, we trust in you.*

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