

THE SACRED LITURGY SINGS THE DIVINE MERCY

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The consoling and deep mystery of God's mercy permeates the public worship of the Church. The sacred liturgy sings on page after page the wonders of the divine love which shows itself especially as mercy. We can ever say that the history of salvation is the history of the manifestation of God's loving mercy. I, therefore, welcome the invitation of the organizers of this Congress to propose to you some reflections on the Divine Mercy in the Sacred Liturgy.

Divine mercy reaches us especially through the celebration of the sacred liturgy. The paschal mystery, which is at the centre of the celebration of Holy Week, is the apex, the highest point. The Cross occupies a key place. The Sacraments are the major liturgical celebrations through which God's mercy reaches us. It will be proper that we highlight the liturgical texts of Mercy Sunday. The Votive Mass of God's Mercy is not yet widely known and needs to be reflected upon. A consideration on how divine mercy runs through the Liturgy of the Hours will help us to see further how the sacred liturgy sings God's mercy.

1. HISTORY OF SALVATION, HISTORY OF GOD'S LOVING MERCY

The whole of the history of salvation is full of manifestations of God's mercy and love. After original sin when man disobeyed God and lost his friendship, God did not abandon man to the power of death. He continuously helped all men to seek and find him. Again and again he offered a covenant to man, and through the prophets taught him to hope for salvation (cfr *Roman Missal*: Euch. Prayer IV).

God, for example, called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and through the desert. God heard Moses' prayer of intercession and agreed to walk in the midst of an unfaithful people. The Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:5-6).

God loved the world so much, that in the fullness of time "he gave his only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). "God who is rich in mercy", St Paul tells the Ephesians, "out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph 2:4-5).

Jesus made mercy one of the principal themes of his preaching, especially as manifested in the parables of the Prodigal Son, of the Good Samaritan, of the Lost Sheep, of the Lost Coin and even of the Merciless Servant (cf Lk 15:11-32, 10:30-37; Mt 18:12-14; Lk 15:3-10; Mt 18:23-35; cf also *Dives in Misericordia*, 3).

The Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, was a great apostle of the divine mercy. Early in his pontificate, he gave the Church and the world the encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, in 1980. He beatified and canonized St Faustina Kowalska, Christ's chosen soul to propagate devotion to this great

mystery. In the Great Jubilee Year 2000 Pope John Paul set up a new parish in Rome with the suggestive title of God the Merciful Father, to condense in a few words the significance of that extraordinary spiritual event. Referring to Pope John Paul II on Mercy Sunday, 15 April 2007, Pope Benedict XVI put it beautifully: “In the word ‘mercy’ he found summarized and again interpreted for our time the entire mystery of the Redemption” (Homily on 15/4/2007, in *L’Osserv. Rom.*, 17-18 April 2007, p. 10).

In the same homily Pope Benedict says that it is mercy that puts a limit to evil. In mercy the nature so special to God is expressed – his holiness, the power of truth and of love.

This is the divine mercy which we have now the grace and the joy to admire and adore, as it is sung and proclaimed in the sacred liturgy.

2. DIVINE MERCY REACHES US THROUGH THE LITURGY

It is especially through the sacred liturgy that we come into contact with divine mercy. Jesus Christ, the manifestation of God’s saving and merciful love for all humanity, the one and only mediator between God and man (cf I Tim 2:5), did the work of our redemption. He gave perfect glory to God. He instituted his Church and entrusted to her the preaching of his Gospel and the celebration of his saving mysteries. Jesus thus sent his Church to exercise the work of salvation by means of sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves (cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 6).

Jesus is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the praying liturgical assembly. He is present in the word of God proclaimed in the liturgy. He is present in the Sacraments by his power. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass not only in the person of the celebrating priest but especially under the Eucharistic species. In the sacred liturgy, therefore, full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Christ, that is, by the Head and his members (cf SC, 7).

The liturgy is the chief channel through which we receive God’s mercy and grace. “From the liturgy, therefore, grace is channelled into us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their goal, are most powerfully achieved” (SC, 10). It is in the liturgy that God feeds us with his word, his forgiveness, his mercy and his life. This will become clearer as we consider each of the Sacraments later.

Pope John Paul II in 1980 drew attention to the vocation of the Church to proclaim God’s mercy especially through the liturgy: “The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy – the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer – and when she brings people close to the sources of the Saviour’s mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser. Of great significance in this area is constant meditation on the word of God, and above all conscious and mature participation in the

Eucharist and in the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation ... Therefore the Church professes and proclaims conversion. Conversion to God always consists in discovering his mercy, that is, in discovering that love which is patient and kind" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 13).

3. PASCHAL MYSTERY, THE CROSS AND DIVINE MERCY

In the sacred liturgy, all time is sacred. All time belongs to God. But the week in which the Church celebrates the central event of our redemption is particularly sacred. We call it Holy Week. It is the week in which the Church celebrates the paschal mystery of the blessed passion of Christ, his death, his resurrection from the dead and his glorious ascension, whereby "dying, he destroyed our death and, rising, he restored our life" (*Roman Missal Paschal Preface I*).

This is the high point of the manifestation of God's love and mercy. "From the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross came forth the wondrous sacrament which is the whole Church" (SC, 5). The New Covenant is sealed in the Blood of Christ.

In Baptism we are inserted into this mystery of God's mercy. We celebrate it in the Sacraments, especially in the Holy Eucharist. We sing and praise God's loving mercy in the Liturgy of the Hours, or the prayers of the Church for the various hours of the day.

This explains why the crucifix occupies a central place in our churches, on our altars, and at other gatherings for the public worship of the Church. From the Cross of the Lord, the Sacraments of the paschal mystery flow (cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1182). Jesus suffering and dying on the Cross is a visible and powerful manifestation of God's loving mercy for all humanity. God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Rm 8:32).

Pope John Paul II extols the Cross and God's mercy: "Believing in the crucified Son means 'seeing the Father' (cf Jn 14:9), means believing that love is present in the world and that this love is more powerful than any kind of evil in which individuals, humanity or the world are involved. Believing in this love means believing in mercy. For mercy is an indispensable dimension of love" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 7).

Pope Benedict XVI tells us in his first Encyclical Letter how deep and how far the love and mercy of God have gone: "In Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the 'stray sheep' ... His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 12).

It is very significant that the *allocutio* which Pope John Paul II prepared to deliver to the faithful on April 3, 2005, Divine Mercy Sunday, comes back to

this mystery of God's love that forgives, reconciles and offers hope. Divine Providence called the Pope to himself the night before. The *allocutio*, a type of testament, was published in the *Osservatore Romano* of April 4 2005. Pope Benedict XVI extolled it during his pastoral visit to the Parish of God the Merciful Father on 26 March, 2006. Here are the memorable words: "To humanity, that sometimes seems lost and dominated by the power of evil, of egoism and of fear, the risen Lord offers as gift his love that pardons, reconciles and opens the mind to hope. It is love that converts hearts and gives peace. How much need the world has to understand and welcome Divine Mercy".

This is the divine mercy which the sacred liturgy celebrates. And the summit of these celebrations is Holy Week when the paschal mystery of the suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ is at the centre.

4. DIVINE MERCY AND THE SACRAMENTS

Although in these reflections there has been mention of the Sacraments as gifts of God's mercy, it is now necessary to focus on each of the seven. They are Sacraments of redemption (cf *Roman Missal: Votive Mass of Divine Mercy, Prayer over the Offerings*). They are the major streams through which the graces won for us by our Redeemer reach us. And they are Sacraments of faith because they not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen and express faith (cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59; CCC, 1123).

Baptism plunges people into the paschal mystery of Christ: they die with Christ, are buried with him, and rise with him. They receive the spirit of adoption as God's children by which they cry Abba, Father. They are also incorporated into the Church as members and receive the capacity to take part in Christian worship. St Peter tells them of their dignity and of the mercy that God has shown them: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Pet 2:9).

In Confirmation, Christians receive the Holy Spirit as the fullness of Baptism and in completion of their baptismal grace. They become more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched by a special strength of the Holy Spirit. As true witnesses of Christ, they are more strictly bound to spread and defend the faith by word and deed (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 11; CCC, 1285).

The Eucharistic Sacrifice, fount and apex of the whole Christian life, is the offering of Christ, Body and Soul, to God the Father in adoration, thanksgiving, propitiation and supplication for mercy and grace. "This is my blood of the covenant", Jesus tells us, "which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). That Jesus feeds us with his Body and Blood and remains with us in the tabernacle – These are wonderful manifestations of his love and mercy.

The Sacrament of Penance brings us the pardon and mercy of God for offences committed against him. Sinners are at the same time reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins, and which by charity, example and prayer seeks their conversion (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 11). Jesus already declared: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2:17; cf I Tim 1:15). "Joy in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Lk 15:7; cf 7:11-32), is his spirit. Jesus shocked the religious authorities of Israel by identifying his merciful conduct towards sinners with God's own attitude towards them (cf CCC, 589). The parable of the Prodigal Son, which can better be called that of the Merciful Father, shows the process of conversion and repentance and the depth of God's mercy and love (cf CCC, 1439). St Augustine holds "that the justification of sinners surpasses the creation of the angels in justice, in that it bears witness to a greater mercy (cf St. Aug. *In Jo. Ev.* 72,3: PL 35, 1823; CCC, 1994). Of course, the Sacrament of Penance demands conversion and repentance, as a condition for God's mercy: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I Jn 1:8-9).

In the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick the Church commends the sick to the suffering and glorified Lord Jesus and exhorts them to be associated with the passion and death of Christ.

Those of the faithful who are consecrated by the Sacrament of Holy Orders are appointed to minister God's love and mercy to the people of God by word and sacrament.

Christian spouses, by the Sacrament of Matrimony, receive grace to help each other attain to holiness and to educate their children in the fear of God.

Thus each of the seven Sacraments is, in its own way, a powerful means of sharing in the work of salvation, in God's love and mercy, and in the call to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect (cf Mt 5:48).

5. THE LITURGY OF DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY

It is now necessary for us to focus our reflection on the liturgical texts of the Second Sunday of Easter or Divine Mercy Sunday. It was at the ceremony of the Canonization of St Faustina Kowalska on 30 April 2000 that Pope John Paul II declared that the Second Sunday of Easter would henceforth have the name of "Sunday of the Divine Mercy".

Theologically, it is significant that this Sunday is the conclusion of the octave of Easter. Thus is shown the strict link between the paschal mystery of the Redemption and the Feast of Divine Mercy. Novena in preparation for Mercy Sunday begins on Good Friday. This is eloquent. We are adoring the merciful God who sent his Son to save us through the Cross.

Pope John Paul II did not create new liturgical texts for the Mass of Mercy Sunday. Providentially, the reform of the texts of the 1962 Missal, following on the Second Vatican Council, had already supplied us with prayers and readings that speak of the mystery of God's mercy.

The Collect for the day prays God whose mercy is eternal, who increases the faith of his holy people in the paschal celebration, to increase the grace he has given them, so that they may better understand by what fount they have been washed, by what spirit they have been reborn and by what blood they have been redeemed. The major concepts are clear: mercy, grace, baptismal cleansing, regeneration and redemption.

The First Readings for the 3-year cycle speak of the early Church community where the faithful lived together and owned everything in common, prayed together and were highly esteemed. The Second Readings touch on the following: St Peter telling us that in his great mercy God has given us a new birth as his children by raising Jesus from the dead and St John stressing faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God who has risen from the dead and lives for ever.

The Gospel for each of the years A, B and C is the same. It is the great account of Jesus appearing to his Apostles, showing them his pierced hands and side which are signs of his love and mercy, breathing on them the Holy Spirit and giving them the power to forgive sins. The Sacrament of Penance is a powerful and moving act of God's mercy. The Gospel account continues with our beloved Saviour appearing again a week later when Thomas was present and inviting the doubting Apostle to put his finger and indeed hand into his side, into his wounded heart. That is the heart from which St Faustina saw two rays of light spring on the world and representing blood and water. Commenting on this in his homily at the Canonization of St Faustina, Pope John Paul II said: "Our thought goes to the testimony of the Evangelist St John that, when a soldier on Calvary pierced with a lance the side of Christ, blood and water came out (cf Jn 19:34). And if blood recalls the sacrifice of the Cross and the gift of the Eucharist, water, in the symbol language of John, recalls not only Baptism, but also the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf Jn 3:5; 4:14; 7:37-39). Through the heart of Christ crucified, divine mercy reaches people" (Homily on 30/4/2000, n. 2, in *L'Osserv. Rom.*, 2-3 May 2000, p. 6).

The Pope goes on to say that Jesus is Love and Mercy personified and that mercy is another name for love, especially the love that bends down to the needs of the loved one, the love that forgives.

The Prayer over the Offerings begs God to receive our gifts and bring us to eternal life through our confession of his name and through our baptismal renewal. The Postcommunion Prayer is that God may grant that the reception of the paschal sacrament may have permanent effect in us.

These reflections can help us to appreciate the riches in the liturgical texts of the Sunday of Divine Mercy.

6. THE VOTIVE MASS ON DIVINE MERCY

This Votive Mass is recorded for the first time in the Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition, issued in 2002, on pages 1158-1159. It was approved on September 1, 1994, by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, according to the directives of Pope John Paul II, and sent to Bishops' Conferences on October 24, 1994.

The Decree of approval (Prot. 1769/94/L) notes that in our times the spiritual sensitivity of the Christian people towards the mercy of God and its wonders has increased enormously and worship of the Divine Mercy is today very widespread. No doubt, the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, issued in 1980 has greatly contributed to this. In this Encyclical Letter the Pope exalts the Divine Mercy with powerful considerations. This Mercy reaches the high point of its manifestation in the paschal mystery of Christ that is now rendered perpetually present in the Church at the Eucharistic Celebration.

The Decree concludes by saying that by the explicit directive of Pope John Paul II, the Roman Missal now includes this specific reference to God's Mercy. It prays that God may grant that praise and love towards the Divine Mercy may grow daily and produce abundant fruit until we glorify eternally in heaven this Mercy which is eternal (Decree published in *Notitiae* 30 (1994) pp. 529-534).

Translations of the 2002 Roman Missal into the local languages around the world are now going on. Here are a few comments on this Votive Mass on God's Mercy.

The Antiphon to the Introit quotes Jeremiah 31:3 and I John 2:2. God has loved us with an everlasting love. He sent his only-Begotten Son as propitiation for our sins and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. The alternative Antiphon quotes Psalm 88:2: "I will sing of your mercies, O Lord, for ever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations".

In the Collect, the Church prays God whose mercies are without number, and the treasures of whose goodness are infinite, to graciously increase the faith of the people consecrated to him. This will help people to understand better by what love they have been created, by what blood they have been redeemed and by what Spirit they have been regenerated. Here we notice these beautiful concepts from the Collect of Mercy Sunday.

The Readings indicated are I Pet 1:3-9 (By his great mercy we have been born anew) for First Reading, Psalm 117 for Responsorial Psalm, and for Gospel, Mt 20:25-28 (The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many) or Jn 15:9-14 (Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends). It is also indicated that readings can be taken from the Votive Mass of the Most Precious Blood or from that of the Most Sacred Heart.

The Prayer over the Offerings begs God to mercifully accept our offerings and to change them into the sacrament of redemption, memorial of the death and resurrection of his Son, so that by the power of this sacrifice, trusting all the time in Christ, we may arrive at eternal life.

The Communion Antiphon sings Psalm 102:17: "The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him". The alternative recalls the Gospel passage reflected in the well-known Divine Mercy image: "One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (Jn 19:34).

The Postcommunion Prayer touches on the dimension of our showing mercy to our neighbour. It prays the merciful God to grant that as we are nourished by the Body and Blood of his Son, we may draw with confidence from the fountains of mercy and show ourselves more and more merciful towards our brothers and sisters. This recalls what Pope John Paul II wrote in 1980: "Christ, in revealing the love-mercy of God, at the same time demanded from people that they also should be guided in their lives by love and mercy" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 3).

Priests will discover riches for meditation and homilies from these texts and further conviction why they should not deprive their people of this Votive Mass.

7. DIVINE MERCY IN THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

Let us conclude our reflections with a hint on how the theme of divine mercy runs through the Liturgy of the Hours.

The major liturgical times of Advent and Lent stress God's mercy as can be seen from the chosen scriptural texts and the prayers. In Advent, the Prophet Isaiah is often read. He presents us with the promised Saviour who is so gentle and merciful that the prophet says of him: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (Is 42:3). Lent tells us of God who is merciful, who brings his people out of the land of slavery and who walks with them in spite of their repeated falls – a God who loves and forgives.

The Psalms occupy a major place in the Divine Office. They speak abundantly of trust in God who forgives. They make constant appeal to him for deliverance from enemies and for help during persecution. Psalms that sing of the mercies and love of God abound (cf especially Psalms 88, 117, 135).

Deserving of special mention is the mercy of God as reflected in the Gospel Canticles of Zechariah and of the Blessed Virgin Mary which the Church sings daily in her morning and evening prayers. In the *Benedictus*, Zechariah praises God who has visited and redeemed his people to perform the mercy promised to their patriarchs. John the Baptist is to go before the Lord who through the tender mercy of our God will rise like the dawn from on

high to visit us. In the *Magnificat*, the Virgin of Nazareth praises God whose mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. God has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy which he promised to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.

Indeed one could go through the entire Divine Office, intent on discovering the many references in it to the divine mercy. And the discoveries will be very enriching.

There is no doubt that the sacred liturgy sings of God's love which is mercy. May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy, obtain for us the grace to sing, love and live the riches of Divine Mercy as reflected in the public worship of the Church.