

2d SUNDAY OF EASTER – April 11, 2010
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Once again I wish all of you a very happy and blessed Easter. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead not on Easter Sunday alone, but for a whole season of fifty days—concluding with Pentecost which we observe on May 23 this year. And on this second Sunday of Easter we celebrate in a special way the tremendous gift of God's mercy. Jesus' resurrection from the dead shows his complete and final victory over the lasting power of sin and death, a victory that makes eternal life and joy in heaven possible for us in the first place. What is that great gift, if not proof positive of God's mercy toward us? In the gospel we saw that wonderful scene where Jesus extends his mercy and grace to the apostle Thomas who at first refused to believe that his Master had truly risen. We also heard Jesus give the apostles a very direct and intimate role to play in the forgiveness of sins: telling them that whose sins they forgive would be forgiven them and whose sins they retain would be retained. The power to forgive and absolve sins belongs to Christ, but he delegated and entrusted that power to the apostles and their successors, the bishops (along with us priests who are their assistants). The Church has defined this action of Jesus as the origin and foundation of confession, our sacrament of reconciliation.

Returning to the idea of mercy: what is it; how would you describe it? Part of the dictionary definition is: 'kindness in excess of what may be expected by fairness.' This calls to mind the story of the college professor who was having his portrait painted by one of the art teachers. This professor was, to put it kindly, not the most handsome member of the faculty. A fellow professor remarked, half in jest, "I hope the artist does you justice." The posing professor replied: "forget about justice—I want mercy!" An even better definition of mercy is: 'doing out of generosity what one is not obligated to do.' Think about the many times that mercy, according to this meaning, has been shown to you: someone does you an act of kindness out of sheer goodness and generosity and not because of anything you 'deserve.'

All those human acts of mercy and kindness, wonderful as they are, fade to nothingness compared to the infinite mercy and generosity of God who gave us his Son to suffer and die and rise from the dead for us to make eternal joy in heaven possible for us. What we are talking about here is a divine mercy that reaches out to us and wants us, pleads with us to put our trust in Jesus as the Lamb of God who really has taken away the sins of the world and our own sins in particular. And God has reaffirmed the truth of his mercy in a particular way in our own time. In the 1930's, Jesus appeared to a Polish nun—Sr. Faustina Kowalska—and told her to remind the world of his infinite mercy. This was an especially appropriate time for this message: Poland and the rest of Europe had just suffered the ravages of World War I, and the groundwork was being laid for the even worse ravages of World War II. After several years of investigations of these claims of Sr. Faustina, the Vatican in 1978 approved this message—thanks in part to the efforts of a Polish cardinal, Karol Wojtyla...who would be elected as pope in 1978 and take the name of John Paul II. One of the new pope's first encyclicals was on the richness of God's mercy. And in 2000, the circle was completed: Pope John Paul canonized Sr. Faustina, declaring her to be a saint in heaven. He did so on the second Sunday of Easter that year, and declared that that Sunday would from there on be called Divine Mercy Sunday—and that is indeed what we observe and celebrate today.

Are we truly conscious of the gift of God's mercy and how totally dependent we are on that gift? Are we grateful for God's mercy, and do we express that to him on a daily basis? If God acted only in terms of strict justice, in terms of what we deserve, we would truly be in a sorry state. But the good news is that God's mercy is greater than justice. One of my favorite lines from Scripture is from 1 John: "Love, then, consists of this: not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offering for our sins." God didn't have to take the initiative in loving us or showing us mercy; but because God is love and mercy itself, he offers it to us through his crucified and risen Son. That is why Easter can truly be called the feast of Divine Mercy. In our first reading (Acts), those who were sick did not deserve, they could not claim a right to be cured by Jesus working through his apostles—but Jesus cured them from the

depths of his mercy. In the gospel, the apostle Thomas did not deserve, he could not claim a right to have Jesus prove his resurrection to his doubting mind—but Jesus provided that proof from the depths of his mercy.

So the mercy of God is unlimited, and it is available to us. But we cannot remain passive in response to that gift; we must respond positively in at least two ways:

--first, we must accept this gift of mercy for ourselves. Sometimes it can be tempting to think that God could not possibly forgive us for something we may have done. But as Jesus said to St. Faustina: “I cannot punish even the greatest sinner if he makes an appeal to my compassion. The smallest sin is repulsive to me...but if the sinner repents, there is no limit to my generosity toward [him]...my mercy embraces him and justifies him.” There is **no** limit to Jesus’ mercy—if only we sincerely ask for it.

--second, we must imitate the love and mercy of God by showing mercy to others. Jesus could not have been more clear about that challenge; as Pope John Paul said: “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.” Regardless of what someone may have done to you in the past, no matter how anyone may have hurt you or what our own ideas of strict justice may demand, we too are to show mercy just as our heavenly Father did for us. Remember Jesus’ words from his Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the merciful—they shall obtain mercy.” We will receive God’s mercy to the extent we show mercy to others; let us not forget the prayer Jesus taught us: “Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*”

One of the great ways Jesus extends the gift of his mercy is through confession, the sacrament of reconciliation (as I mentioned earlier, the gospel today gives us the origin of this sacrament). Msgr. Paul Steimel will have the 11 a.m. Mass (tomorrow)/today, and he will be available for confessions before that Mass (starting at 10:30) and after that Mass as well. In addition, the chaplet of Divine Mercy will be prayed after the 11 a.m. Mass; you are more than welcome to take part in these opportunities. I once saw a description of mercy as being “not a wishy-washy attitude; it is [rather] the wish to wash the other clean.” Jesus has washed us clean of our sins by his Precious Blood and through his resurrection from the dead. May we always rejoice, accept and trust in the gift of his unlimited and Divine Mercy.