

THE ROSARY

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Voice of the Rosary Confraternity

LIGHT & LIFE

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., DIRECTOR

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THOUGHTS FROM THE DIRECTOR

In the last issue of *Light and Life*, as I brought our reflections on the Ten Commandments to a close, I thought of the various ways our fallen nature has devised to break God's law. The thought occurred to me that a series on the Capital Sins might be worth pursuing, and I was about to begin, when I realized that our Holy Father had announced a Jubilee Year of Mercy, to commence this year, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

I needed little persuading to postpone the work on our capacity to sin, and instead determined to devote this – and the next – issue of our newsletter to considering Pope Francis' invitation to rejoice in the immense gift we have received through Christ's taking on our flesh – and the corresponding challenge the Incarnation extends for us to show others the mercy God has shown us.

This all begins, of course, with Mary, the Mother of Mercy, whose Immaculate Conception equipped her to surrender to God's will, and show us what our human nature is capable of when we are willing to say "yes."

We think of October and May as "Mary's months," and appropriately so, because they invite us to celebrate some very important feast days dedicated to Mary. But the liturgical season of Advent, which we will enter as you receive this copy of *Light and Life*, is a far more precious and extended period given to Mary. These days are a time to reflect on her "yes," and to consider how – like her – we may take God's word into our hearts and there allow it to take flesh and blood, so that – again, like her – we may present the human face, the human hands, and the human voice of God to the world.

And the Rosary, which calls us to identify ourselves with Mary, reminds us more clearly than any prayer other than the Eucharist that the God in whom we trust has loved us enough to take on our flesh, to be a sign of His everlasting and merciful presence in our midst.

The Incarnation is a call to humility, but humility properly understood – the virtue by which we acknowledge God as the source of everything we have and everything we are. Mary, who is our model in all things, is our exemplar in humility. Mary – like us – can be happy, ecstatic, when she speaks of her lowliness



THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

as God's servant, because to acknowledge God as the source of our talents and strength means having the right to share in God's triumphs and glory.

The Second Vatican Council calls the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ's "saving action par excellence." And if we seek a tool that will extend the effects of the Eucharist and form our humanity according to the example of Christ's, we need look no further than the Rosary. Pope St. John Paul II said, "by immersing us in the mysteries of the Redeemer's life, [the Rosary] ensures that what he has done and what the liturgy makes present is profoundly assimilated and shapes our existence."

A REMINDER AND AN OPPORTUNITY

We remind our friends that each day during November we offer Mass for the blessed repose of the souls of your deceased loved ones. Needless to say, we continue to remember you and your intentions, as well.

And if you are interested in a worthy companion during this Jubilee Year of Mercy, let me recommend a book

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THE ROSARY LIGHT & LIFE

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TO BE OFFERED FOR YOUR INTENTIONS

THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Works of Mercy, I A Year of Mercy

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

A JUBILEE YEAR

On April 15 of this year Pope Francis announced an *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, a Holy Year that will commence on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 2015 and draw to its close on the Solemnity of Christ the King, November 20, 2016. The year will commemorate the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 and, as the title of the document to introduce the Jubilee Year – *Misericordiae Vultus* – The Face of Mercy – suggests, this is a time, in the Holy Father’s words, for the Church to look within and reach out.

We will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity, and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ, asking him to pour out his mercy upon us like the morning dew, so that everyone may work together to build a brighter future. How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God! May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst! (Misericordiae Vultus 5)

MERCY: A DEFINITION

Before we continue our consideration of Pope Francis’ reflection, we might do well to consider a definition of Mercy. Our theology teaches it is compassion for another’s distress, coupled with an active will to relieve it. The virtue has two elements; each is extremely important and both must be united if we are to recognize an act as merciful.

The first immediate component of mercy is a feeling of sorrow for another’s difficulty. This is the easy part of mercy – easy because our hearts are naturally moved by the plight of so many of the individuals we see around us. The second element of the definition is considerably more challenging. We are not being merciful when we cry at the movies; to be merciful our sorrow must be joined with some practical step to relieve the distress we witness.

MERCY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Holy Father’s letter invites us to see this merciful love illustrated in God’s patience with His People in the Old Testament.

“The Lord lifts up the downtrodden, he casts the wicked to the ground.” (Ps. 147) In short, the mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality

with which he reveals his love as that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a “visceral” love. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy. (MV 6)

MERCY IN THE GOSPEL

The life and work of Jesus are even more visible signs of mercy. When the crowds follow him into a deserted place he not only takes pity on them, he feeds them. When he encounters the funeral procession and a grieving mother, he restores her son to life.

In the parables devoted to mercy, Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy...In these parables God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he pardons. In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon. (MV 9)

A CHALLENGE FOR US

When he considers another parable, Pope Francis concludes, “...mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us.” Living out the example of our loving creator is at the heart of Jesus’ words, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,” (Lk 6:27) and Pope Francis has chosen the phrase, “*Merciful like the Father*” as the “motto” for this Holy Year. (MV 14)

When we consider God’s mercy, it is nowhere more evident than in the Incarnation of His Son. When we had forgotten what it meant to be God’s children, God sent His Son among us a child, to go through every moment of our lives – not so that we would not have to, but to show us how to get it right. And the mercy of Jesus is nowhere more evident than in his gathering up our sins and offering his life in return for them.

Good Friday and Calvary illustrate the utter bankruptcy of our human nature. But they also show us the overwhelming mercy of Jesus. And so that we might never be without the consolation and strength of the Cross, Jesus left us the gift of the Mass, which allows us to touch the Cross and its reward every day. When we eat this bread and drink this cup we open a

window onto eternity and stand at the foot of the cross, where Christ draws us to himself and commands us to transform the world.

And if that were not enough, in the Eucharist, Jesus also gives us one another. Mercy thrusts us into one another's arms; we see this very clearly in the Eucharist. In every other meal, what we eat becomes us, but at the Mass we are changed into what we eat, and we become what we celebrate. By a divine institution our mortal actions are charged with immortal value. *"As I have done, so you also must do... in memory of me."* These words are a command – to act. To be for the world what Christ, by sharing in our mortality and on the cross, was for us.

The imperative in Christ's words is very important, as is the object Christ commands us to serve in his memory. The memorial that draws us to the altar forbids us to forget the social dimension of our faith, because the Eucharist isn't just the focus of our worship; it is the basis of our morality. A decade or two ago, an American Archbishop reflected on the relation of moral life to moral laws. He said

The first question of Christian discipleship ... is not What am I obliged to do or to avoid? The first question of the moral life is, What does it mean to me to be in Christ Jesus? What claim does being a new creation in Christ make on the way I live?

THE EFFECTS OF MERCY

The Cross draws us to the altar, but when we gather there, we do more than profess our faith in an event; we also profess our faith in a result. We are what we eat, and we become what we believe – for one another, and by Christ's merciful action on the cross, for the salvation of the world.

Christ's sacrifice is a reflection on the value of our human nature, and a challenge both to embrace it and to work for its restoration. Humanity lies at the heart of everything we believe. The weakness of our humanity necessitated God's elevating it in the Incarnation and sacrificing it on Calvary. And if we are to enjoy the salvation Christ won for us, it will be because our bodies surrender to what we understand with our intellect and determine to do in our will. Pope Francis' letter begs us to give as God has given, *"...always, freely, asking nothing in return...He comes to assist us in our weakness... Day after day, touched by his compassion, we also can become compassionate toward others."* (MV, 14)

WORKS OF MERCY, BRIEFLY

We will consider the individual works of mercy in greater depth as these reflections progress. For now, we may, as does the Holy Father, call them to mind. The corporal (bodily) works of mercy are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, healing the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead. The spiritual works are counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing sinners, comforting the afflicted, forgiving

those who have offended us, bearing ills patiently, and praying for the living and the dead.

If we consider these actions even casually we realize they are – some of them, at least – the criteria on which our eternal life depends. When St. Matthew portrays the end of the world, he pictures God as an Almighty King, dispensing eternal life to those who served him when they encountered him in need, and damnation to those who ignored him. Both ask when they did, or did not, encounter him, *"And the king will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it [or failed to do it] to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'."* (Mt. 23:40)

WITHIN EVERYONE'S GRASP

Some of the works of mercy may not be within our reach. Few of us, for example, have the opportunity to visit those who are in prison. But each of us can forgive those who have wronged us. This need not be a public act; it can take place in a moment of private prayer. We might call to mind someone who has done us ill and then imagine ourselves as Jesus standing before Pilate and pray for the individual who has wronged us.

If we look at Jesus and the fate that befell him once he left Pilate's study, we realize that mercy is a fragile thing compared to the ambition, hatred, and envy that move so much of what we see in our world. Mercy does not play by those rules, and God's kingdom is not a place. It is a sacrifice, offered on the altar of our hearts.

MERCY AND RECONCILIATION

Pope Francis asks us to make the sacrifice of ourselves by seeking the Sacrament of Reconciliation during the Year of Mercy. He calls priests to

...accept the faithful as the father in the parable of the prodigal son: a father who runs out to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance. Confessors are called to embrace the repentant son who comes back home and express the joy of having him back again. Let us never tire of also going out to the other son who stands outside, incapable of rejoicing...May confessors not ask useless questions, but like the father in the parable, interrupt the speech prepared ahead of time by the prodigal son, so that confessors will learn to accept the plea for help and mercy pouring from the heart of every penitent. In short, confessors are called to be a sign of the primacy of mercy always, everywhere, and in every situation, no matter what. (MV, 17)

THE REMEDY OF MERCY

The Holy Father makes an appeal, as he has in earlier letters, for mercy to be shown those who are victims of injustice and crime committed for financial gain. *"This festering wound is a grave sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance, because it threatens very foundations of personal and social life."* (MV, 18) His words are a reminder that Jesus, who was rich, became poor for our sake, and felt immense sorrow for the young man who refused to follow him *"...for he had great possessions."* (Mt. 19:22)

POVERTY AND MERCY

Geza Grosschmid, a writer from the first half of the last century, offers a remedy for these ills. When he reflects on wealth, he sounds like one of the Old Testament prophets.

Wealth, removing the necessity to work for a living, offers leisure which, too often, is wasted and squandered on amusements, intrigues, distractions having very little conformity with morality. It allows the purchase of everything that fancy or ambition may wish: things and people, bodies and souls... Finally, sterile avarice, a dry, isolated and unnatural pleasure, kills the heart, extinguishes the spirit, scorns the universe, and suppresses it when it cannot offer any possible gain to its devouring cupidity.

Yet our author is quick to point out that material poverty is not the remedy for these ills. Many who are poor undoubtedly wish they had the capital to enjoy all the idle pleasures and self-destructive pursuits that endanger the souls of their wealthy neighbors. Such poverty, he points out,

...causes indignation, but too often only for the purpose of insinuation into [the minds of the poor] the corrosive acid of envy and jealousy – as if the enjoyments of the pleasures of this world were, alone, to lead the poor to happiness.

One need not receive public assistance to understand how little merit is to be found in demonstrable material poverty. What puts the virtue in poverty is its being voluntary. Grosschmid sums this up very neatly when he observes, “*It is the intention which gives an act its worth. It is the spirit which makes the station in life and transforms it.*”

We might not immediately link a spirit of voluntary poverty with mercy, but virtue is always the middle course between extremes. The challenge of poverty is to allow it to lead us into a path of simplicity that will result in our caring less for ourselves so that we have time to care for others.

MARY, MOTHER OF MERCY

Our reflection on the remaining paragraphs of the Holy Father’s letter must wait until the next issue of *Light and Life*, and one would be hard-pressed to imagine a happier introduction to the New Year than a continued pilgrimage through the Pontiff’s words to usher in the 2016 Jubilee Year. But, in the meantime, let us look ahead to the close of Pope Francis’ letter, and his words about Mary, the Mother of Mercy. “*May the sweetness of her countenance,*” he prays, “*watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God’s tenderness. No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the Incarnation like Mary.*” (MV, 24)

The Incarnation, Christ’s taking on our flesh, is a call to humility, but humility properly understood – the virtue by which we acknowledge God as the source of everything we have and everything we are. This is closely allied with obedience, because once we realize how utterly

dependent we are upon God’s mercy, it becomes easier and easier to surrender our will to God’s will.

Mary, who is our model in all things, is our exemplar in humility and obedience. Mary – like us – can be happy, ecstatic, when she speaks of her lowliness as God’s servant, because to give up our will to embrace God’s will – means having the right to share in God’s triumphs and glory.

The weakness of our humanity lay claim to the Divine Mercy. The Father elevated our humanity in the Incarnation, and the Son sacrificed it on Calvary. If we are to enjoy the salvation Christ won for us, it will be because our bodies surrender to this mercy, to what we understand with our intellect and determine to do in our will.

The Second Vatican Council calls the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ’s “*saving action par excellence.*” And if we seek a tool that will extend the effects of the Eucharist and form our humanity according to the example of Christ’s, we need look no further than the Rosary. Pope St. John Paul II said, “*by immersing us in the mysteries of the Redeemer’s life, [the Rosary] ensures that what he has done and what the liturgy makes present is profoundly assimilated and shapes our existence.*” ■

A REMINDER ...

Continued from page 1

we have just discovered, *A Faith-Sharing Guide to the Holy Year of Mercy*. The small volume is designed for personal devotion or use among friends. It is divided into eight sections, each devoted to a particular aspect of God’s mercy, revealed in the gospel. Excerpts from Pope Francis’ homilies guide the reader’s meditation, and a series of questions ask the reader to consider the practical applications of God’s mercy. If you are interested in this worthwhile volume, please see our order form.

LOOKING FOR CHRISTMAS IDEAS?

If you happen to be seeking some serious stocking-stuffers, let me suggest one or more of the following.

A perennial favorite among the Rosary Center’s friends is the children’s book, CHRISTMAS MOUSE. The story relates the adventures of a little mouse who is being chased by a cat. He finds himself inside a home, gazing at a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. He then comes upon a book and falls into it. To his surprise, he is in a stable, and Jesus has just been born.

LITTLE STAR, by Anthony DeStefano and illustrated by Mark Elliot, is certain to become a Christmas classic. This delightful tale connects the star atop the Christmas tree to the true meaning of Christmas – the birth of Jesus.

DAY BY DAY WITH POPE FRANCIS This is a stand-up desk calendar for 2016. Let Pope Francis touch your heart each day with an inspiring word. These daily selections from the Holy Father’s writings will both challenge and comfort you, giving you hope, courage, and the assurance of God’s mercy and love.