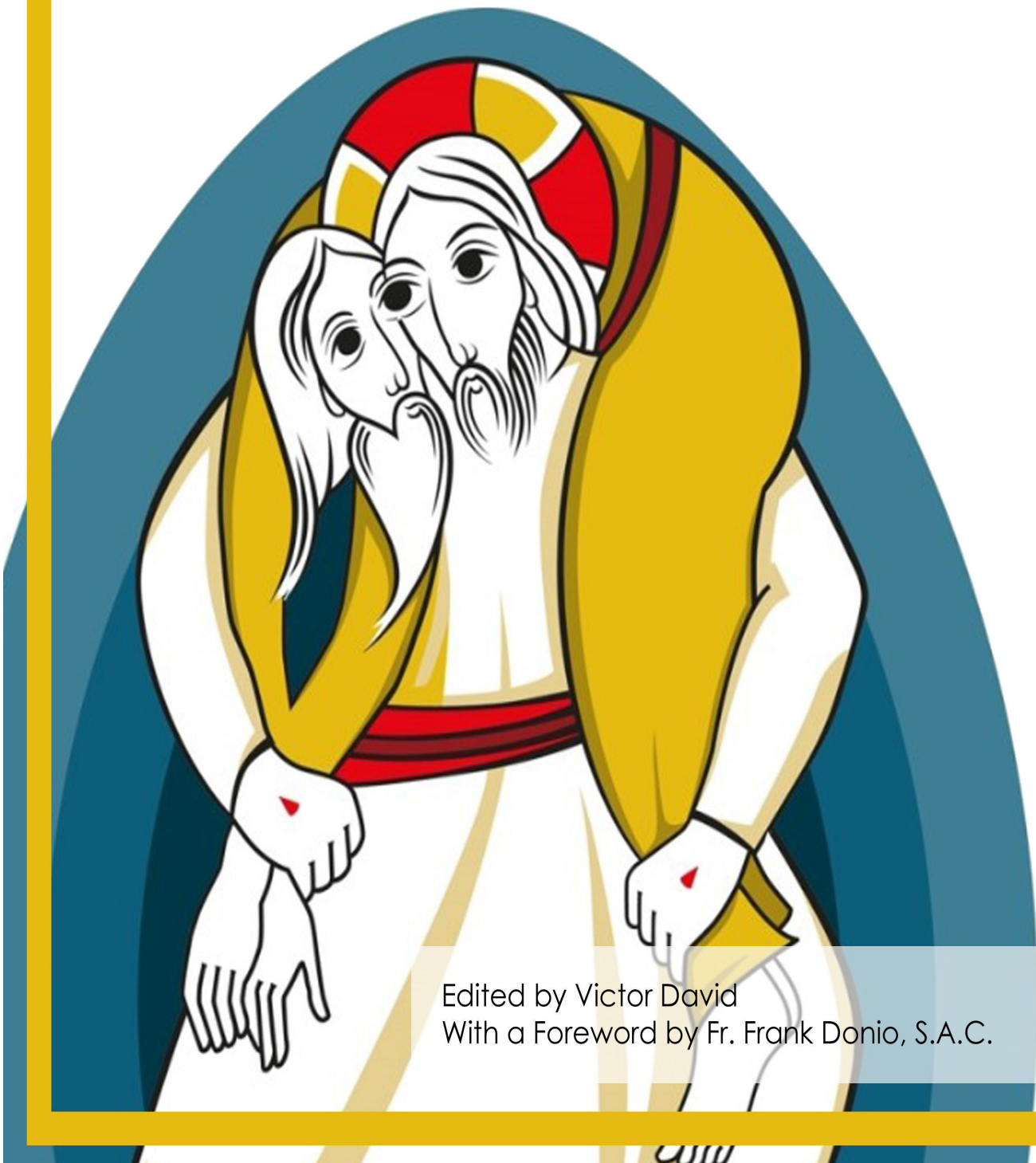


MERCY ALIVE

Reflections from the Bloggers of the Catholic Apostolate Center




Edited by Victor David
With a Foreword by Fr. Frank Donio, S.A.C.



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Foreword

Very Rev. Frank S. Donio, S.A.C., D.Min.

When we published our first e-book in 2014, I wrote that it was our desire that all those who would read the book would “reflect on and strengthen their relationship with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God, the Infinite Love.” Now it is with great joy that we release our next e-book, Mercy Alive.

Unlike our last publication, which surveyed many areas of the faith, this book focuses on the subject of mercy. As the Jubilee of Mercy reaches its conclusion, it is our hope that this collection of posts from our Ad Infinitum blog will encourage you to continue living out the lessons learned from this extraordinary year. As always, I thank all those authors whose work appear in this book.

Pope Francis announced the Jubilee of Mercy in his bull, Misericordiae Vultus (The Face of Mercy). In it, he writes, “[Let] us allow God to surprise us. He never tires of casting open the doors of his heart and of repeating that he loves us and wants us to share in his love with us” (MV 25). One lesson I wish for all of us to take away from this year, and from this book, is that mercy is truly endless. There is no limit to the number of ways that we can seek mercy or show mercy.

I hope these reflections will inspire you to live out mercy during this jubilee year and in all the years to come.

May the charity of Christ urge us on!

**~Fr. Frank Donio, S.A.C.
Director, The Catholic Apostolate Center**





A Note from the Editor

The following is a selection from the hundreds of posts that have appeared on the Catholic Apostolate Center's Ad Infinitum blog that have a specific focus on the subject of mercy.

As you flip through the pages, you will gain inspiration from the saints on how faith is the foundation to living out mercy, everyday examples of how to better practice mercy towards ourselves and others, and the gift that is mercy itself.

As in the previous book, anytime you see something underlined or flash as you turn the page, feel free to click on the item to see the author's source or futher resources he or she wishes to provide.

I hope you enjoy the following pieces and pray that they may inspire you to live out the lessons learned from the Jubilee Year of Mercy for many more years to come.

**~Victor David
Editor**



Works of Mercy



Leave Your Jar

By Kate Fowler

We are often our own harshest critics. This is the case in my own life, and sometimes I look up in exasperation at God and tell Him I'm tired...of myself. In our culture of busy-ness and perfectionism, high achievement and the constant thirst for more, it's tempting to balk at our deficiencies, cringe at our weakness, run from our blemishes.

How could I have said that? Why did I fail at that again? How have I not learned?

These thoughts run through our defeated minds if we forget in this Jubilee of Mercy to be merciful to ourselves. So often, we turn to shame, annoyance and frustration when we fall, sin or come face-to-face with our humanity.

I imagine this is how the woman at the well felt as she went to get water at the hottest time of day. Divorced and remarried multiple times, she was seen as unclean by her Samaritan kinsmen. She avoided the other villagers at all costs in order to protect herself from their condemning gaze. There was one gaze, however, that she was powerless against: His. It was a gaze far more surprising than all others. A gaze not of condemnation, but piercing in its persistence and compassion—the gaze of love from God Himself.

What must it have felt like to look up in the noon day heat and meet His gaze? What must it have felt like to be seen, known, and loved by the Son of Man?

This is Christ's eternal gaze upon all of us. If you've already experience it, you can relate to the Samaritan woman. If not, I invite you to look up from your well and meet Him there.

How He waits for us—the Christ! How He goes out to our man-made wells of sin and shame, of selfishness and pride, of indifference and bitterness to meet His children, to remind them that they are loved! He comes to you, to me. The Lover pursues His beloved. The Shepherd pursues His sheep. The Father pursues the prodigal son.

God desires us.

Encountering this love and mercy leaves no room for indifference or fear. We long to reciprocate this love, as the woman at the well did. She left her jar, the very reason she came to the well, in order to proclaim the Christ to her entire town—the town she had avoided at all costs (cf Jn 4:28-29). This is radical. This is the conversion that results from the beautiful and delicate balance of love and justice, mercy, and truth.

We are loved even when we have deemed ourselves unlovable. We are desired even when we remain indifferent. We are sought when we hide. And today we are being called and sent forth to bring His gaze to the nations.

Why? Because we were created for greatness, though we are pilgrims living in a fallen world. We were created for life with God Himself; to live blameless, spotless, white as snow. Yet we live in a world in which we are often warring against God, ourselves, one another, and nature.

In this Jubilee of Mercy, we are reminded that our scars or weaknesses should not scandalize us to the point of paralyzation or despair. We can no longer be imprisoned by our sin because we have a Savior—one who calls us to transfiguration and gives us the hope of the Resurrection, which we celebrate in 10 days. The piercing love of God elevates us to be salt of the earth, light to the nations. If we live in the certainty of being loved, we cannot refuse to be gentle and merciful to ourselves. Only in receiving His merciful love each day will we be able to love ourselves purely in the way that enables us to purely love our fallen brothers and sisters.

Rather than cower at our weakness, going to the well at noon, let us embrace it—giving ourselves fully and completely to the One who can transform our weakness for His glory! May we cling to Him, not to ourselves, surrendering our folly to His wisdom, our sin to His perfection, our indifference to His love, our brokenness to His wholeness.

Leave your jar at the well and go forth.

Alien Church

By Evan Ponton

Paul boldly reminds Christians, "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). In a sense, our single most political act on this earth is not who we vote for in the next election, but our Baptism. In baptism, we discover our truest identity as adopted sons and daughters of God, and together become "one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28). But as citizens of heaven, we also live as "aliens and sojourners" (1 Peter 2:11).

This Jubilee Year of Mercy issues an invitation and challenge for Catholics to transform what society regards as 'political problems with political solutions' into encounters with God's grace and mercy. When Christians do not actively imagine and enact truthful and merciful alternatives to social evils, pragmatism and deceit can lay deep roots in our society.

Today our Church takes seriously the responsibility to stand up for the human dignity of migrants and refugees. While speaking on the topic of pastoral care for migrants and itinerant peoples, Pope Francis expressed his hope that, "our Christian communities really be places of hospitality, listening, and communion."

Hospitality

In Leviticus 19, God instructs Moses and the Israelites about harvesting the land, not to "reap the field to its very edge," for, "... these things you shall leave for the poor and the alien" (Lev 19:9,10, cf. Deut 24:20-21).

A problem many of us succumb to in a consumerist culture (myself included) is living without margin. We max out our schedules and credit cards so that we simply cannot make room in our day or budget to give freely, or receive someone in need when opportunity arises. As Pope Francis recently put it, "If the Jubilee doesn't arrive to the pockets, it's not a true Jubilee."

The scripture and tradition of the Church prescribe counter-cultural hospitality toward the stranger. Exemplified in monastic tradition, the Rule of Benedict in Chapter 53 puts forth Jesus' words, "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ" (Matthew 25:35). Moreover, in a culture where nearly every human experience is branded and marketed, we should not confuse hospitality with customer service.

Listening

"Listen... and administer true justice to both parties even if one of them is a resident alien... Give ear to the lowly and to the great alike" (Deut 1:16,17).

There is no justice or mercy without listening to the oppressed and marginalized. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. . . It is God's love for us that He not only gave us His Word but also lends us His ear. . . Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either" (Life Together. New York: Harper & Row).

When we listen, we may even discover someone who is no longer a stranger but a friend.

Communion

God had to remind the Israelites, "You shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt," (Lev 19:34). The New Testament reiterates: "Once you were 'no people' but now you are 'God's people'; you 'had not received mercy,' but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:10).

Pope Francis powerfully stated that communion cannot exist where Christians seek to build walls instead of bridges. Communion happens through solidarity and accompaniment, not the gospel of, "God helps those who help themselves." As Catholics, our communion is best expressed through the Holy Eucharist, where we "participate with the whole community in the Lord's own sacrifice" (CCC 1322). Recent celebrations of the Mass across the USA-Mexico border witness the power of the Eucharist to unite Christians separated along national/political divides. In a climate of fear and self-preservation, the Eucharist consumes us, lest we consume each other.

As Christians, let us consider how the Jubilee of Mercy cannot be separated from our particular concern for migrants and refugees in the form of the prophetic witness of Christian hospitality, listening, and communion.

Youtube Evangelization

By Jonathan Sitko

On April 23, 2005, a small video sharing website was created with a simple idea: to make videos easier to share across the internet. That invention was called YouTube and quickly became a tool to share billions of hours of information and ideas across the Earth. While some consider the platform to be only a place for videos of cats doing cute/funny things (about 15% of all internet traffic is related to this), people like myself use YouTube as a means to find information we are passionate about, from video games, movies, television, and even cooking videos. People use YouTube as a means to share things online that they think their friends would be interested in, and this has truly globalized how we consume and share our media.

YouTube has become an important means of communication and evangelization for the Vatican and other entities within the Catholic Church. The Church is experiencing a rapid change in how we share our faith, from Vatican videos of the Easter Mass in Rome, videos of priests and religious explaining core tenets of the Catholic Church, and videos explaining how to preach our Catholic faith to other people. Thousands of hours of video are being recorded in the idea of spreading the Gospel message to others. There are beautiful images, witnesses, and events that happen in the Catholic Church, and many are viewed and shared across languages and continents thanks to this website.

How does YouTube relate to the idea of evangelization, and how can we as lay people be involved? The Catholic Church has some beautiful and amazing ideas and images that it can offer to people, if it has a way to be seen. YouTube is first and foremost about sharing video, so share some Catholic videos! Find something that you yourself would be interested in watching, and you are already halfway there. I love reviews on media, and with a quick search, found a video by Robert Barron of Word on Fire discussing the 2014 Oscar nominated film Whiplash and how that can relate to our spiritual life. I would be interested in viewing more videos like them, which eventually leads to the final step.



The final step in an easy way to evangelize is by sharing a video with friends and family on social media. It takes a matter of a few seconds and a few clicks, but it may offer an interesting interaction and discussion by your loved ones on why you would share that information and what it means to you. People are experiencing more media than ever, offering a personal witness and approval of something makes it easier for a friend or family member to accept it as something worthwhile. They should value your opinion as someone close to them, and so this opens the door for conversation and their own hopeful self-discovery.

YouTube today is, at its core, the same as it was in 2005: a website on the internet devoted to sharing video. Although, now with faster desktop internet connections and smartphones, YouTube can serve as a way to easily share experiences and ideas across the planet. Why can't we as Catholics use that tool to show people the magnificence of God through His Church? I end with sharing a video I enjoy watching, and can serve as an example of how easy it is to share with others.

Scripture to Life: Enduring Afflictions

By Jonathan Jerome

"...we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Romans 5:3-5

During the celebration of the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, this portion of St. Paul's letter to the Romans is read to faithful Catholics throughout the world. I had the privilege of attending a bilingual Mass that weekend with my girlfriend, Kara, in a high school gymnasium. The different setting, unfamiliar language, and unusually large number of altar servers hardly crossed my mind as we participated in Mass at Most Holy Trinity Parish, on this, their solemnity. It was a beautiful liturgy to say the least! What struck Kara and me most about our experience, however, were these lines from the second reading.

How many of us know someone who is afflicted? We all have family members, friends or colleagues that are struggling with cancer, unemployment, depression, etc. In the daily news - local, national and international - we hear about gun violence, war, natural disaster, and famine. Even more simplistically, we each have 'good days' and 'bad days.'

St. Paul reminds us that affliction is not something to run from because ultimately, we "boast in hope of the Glory of God" (Romans 5:2). His 'flow chart of hope' is a reassuring message of what true faithfulness yields and how God makes His love present to each of us in our struggles.

The alternatives to hope (sin, despair, discouragement, impatience, fear, anxiety, guilt...)_ when left unchecked, are a rejection of God's invitation to deeper communion with Him. Very basically, this reading offers us a roadmap to understand how affliction does not have the final word; hope does!

Pope Benedict XVI's homily at Nationals Stadium during his 2008 Apostolic Visit to the United States speaks to this point: "It is a prayer of unfailing hope, but also one of patient endurance and, often, accompanied by suffering for the truth. Through this prayer, we share in the mystery of Christ's own weakness and suffering, while trusting firmly in the victory of his Cross."

We are able to endure our own afflictions because of the hope promised to us by God. Pain, suffering, and struggle are not pleasant, especially when they are affecting someone we know and love. As people of faith, though, we believe God is with us, united in our affliction and made present to us in the love we experience. This faith, this hope, and this love, offer us momentary comfort and strength as we journey to the ultimate glory of complete communion with God.

We have a common call to share this hope with those around us, especially with those who find it difficult to endure in times of struggle. This simple reminder of the universality of the Church also reminds us that through prayer, "we become capable of the great hope, and thus we become ministers of hope for others" (Spe Salvi, 34).

And so, as we are confronted with affliction, our prayer should be one of hope. As others struggle with affliction, our response should be one of hope. And as we begin to question why affliction affects our lives, we must remember that affliction yields hope; hope in the love of God.



The Power of Kindness

By Krissy Kirby

Kindness is "hard to show." Gratitude is "rare." Mercy is "weak." I see these realities in my classroom all the time when we teach kids about good choices. We remind them, "Be kind to her!" "How would you like it if he pinched you with a racecar?" and "Would you want to have a friend cut your hair off in art class without permission?" We try so hard to encourage kids to be kind, but do we set examples of it ourselves? How can we expect this next generation to understand when to say "Thank you" or "Good morning, how was your weekend?" when we oftentimes don't do this as adults?

This past Sunday, I was walking through a nearby neighborhood when I overheard a short and simple conversation between a man sitting on a bench in the heat and a well-dressed young man passing by him. The exchange brought tears to my eyes when I realized what happened. The scene went something like this:

(Young man walking by a man on a bench, earbuds in, and distracted by his phone.)

Man on the bench: Excuse me, hey you there! I wanna know... why did you get me a coffee yesterday?

To which the young man took out his earbuds and answered casually: Because you asked me for one and I needed one too.



In Aesop's Fable, The Lion and the Mouse, even the most unassuming creature saves someone's day and proves that "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted." Being a member of the universal Church, what can you do for a neighbor? Kindness is a fundamental value taught at a young age, and appreciated throughout a lifetime. When you show it, people notice, just as I did with the example above, and want to show it too. Christ was a model for kindness. He taught us how to be kind, how to show mercy, and how to pray for those in need. When we are merciful to others when they make mistakes or shortcomings, we are being the face of Christ to those who need it and are being compassionate to Christ himself.

When we go about our daily lives thinking about ourselves, the things we need to do, and the places we need to be, we get bogged down in only what we need. We rarely consider the effect that our selfishness has on others. It is hard to show kindness if we don't quite know where to start, but it's something that anyone can show and soon becomes contagious. Here are ten ways to get started!

1. Say something positive to someone you know.
2. Say something positive to someone you don't know, such as "Good morning!" or "Have a wonderful day!"
3. Smile at a stranger
4. Hold a door for a stranger
5. Call a relative
6. Leave a huge tip
7. Ask a worker how their day is and actively listen to their response
8. Say "I love you" more often to those you care about
9. Pray for someone without telling them
10. Give someone a hug

Compassion, Mercy...and Doctor Who?

By Sarah Jarzembowski



After the extraordinary visit of Pope Francis to the United States, I had a renewed vision of the world around me. I saw things in ways that I had not experienced before. The Lord's call for compassion and mercy, especially during the Jubilee of Mercy, was heightened. My experience in youth and young adult ministry trained me to hear God's voice speaking through popular culture so that I could help connect the Catholic faith to teenagers and young adults. As such, movies and television have become an important part of my ministry, as well as a guilty pleasure, especially when I need to process, reflect, and rest.

I took time to catch up on the ninth season of Doctor Who, the long-running BBC show about an alien time traveler named The Doctor, who saves the day using his clever wit and a sonic screwdriver (a futuristic Swiss Army knife).

In one of the episodes, the Doctor comes across an innocent young boy caught in the middle of a desert wasteland and surrounded by "hand mines". The boy calls for help and the Doctor shows up to offer his assistance. As the Doctor starts to rescue the child, he asks the boy his name, to which he responds, "Davros." What makes this devastating is that "Davros" is the name of the Doctor's longtime arch-nemesis who would grow up to create the race of killer robotic aliens known as the Daleks. The Doctor is faced with a dilemma: Does he save the child and, in so doing, allow the child to grow up to become a villain that would destroy so many, or does he abandon the child, which might possibly save countless lives? At first, the Doctor leaves – choosing the latter option.

Years later, the Doctor finds himself in the presence of the adult Davros who has exterminated entire races throughout his adult life. Davros is bitter and broken. He is dying and asks the Doctor for one final moment, presumably to exact revenge for leaving him to die as a young boy. Davros asks why he willingly came, to which the Doctor responds, "I came because you're sick and you asked." Davros replies with bitterness, "Compassion? Always!" the Doctor answers, "I'm helping a little boy I abandoned many years ago." To this, Davros laughs and mocks him, saying, "Your compassion is your downfall" and proceeds to trap the Doctor.

Without going into too many intricate details of the plot, let's just say that the Doctor's companions rush to save him. Upon encountering one of Davros' creations (the Daleks), the Doctor discovers that –despite the rage and revenge of this alien race, they also understand the concept of mercy.

As the Doctor ponders this concept of mercy and wonders how this "design flaw" came to be in a heartless race of robotic aliens, he has an idea. He goes back in time to the young Davros whom he had once abandoned. Only a moment after he had initially left, as the boy stands crying for help, the Doctor reappears on the scene and offers mercy to his future enemy. The young boy asks "Are you the enemy?" The Doctor answers him, "Friends, enemies, I'm not sure if any of that matters as long as there is mercy. Always mercy." It seems, in the end, the "design flaw" of the Daleks resulted from young Davros experiencing mercy from the Doctor (and if this all sounds confusing, it's because it's a time travel television show).

Pope Francis spoke at great length about compassion and mercy during his visit, too. It was an undercurrent of each of his talks or homilies. He stressed the need to be compassionate with family members, to show mercy to those in prison and to the homeless, to those who disagree with us and stand on the other side of issues and causes. As we continue to process Pope Francis' visit to Cuba and the United States, and as we move into the Jubilee of Mercy, this quote from Doctor Who will continue to resonate with me: "Friends, enemies, I'm not sure if any of that matters as long as there is mercy. Always mercy." It is a truth that didn't originate from a science fiction show or even the Holy Father.

It is a truth grounded in Christ, who told his disciples on the mountain: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7) May we, too, be merciful –even to those we may not like or agree with –for God is so gracious in his mercy towards us.

Learning Forgiveness

By Dana Edwards

While on my way to work one morning, I passed a church that had a marquee saying, "Forgive others as quickly as you expect God to forgive you."

That phrase stuck with me the entire day to the point where I just had to write it down to look back on. Forgiveness can be so difficult when we've been hurt or feel we've been wronged. That little message to me from God reminded me of the work I needed to do during Lent to prepare for Easter.

The season of Lent is centered on God's forgiveness of our sins and our willingness to be penitent. When we receive our ashes on Ash Wednesday, the priest often says, "Repent and believe in the Gospel." Especially during this time of the year, we recognize the brief time we have on earth to do God's will. This is a time in which we reach out to God to experience him in a tangible way through sacrifice, almsgiving, and fasting. On Ash Wednesday, we come together to show remorse for the times throughout the year that we have failed not only God, but also our family, friends, and fellow man.

This month during the Catholic young adult group meeting in my area, a guest speaker shared that, contrary to what we might think, shame or guilt can be positive motivators. Sometimes, we can be so harsh on ourselves in dwelling on our imperfections that we don't allow God to heal us. Acknowledging our sinfulness through guilt and accepting God's mercy and forgiveness helps us to move on in striving to fix our wrongdoings. God will always accept us. We do not need to wait to "cleanse" ourselves for him. He will help us to choose right from wrong. If God, our flawless creator, can forgive us, who are we to deny it to others or ourselves?

In Matthew 5:23-24, we are told, "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

During Ash Wednesday, let us think of the ways in which we are slaves to sin and look for ways to repent and reflect on this during Lent. How can we be more open to God and seek his guidance? How can we be more forgiving to ourselves and others?



Let Your Life Speak

By Alyce Shields

Does your life speak a story of evangelization?

I think about this question, and it is easy to think about the moments where I have really fallen short. I could have been kinder and more loving with a student who really needed me today. I could have been quicker to help a colleague in need. I know that I have missed clear opportunities to be Christ to others. As Christians in the age of the New Evangelization, we have been called more than ever to think about these moments and act with grace to better love God and share his love with others.

The story of the Visitation deeply teaches us about bringing Christ to others. Mary has just learned that she is with child; yet she travels to Judah after she finds out that her relative, Elizabeth, is six months pregnant in her old age. Although Luke does not elaborate on the details, we can only imagine the sacrificial love beaming through this selfless act: Mary, in her first trimester of pregnancy (which is often filled with morning sickness and other trials), gives up time at home to care for a fellow expecting mother. Her heart is filled with joyful love as she physically brings Jesus to Elizabeth and her family. She is the "Theotokos," or God Bearer. Elizabeth affirms Mary's faithfulness and the gift of bringing Christ to her:

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." Luke 1:41-45

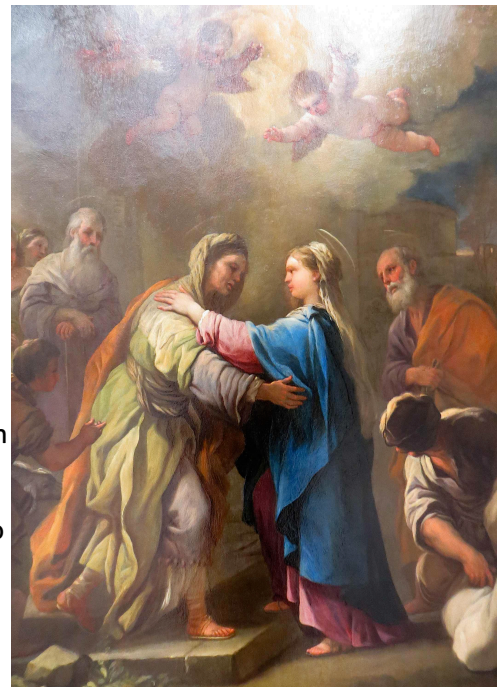
It is clear that Mary's life speaks a story of evangelization to others.

Mary's life and witness call us to be God Bearers to others, too. This may manifest in a physical way, as Mary physically brought Jesus in her womb to Elizabeth. During my time as a Catholic missionary for middle school and high school students, we reflected on the Visitation by bringing a friend to kneel with us in front of Jesus in the Eucharist in Adoration, physically bringing those we love closer to Christ. It was so humbling, and deeply moving to physically soak up Christ's presence by being brought to him by someone you love.

Perhaps Mary's evangelization story calls you to bring others to Christ physically in the Eucharist, inviting a friend to attend Mass or Adoration with you. In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis explained in his Lenten message that "in the corporal works of mercy we touch the flesh of Christ in our brothers and sisters who need to be fed, clothed, sheltered, visited" (Pope Francis, 2015). Perhaps in your evangelization story you are called to serve those who need to know or be reminded of Christ's love by your service. Whether directly or indirectly, as Catholics we trust that God makes every gift and sacrifice more perfect when done in his name.

To let our lives speak a story of evangelization, to live out the Gospel, we must humble ourselves like Mary who lived as a handmaiden of the Lord. When we submit to the will of God and "do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5), surely we make Christ's presence more known to others.

Today we are called to let our lives speak a story of evangelization, just as the Visitation teaches us. We can entrust ourselves to Mary's mission of bringing Christ to others, and know that through her patronage and guidance, our attempts to bring Christ to others will bear fruit in more lives than one. Pope Saint John Paul II entrusted his papacy to Mary with the simple prayer, "Totus Tuus," or "totally yours," knowing that Mary leads all hearts to her son, Jesus Christ. Let us, too, live in the spirit of the Visitation and follow the great evangelizers who have brought us closer to Jesus through Mary. Let your life speak a story of evangelization.



"Into Your Hands, Father of Mercies"

By Alex R. Boucher

Last week, I had the honor of attending the funeral of a young man I never had the privilege of meeting. Dominik Liam Pettey, a senior at Gonzaga College High School in Washington, D.C., died tragically and suddenly in the early morning of November 1, All Saints Day ([click here to read a Washington Post article about the accident](#)). During his funeral liturgy, held at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and attended by over 3,500 people, Dominik was described as a faith-filled young man who was joyfully committed to his family and friends. We were told that he loved to play hockey, endured suffering with humility and patience during health issues last year, and gave of himself selflessly.

As an alumnus of a Jesuit high school and the brother of hockey players, I felt compelled to attend the funeral liturgy of a young man whose story hit very close to home. I could not help but shed several tears as the funeral progressed. As those in attendance held each other close, both physically and in prayer, I could sense their immense sadness at the loss of a child, a brother, a friend, a classmate, a teammate, a student, a beloved and devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

During the month of November, we remember the souls of all the faithful departed. As we pray for the deceased, we remember that for the Lord's faithful people, life is changed, not ended. Those who have died in Christ have entered an eternal life that is fuller and more glorious than anything we have ever experienced on earth. We who are left behind feel the emptiness of their going from us, but for them there is no more sadness or suffering or pain. If we live in the light of hope, the sadness of parting will be followed, at the end of our own lives, by a reunion in which God will "wipe away every tear from our eyes" (Revelation 21:4).

We who remain will be brought together with all those who have died and see the Lord face to face. Together in heaven, we shall always be with the Lord. In a particular way, during this month dedicated to praying for the faithful departed, I have been praying for Dominik, that he may be remembered among those who have been raised by God to the fullness of life. Please pray for Dominik, and continue to pray for all the faithful departed. May Jesus Christ, who is goodness and mercy, intercede for all those who mourn the loss of Dominik, and may the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

*Into your hands, Father of mercies,
we commend our brother Dominik
in the sure and certain hope
that, together with all who have died in Christ,
he will rise with him on the last day.*

*We give you thanks for the blessings
which you have bestowed upon Dominik in this life:
they are signs to us of your goodness
and of our fellowship with the saints in Christ.*

*Merciful Lord,
turn toward us and listen to our prayers:
open the gates of paradise to your servant
and help us who remain
to comfort one another with assurances of faith,
until we all meet in Christ
and are with you and our brother for ever.*

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.
-Prayer of Commendation, Order of Christian Funerals



Love Yourself

By Joe Cuda

During this Year of Mercy, I've been pierced by this question: how merciful am I to myself? The question echoes within me because I realize how unmerciful I can be to myself sometimes. And the degree of mercy I extend to myself, whether I know it or not, invariably affects the mercy I give to others. That is a significant truth, yet how often I overlook that!

Jesus tells us to "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt 22:39) It's easy to take that verse at face value and think, "Just love your neighbor." But the modifying phrase, "as yourself," tells us we need to love ourselves in order to fully love our neighbor. We need to be merciful to ourselves if we are to be merciful to others.

Our self-love seeps into our actions and affects our relationships in subtle and not so subtle ways. If I dislike and fail to embrace my quieter and more reflective nature, then it will be hard for me to fully embrace the same in another. How can I love another if I choose to hate that which is in me? And if I make a mistake and don't let it go, then my bitterness can affect what I do for others. If I don't practice even little acts of mercy towards myself, what will make me give such mercy towards another?

God wants us to be kind to ourselves. He wants us to overcome those self-critical thoughts and stop holding grudges against ourselves. He yearns for us to forgive ourselves and to believe in the gifts he has given us.

Whenever we struggle to love ourselves, God is always there to receive us in our wounds. He is the Father who wants us to see the goodness within ourselves and embrace it. 1 John 4:10-11, says "We love because he first loved us." This is where the path of mercy and service begins! For us to love ourselves ever more fully so that we can love others ever more fully, we have to continually encounter Christ and abide in his intimate love. Then our hearts will be on fire because He reveals to us who we are and shows us how to love: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (Jn 15:9). Christ enlivens us with self-acceptance and self-worth so we can go out and give to others the mercy and love by which we have been loved.

In this Year of Mercy, let us strive to be merciful to ourselves so that we can be merciful to all, asking Jesus: "Lord, help me to love myself as much as you love me."



The Church's Best Kept Secret

By Eric Clayton

I had lived in Baltimore for only a few months when some friends came to town. They insisted we see the Inner Harbor, and so off we went, adventuring on foot. I'll be very honest: having grown up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, I was still getting used to the number of individuals on the streets asking for money. My instincts always screamed: KEEP WALKING; DON'T MAKE EYE CONTACT; YOU HAVE NO MONEY TO GIVE. And usually by the time my inner voices settled down, I was a block or two past the questioner.

But when my friends and I decided on crepes for lunch, I found myself unable to keep walking past the homeless man who was hunkered down directly in front of the door to our intended restaurant. In my mind, of course, it became a game of lowered eyes, mumbled replies and a quick grab for the doorknob.

Not so, for my friends. While I was shuffling past the man and his quiet request for help, my two friends stopped, asked his name, and shook his hand. "I'll tell you what, buddy," my one friend replied. "I don't carry any cash. But why don't I buy you a crepe?" The gentleman thought that would be just fine, and so in we all went to place our orders.

I don't remember that man's name, what we discussed, or what kind of crepe he got. But I do know that my comfortable, ready-made response to those I encountered on the streets asking for money suddenly became embarrassingly out-of-touch and morally questionable. What's more, I was awestruck by the knee-jerk reaction of my two friends: where I cast my eyes down, they looked another human being in the face and smiled.

If you hear anything about Catholic Social Teaching, you often hear that it's the Church's best kept secret. Why is that? Because we sometimes don't realize that popes, theologians, saints and everyday Catholics have been thinking, praying, and writing about issues of hunger, war, poverty, and injustice for a very long time. And, as a result, we have a pretty elaborate, intellectually rigorous and philosophically challenging framework within which to address the most pressing issues of our day.

So often, those who are in on this best kept secret are often intimidated because they think they need a degree just to wrap their minds around Catholic Social Teaching. Not so. Certainly don't miss out on the chance to study these teachings, but prayer is what helps us get at the heart of the matter.

I spent a lot of time over the following weeks reflecting on that encounter between me, my friends, and that man outside the crepe shop. Why was I so struck, so inspired? Could this have been what the disciples saw in Jesus, why they were so attracted to him? Did they see an individual who met the gaze of those in need with a smile and an outstretched hand?

Let us take the person of Jesus—God, who we meet in prayer and life's daily joys and struggles—and go from there. That's the heart of Catholic Social Teaching.

We realize that every person we come across in our day—those we intend to meet, and those who stop us for money—are lived expressions of God in our world, opportunities to meet Christ. It becomes a lot harder to ignore them. What's more, we begin to see that as we encounter Christ in others, we find ourselves drawn deeper into the plight of those most in need. We ask ourselves, "how can such injustice be allowed to exist?" And God responds, "Well, then do something."

That's now what I find myself forced to grapple with when I encounter individuals on the street, in the news, wherever. Because if I admit that we are all part of God's family, that my existence here and your existence there are less about what we're doing and more about what God's doing, my perspective has to change. I have a responsibility to act, to live my life in a more intentional way.

At Catholic Relief Services, we throw the word solidarity around like it's a Frisbee on the beach. But that doesn't make it any less important. It is, after all, a key element of Catholic Social Teaching. And it calls us to live beyond ourselves, to recognize God in all things and all people and to work for a world that is just and peaceful for all. And sometimes, that work begins with the guy you passed on the street outside the crepe shop who's asking for some change.

Saintly Inspiration



St. Vincent Pallotti and the Year of Mercy

By Pat Fricchione

"Keep multiplying your commitment because what Vincent Pallotti prophetically announced, the Second Vatican Council authoritatively confirmed, becoming a happy reality, and all Christians are authentic apostles of Christ and the church and in the world!" -St. John Paul II, 1986

Every January 22nd, we celebrate the feast day of Saint Vincent Pallotti. He is the patron of the Catholic Apostolate Center and his vision guides the Center in all of its works. Today is a special day in which we remember the works, deeds, and vision of St. Vincent Pallotti. I could write to you about his many deeds, his self-sacrificing attitude, or his disdain for honors, but I feel that that is not the proper way to celebrate him. He would be satisfied knowing that we are spending our time recounting his life, and would encourage us to go out into the world doing works of charity and preaching the gospel. St. Vincent Pallotti inspires me. Especially in this Year of Mercy, we need examples of people like him who have led merciful lives.

St. Vincent Pallotti had a very simple question that he asked, that took him a lifetime to answer: "Who is God and who am I before him?" Over the past few years this simple question posed by St. Vincent Pallotti has driven my prayer. Many of us have 'stock' answers for the first part of the question such as: God is the Father, He is all powerful and ever loving, He is the creator of the universe, the Unmovable mover, and the very essence of infinite love. But for St. Vincent Pallotti, these 'stock' answers are just that, stock. They're not the answers from the heart that St. Vincent Pallotti demands. He wants us to form the answer that only we can answer. He then asks us to find ourselves in this context. Let us ponder how we are to respond to his question because the two are intimately connected. At every stage of our lives, this answer is challenged. I invite you to take it back to prayer every single time you pray.

"Learn from the Lord to be merciful to your brethren. Trust you will receive from Him a loving and compassionate heart." -St. Vincent Pallotti, 1833

St. Vincent Pallotti expressed that we need to show mercy to all and led by example. As a priest, he would minister to anyone in need. He would visit prisoners, revolutionaries, students, popes, and future popes. He gave himself completely to those in need and wanted those around him to do the same. St. Vincent Pallotti's example invites us to express mercy even when it seems impossible to do so. This is the way to serve all.

The spirituality of St. Vincent Pallotti is relevant to us today. His writings on mercy, for example, sound like they could be quotes from Pope Francis and not the writings from over 180 years ago. In my own spiritual life, St. Vincent Pallotti's vision inspires me to act with the merciful heart that reflects the power of God's infinite love to all, no matter who they are. This manifests itself in my interactions with my family, friends, coworkers, and anyone I meet. I also make sure that I give back to the community by volunteering and serving others. We can also show mercy to anyone with a simple smile. In times when I feel uninspired and defeated by the world, I can turn to St. Vincent for a quote or gesture that gets me through the challenge. He has revived my faith, rekindled my charity, formed me into an apostle, and will continue to do so every day of my life by leading me to Christ.

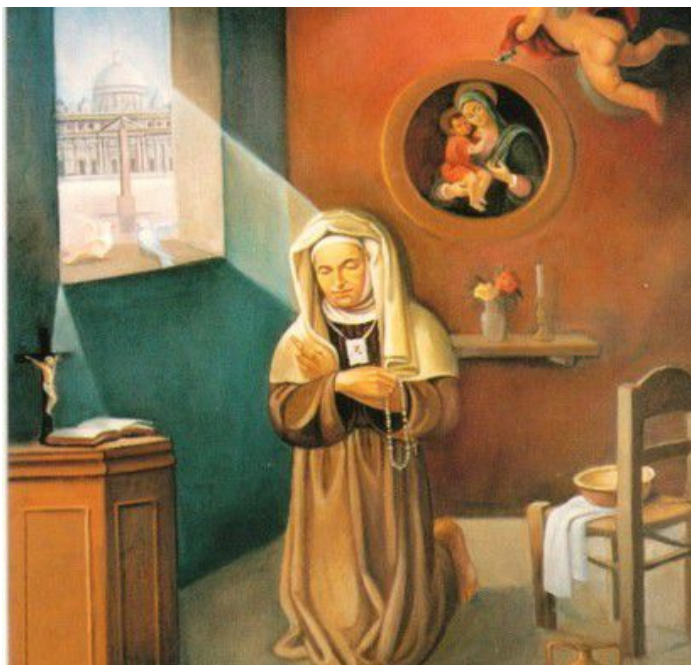
St. Vincent Pallotti's vision is as relevant today as it was over 180 years ago. We at the Catholic Apostolate Center and Pallottine apostolates all over the world continue to be inspired by his work. We thank God for this great Saint.

May the charity of Christ urge us on!



The Venerable Elisabetta Sanna

By Conor Boland



Not too long ago, as I knelt in prayer at the tomb of the Venerable Elisabetta Sanna, I experienced a great sense of peace. I also felt a profound connection to this holy woman, who is largely unknown in the United States. I was blessed to be in Rome on a pilgrimage with a few great friends during our university's winter break. Before embarking on the pilgrimage, my thoughts chiefly centered on finishing final exams and looking forward to having the opportunity to pray with Pope Francis at St. Peter's Basilica. This opportunity with the Holy Father ended up becoming a moment I will always treasure. Yet, as I reflect back on the pilgrimage, it is clear that my encounter with the Venerable Elisabetta Sanna in the small Church of San Salvatore in Onda left the greatest mark on my spiritual life.

Born in 1788, Elisabetta Sanna grew up in Sardinia. When only three months old, Elisabetta contracted smallpox, a disease that left her physically handicapped for the rest of her life. Despite her disability, Elisabetta married and had seven children. She became well known in her town for

devoting herself to the catechetical education of youth. Elisabetta also educated women from the town in basic Christian doctrine. After her husband died in 1825, Elisabetta decided to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and entrusted her children to the care of her mother and brother. Though she started her pilgrimage, Elisabetta never made it to the Holy Land, instead going to Rome. It was in Rome that she met a humble priest with a bold vision proclaiming that all the baptized were called to be apostles. This priest, Fr. Vincent Pallotti, would become her spiritual director, as well as a saint. He was canonized on January 20th, 1963 by Pope John XXIII.

While Elisabetta planned on returning to her children in Sardinia, her physical disability prevented her from travelling back. Hence, while understandably upset, Elisabetta remained in Rome and continued to selflessly serve others in collaboration with Fr. Vincent Pallotti. In addition to performing multiple works of mercy, such as visiting the terminally ill, Elisabetta's life was rooted in prayer. Both Sacred Scripture and the Holy Mass gave her the ability to be the face of Christ to the marginalized. In other words, Elisabetta's love for Jesus Christ, which was grounded in her personal prayer, impelled her to the apostolate.

What I find so remarkable and inspiring about Elisabetta's life is that her path towards holiness appears so un-extraordinary. She was not the founder of a religious community, nor did she author a great theological treatise. Yet, it is exactly the ordinariness of her life that makes her so extraordinary. Elisabetta's life is important because it demonstrates that God calls each one of us, in whatever place, in whatever situation, to be apostles. If you begin to doubt your ability to do great things for Jesus, look to the example of Elisabetta. I invite you to pray for her intercession and ask her to assist you in living out your vocation to be an apostle.

On the Importance of Catechesis

By Rebecca Ruesch

On November 4th, the Church celebrates the memorial of St. Charles Borromeo, a scholar and theologian. He was instrumental in responding to the Protestant Reformation, and was named the Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan in 1564. Charles Borromeo has the distinction of being one of four saints mentioned in the Prologue to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and he is mentioned as a significant force behind the products of the Council of Trent, which "initiated a remarkable organization of the Church's catechesis" (CCC 9). In addition to working for the Catholic Apostolate Center, I work in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Secretariat for Evangelization and Catechesis. While the New Evangelization efforts have brought renewed use of Evangelization in the vocabulary of many Catholics, often we forget about the importance of catechesis.

There is no easy, succinct definition for catechesis. Rather, it is a process that is both interactive and ongoing. We tend to use it most when discussing the formation of catechumens, especially in the teaching of young children or through the RCIA process. The USCCB describes catechesis as "the act of handing on the Word of God intended to inform the faith community and candidates for initiation into the Church about the teachings of Christ, transmitted by the Apostles to the Church." At some point in our faith formation, most of us have experienced catechesis. Whether it was the elementary school teachers who taught you in religion classes in Catholic schools, the religious education teachers through your parish CCD program, or RCIA formation leaders, we have all benefited from the important work that catechists do. Through their tireless dedication to teaching and spreading the faith, these men and women play an integral role in our Church.

However, catechesis also takes place at a much more informal level as well. As the USCCB notes, "catechesis also involves the lifelong effort of forming people into witnesses to Christ and opening their hearts to the spiritual transformation given by the Holy Spirit." Catechesis is an interactive process, not merely one person teaching another, but also involves a personal commitment to our own faith development. I know I have personally grown and developed in my faith through typical classroom learning, but also through life experiences. Catechesis takes both these forms. We never know the impact our words and actions can have on others, and perhaps your own experiences have helped someone else on their faith journey! Take a moment today to reflect on your own faith development and pray the prayer below, through the intercession of St. Charles Borromeo, for all those who have taken on the task of teaching our faith to others.



Jesus, you told us that laborers for the vineyard would be few and that we should pray to the Lord of the Harvest in the hope that many might respond. You have answered our prayers by sending us catechists for your vineyard.

Bless these men and women who have responded to your call to the ministry of catechesis. May they be filled with zeal for your Church, with care for those they catechize, and with love for your Word of Life. Let your Spirit come upon them so that your Word may echo through their teaching and through the witness of their lives. Through our catechists, may the members of our parish whom they teach be transformed into witnesses to your Word. And may these catechists receive the blessing your Son promised to all who labor in your vineyard.

We pray to you, gracious Father, in the name of your Son, Jesus, the Word of Life, and in the unity of the Holy Spirit who transforms us by that Word, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Women of Faith

By Krissy Kirby

When I look at my faith journey and the twists and turns it has taken, I consider the people who have impacted it the most. Many of these people have come into my life and taught me something about my faith or about myself in one way or another, through positive relationships, prayer, and community. In the past couple of years, I have been blessed to get to know a few Catholic young women who have become a faith support system for me. These women from different walks of life have been living as witnesses of loyalty, honesty, and vulnerability on their individual faith journeys and have stood as role models to me in mine. Their witness of Christ's enduring love inspires me to be the best Catholic woman I can be.

My faith journey has also been inspired by Our Blessed Mother's "Yes" to God and faithful obedience throughout her life. She, along with many women in the Church, serve as witnesses of faith while living often tumultuous lives on earth. Below is a short summary of five real women with strong characteristics that each can serve as models for us as we move forward on our journeys of faith.

Saint Maria Goretti is remembered for forgiving, while on her deathbed, the man who stabbed her after she refused his sexual advances at the young age of eleven. This Italian saint is often depicted gazing at the Virgin Mother while clutching a crucifix. Maria shows us not only an intense love of Christ, but also exemplifies forgiveness. She forgave her attacker, a man who later became a Capuchin lay brother. By following her example, we can learn to forgive those in our lives who have wronged us and maybe learn to be forgiven ourselves, which can help our hearts be pure through the Sacrament of Penance.

Saint Clare of Assisi is remembered for her empathy and care for the poor. She was a monastic Benedictine nun who later founded the Order of Poor Ladies in the Franciscan tradition. With a strong devotion to Saint Francis, Clare adopted his faithfulness to the poor and desired to live humbly with her order. Clare shows us how to live in service to others by giving of our time and prayer to people in need. We can imitate her example by donating gently used clothing or volunteering at soup kitchens all year round.

Saint Joan of Arc is remembered for her bravery and leadership. She defied secular norms and led soldiers to victory in France. Joan, who is the patron saint of soldiers and France, lived for Christ through her actions. Her bravery can give us courage to persevere through any vocation God has for our lives. She shows us the importance of following God's call, whether we are preparing to take vows or changing careers.

Saint Kateri Tekakwitha is remembered for steadfast devotion to Christ after converting to Catholicism and cultivating a desire to live devoutly for God. In the face of adversity within her family (her parents and brother died of smallpox when she was only four years old) and rejection by her Native American community, Kateri stayed true to her heart and had faith in God. Kateri is the first Native American saint and was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012.

Saint Therese of Lisieux is remembered for her undying love for Christ and ongoing cheerfulness until her death at age twenty-four. Known as the "Little Flower," Therese lived simply and fully in pursuit of a deep and genuine relationship with God. She became the third female and youngest Doctor of the Church in 1997. Therese once said of her life, "It is impossible for me to grow up, so I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short and totally new." She shows us how to stay joyful and childlike by fully opening our hearts to Christ and seeking God in our own little ways.

These women and countless others served God through their words, actions, and commitment to the Gospel. I invite you to take a moment to consider these female saints and hundreds of others who witness to their faith. How can Christ help you be brave, like St. Joan of Arc, or instill in you a burning devotion to the Gospel, like St. Kateri Tekakwitha? In what ways can you give to the poor or exercise other corporal and spiritual works of mercy, like St. Claire of Assisi? How can you forgive others, like St. Maria Goretti, or remain joyful like St. Therese of Lisieux? Let us look to the saints, pray for strength, and learn to live through faith.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

By Nicholas Shields

Mary has appeared throughout the last two thousand years to different peoples all around the world. The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe celebrates the Virgin Mary's appearance to Juan Diego on the Hill of Tepeyac outside of Mexico City. We have all heard the story of how Mary appeared to Juan Diego and told him to build a church on the hill in her honor. Upon returning to his town and informing the Archbishop of what he had seen, the Archbishop instructed him to return to Tepeyac and ask for a sign that this was indeed the Virgin Mary. Mary instructed Juan Diego to fill his tilma with roses and carry them back to the Archbishop. When Juan Diego laid the roses before the Archbishop there on his tilma was an image of the Virgin Mary, the image that we know today as Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Basilica built on the very spot of her appearance is the most visited Catholic site in the world. This alone speaks to the widespread devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe throughout the world. Today's feast day provides us with a wonderful opportunity to remember the universality of Mary. She has appeared to many different cultures at many different times throughout history and with each depiction she reminds us that she stands beside each and every one of us as a mother for all people.

Pope Francis, in an audience shortly before the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe in 2013, spoke of one of the most important aspects of Mary: "When the image of the Virgin appeared on the tilma of Juan Diego, it was the prophecy of an embrace: Mary's embrace of all the peoples of the vast expanses of America – the peoples who already lived there, and those who were yet to come. Mary's embrace showed what America – North and South – is called to be: a land where different peoples come together; a land prepared to accept human life at every stage, from the mother's womb to old age; a land which welcomes immigrants, and the poor and the marginalized, in every age. A land of generosity." This points right to the heart of Mary as our Mother, a Mother for all peoples, for all cultures.

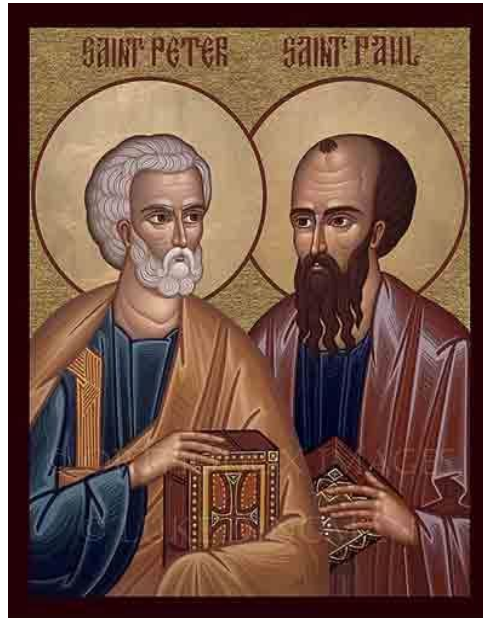
The Virgin Mary is an important aspect of my own faith, but for one reason or another, her depiction as Our Lady of Guadalupe holds a special place in my heart. It might be because her feast day is also my birthday, or because my Dad often jokes that he wanted to name me Guadalupe, or that I grew up in Texas where this depiction is very prominent. I do not know why her image speaks to me so deeply, but I do know that in my devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe I feel a Mother's embrace. I know that she welcomes me in and I feel at home.

But we are not meant to just live for that embrace of Mary, our Mother, but rather we are called to embrace all peoples and all cultures. And Mary teaches us how! She is the perfect example of how to live out that embrace. She unites us in our humanity and she strengthens our faith in Jesus. She knelt before the cross watching her own son die, and yet when Christ entrusted all of humanity to her, she said yes. She opened her arms and welcomed us in. On this Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, let us be like her, let us open ourselves to the whole Church, not just in our local communities but throughout the world.



Pillars of Mercy

By Victor David



The Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul gives the faithful the opportunity to reflect on many different subjects. For instance, it is on this feast that the Pope traditionally presents the pallium to newly installed metropolitan archbishops, signifying their union with the Holy See. The feast is also important for the ecumenical movement because it is on this day that leaders of both the Catholic and Orthodox churches come together to pray and work towards full communion. However, one theme that seems to be missed is that of God's mercy as exemplified by the lives of these two leaders of the early Church. And with the Jubilee Year of Mercy upcoming, one might want to look to these great saints for some inspiration.

One of the most well-known moments of the Passion is when Peter denies Christ three times (Mt 26:69-75) even after promising Jesus that, "though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be" (Mk 14:29). Likewise, Paul also denied Jesus by his persecution of the disciples. He even takes part in the death of the first martyr, St. Stephen (Acts 7:58-60). If their stories had stopped there, we might judge the first as a fare-weather follower and the second as a ruthless fanatic.

Yet, we know that is not how the story ends. In the Gospel of John, Jesus appears to his disciples as they are fishing. They are eating breakfast on the shore when Christ asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" to which Peter replies yes twice and at the third time says, "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you" (Jn 21:15-17). And thus, Peter is redeemed and given the charge by Jesus to "Feed my sheep." He becomes the leader of the early church and by tradition is regarded as the first pope.

On his way to Damascus, Paul sees a bright light from the sky and voice crying out, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). The voice is revealed to be that of Jesus himself. Blinded by the light, Paul enters Damascus when one of Jesus' disciples, Ananias, lays his hands on him at the Lord's command. Upon doing so, Paul's vision is regained, is baptized, and goes on to preach the Gospel throughout the Mediterranean.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that, "The Church is not holy by herself; in fact, she is made up of sinners...Rather, she is made holy ever anew by the Holy One of God, by the purifying love of Christ." Similarly, Pope Francis recalls, "[God] never tires of forgiving, but at times we get tired of asking for forgiveness...He is the loving Father who always pardons, who has that heart of mercy for us all." The lives of Sts. Peter and Paul show us that no one is beyond forgiveness, so long as he or she seeks the mercy of God. Therefore, these two great pillars of the Church are a great reminder to have as we approach the Jubilee Year.

Resurrected Repentance

By Kate Fowler

I remember the first time I felt true repentance. It was not because I got caught making a bad decision; not because I simply felt guilty; not because I thought about what others might think of me—all of which might be gateways to repentance, but not sufficient in and of themselves. I remember the first time I felt true repentance out of love of Christ and sorrow for the rejection of His love through my sin.

I was in a small chapel in the hills of Los Gatos on a five-day Ignatian Silent Retreat. The assignment on this particular afternoon was to spend time praying over and reflecting on your past sin, on how you had rejected God's love and, in so doing, on how you had contributed to His pain on the Cross. It was a heavy day.

I took a deep breath in the chapel and started remembering and reflecting on past sinful decisions. Some, I knew blatantly. Others seemed inspired by the Holy Spirit. I had not even realized how past decisions might have affected other people more than myself, and I was illuminated in such a way that I saw how my sins spread out like a web contaminating the lives of others. Tears flowed unguarded from my eyes. How could I have done such things? I placed myself within the crucifixion narrative and saw that I had joined the Roman soldiers with their whips, their taunts, their hammers. I had pierced my Lord.

I felt terrible—like the scum on the bottom of a lake in the darkness.

And then I felt Him. I felt His gaze from the tabernacle. He beckoned me, inviting my eyes to meet His own.

"I can't look back at you, Lord," my heart said. "I'm too broken, too ashamed, too unworthy." I kept looking down at my lap, afraid to meet His gaze. But the feeling of being looked at persisted, gently. After a few moments, I could no longer bear it. Anything, even Christ's condemnation, would be better than avoiding Him.

I looked up. And I met Love.

I felt Christ's presence in the tabernacle and saw Him looking at me as a bridegroom looks at his bride on their wedding day: joy, peace and love filling his face, eyes brimming with pride and tears and awe. The gaze with which Christ looked at me turned my blemishes into radiance. I became a spotless bride because of the overflow of His love. I knew, in the midst of my sin and ugliness, perhaps the ugliest I had ever felt, that I was inherently and infinitely loved, that my dignity was in Him. And so the tears flowed evermore—tears of humility, peace and joy. I had been given yet another chance, which I used to further receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I assume the joy and freedom I felt after this experience and after going to Confession is how Mary Magdalene felt when she met the Christ and was freed from seven demons. We know with certainty that Mary Magdalene had been cured of seven demons, that she was a follower of Christ and that she was present at the crucifixion. We also know Mary Magdalene, like all of us, was a sinner. When Christ met her, she might have given up. She had been plagued by seven demons and thought that perhaps she would never be free. Christ offers her another alternative: freedom. As a result of our encounter with Christ's forgiveness--both by encountering His love and by being reconciled to Him--we can live in the joy of the Resurrection.

For this reason, it is fitting that Mary Magdalene is cited as the first witness of the Resurrection. St. Augustine called her the Apostle to the Apostles. We find Mary Magdalene in John's Gospel weeping by the open tomb of Jesus three days after His burial, for she thinks His body has been stolen. When Christ meets her, she mistakes him for the gardener. "Mary!" Jesus exclaims to his forlorn disciple, calling her by name (John 20:16). "Kate!" He exclaimed to me in the chapel. He meets us in our despair, our sorrow. Only then can we join Mary Magdalene in looking at Christ, recognizing Him and meeting His gaze. I imagine she grasped her bridegroom's feet, kissing them in thanksgiving and bowing before Him. We cannot stay there in gratitude. Christ called me to go out from the chapel and to go out after receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as he did Mary Magdalene:

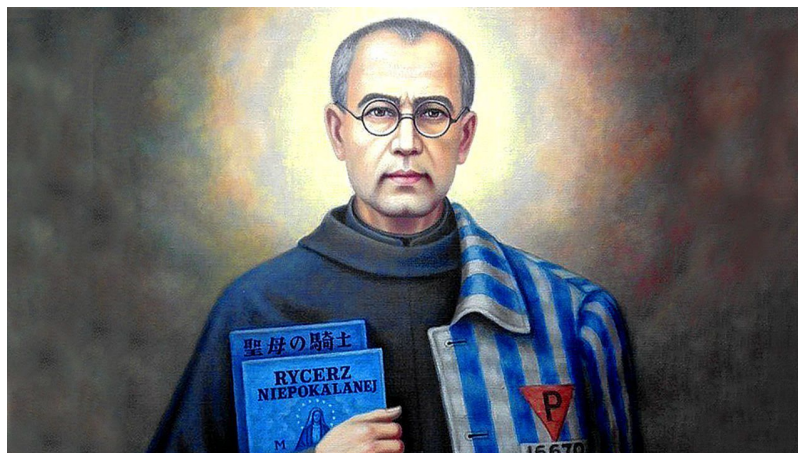
"Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers" (John 20:17).

Different Shapes of Mercy

By Jennifer Beckmann

Pope John Paul II, in his homily at the Mass he celebrated at the site of the Brzezinka (Auschwitz II) Concentration Camp in 1979; called St. Maximilian Kolbe "the patron of our difficult century." Although the dawn of a new century has since come, St. Maximilian remains a strong symbol of Christian charity today. Seventy-four years ago tomorrow, he offered up an ultimate act of charity while knowing it would cost him his own life to save another.

While Maximilian Kolbe was a prisoner at Auschwitz, several men escaped from the camp. In an attempt to deter other prisoners from trying to escape, the officers chose ten men to starve to death. When one of the men chosen expressed his anguish because he had a wife and children, St. Maximilian willingly volunteered to take his place. After two weeks without food or water, St. Maximilian was the only one of the ten still alive. At that point, he was killed by a lethal injection. Although we cannot know for certain what happened while the ten men were held in the bunker, there are reports that St. Maximilian spent much of the two weeks leading the other nine in prayer to the Blessed Mother.



Most of us will not be called to make the same sacrifice as St. Maximilian did for a stranger, but God calls each of us to works of charity and mercy. The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy are simple ways to love God and to love our neighbor. This might mean sacrificing your Saturday afternoon to drive an elderly neighbor to her doctor's appointment or to volunteer at a food pantry. Mercy might take the form of comforting a coworker or classmate (regardless of whether or not you are friends) when you notice them grieving. Mercy means not honking or cursing, but instead offering up a prayer when someone cuts you off in traffic. Mercy could mean not buying another sweater when you already have ten hanging in your closet and instead donating the money to a charity for the homeless. Every act of mercy requires some sacrifice--whether you are giving up time, money, or a bit of yourself--but there is no simpler way to tell God that you love Him.

St. Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us!

Let His Mercy Be Known

By Joe Cuda

St. Catherine of Siena was a 14th century tertiary Dominican and Doctor of the Church, who was renowned for her ardent prayer, peacemaking, and writing. Her life is filled with stories that reflect a transparent faith in the power of God's intervention, her desire for unity within the Church, and her gifts in healing and touching the lives of others.

I discovered St. Catherine a few years ago when I read this passage. She writes these words with the same devotion and absolute trust with which she lived her life by:

"I don't want you to yield to weariness or confusion, no matter what may trouble your spirit. No, I want you to keep the good, holy, and true faithful will that I know God in his mercy has given you. Be glad...celebrate! Without any slavish fear take courage. Don't be afraid, no matter what has happened, no matter what you see coming. Take courage for perfection is very accessible" (excerpt from her Letter to Br. Raimondo of Capua at Avignon).

Whenever I read these words, they indicate to me that St. Catherine must have experienced trials herself and had her faith tested. Don't we all struggle with weariness or battle the armies of confusion? St. Catherine doesn't want us to get caught up in the messiness of our sins and plights but rather in the will of God that will lead us through our struggles.

The reason we should "be glad and celebrate" is because God's will is there to guide us through the midst of it all. And this, as St. Catherine reminds us, is a wonderful gift of God's great mercy, which is able to penetrate into our past, present, and future experiences.

God's will can sometimes seem so hard to understand, a mystery that is more hidden than it is found. Many often ponder, "What is God's will for my life? and ask, "Lord, what is your will...what should I be doing?" But St. Catherine knows God's will is more simple and apparent than we think. He doesn't hide it so much as reveal it or deter us so much as lead us to it.

We should "take courage" because God has revealed everything in the perfection of Christ his Son, who lived among us and entered into the human experience. He is so near, so accessible.

What is God's will for us then except to grow into the perfection of Christ? St. Paul reminds us that, "God has called [us] through our Gospel to possess the glory of Jesus Christ." (2 Thes. 2:14). Every day we are invited to grow towards sanctity and heaven by rising with Christ in the midst of our circumstances. We are to mature in love so as to become ourselves fully in Christ. If we strive for this first, God will surely lead us down the narrower paths of our lives.

God is always at work in us if only we open ourselves to him. I invite you to think and pray about your own life. How have you grown in virtue over the years? This is evidence of God's grace alive in your heart and mind! St. Catherine points directly to Christ, the Fountain of Life that is never depleted of its mercy and compassion! In him we really can do anything.

Let us then "take courage" in our lives and "celebrate" Christ and the mercy of God! We need not be afraid!

Thank you St. Catherine for your life and example! Pray for us, that we can fight the good fight and become ourselves fully in Christ. May we experience deeper the reality of God's great mercy.



The Gift of Mercy



The Meaning of the Jubilee Year of Mercy

By Carolyn Leatherman

I still remember as if it were yesterday. There I was—a junior in high school with my sights set on my then life's goal of playing college soccer—listening to the doctor tell me the results of the recent X-ray: "You have a stress fracture in your left ankle." My heart sank, and I immediately focused on the most apparent, inevitable consequence of that injury: I would have to sit out the whole season, meaning I would miss crucial recruiting opportunities. To say the least, I was discouraged as I stood before the rather large and ominous mountain that so suddenly impeded the pursuit of my goal. I instantly began feeling sorry for myself and let anger creep into my heart. Then, in what I now look back upon and gratefully remember as "the moment of mercy," I heard God's gentle voice speak to the depths of my heart and tell me, "Carolyn, there's more to life than soccer." With my heart pierced by that voice, my desire to play college soccer disappeared. I soon began making decisions that would lead me to the people and places that God had in mind for me to more deeply encounter His mercy and to discover the actual goal of my life.

During my first year of college, the Lord sent a spiritual director into my life who asked me a life-changing question: "Carolyn, what is the goal of your life?" At that time, I couldn't honestly answer, since I couldn't yet put into words what the Lord had begun stirring in my heart through the stress fracture event. Yet, over the next few years of college as I continued spiritual direction and developed a more habitual prayer and sacramental life, the Lord began to show me the answer to the question: Communion with God—holiness—is the goal of my life, because Love is the meaning of life.

In a special way during the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Church is called to be "a living sign of the Father's love in the world" (*Misericordiae Vultus* 4). At the heart of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, we find the Person of God the Father, whose love is both the origin and goal of our life. The Year of Mercy is a special time of grace in the Church, and Jesus invites us to daily re-encounter our Heavenly Father, to be renewed by His love—which alone gives meaning to our life—and to joyfully share the gift of His love with those whom the Lord entrusts to us each day. At a General Audience on December 9, 2015 (the day after the opening of the Year of Mercy), Pope Francis emphasized the purpose of the Jubilee Year:

"Turning our gaze to God, our merciful Father, and to our brothers and sisters in need of mercy, means focusing our attention on the essential contents of the Gospel: Jesus, Mercy made flesh, who renders the great mystery of the Trinitarian Love of God visible to our eyes. Celebrating a Jubilee of Mercy is equivalent to placing once again the specific nature of the Christian faith, namely Jesus Christ, the merciful God, at the center of our personal life and that of our communities."

In other words, Pope Francis is saying that the invitation during this Jubilee Year of Mercy is to "return to the basics" of our faith: to enter more deeply into the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which is "the central mystery of Christian faith and life" (CCC 234). In fact, Pope Francis begins his letter for the Jubilee Year with words which aim to "sum up the mystery of the Christian faith", namely, that "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy" (*Misericordiae Vultus* 1). Jesus' whole earthly mission was to reveal the truth about God's inner life of love and man's vocation to that love that originates from the Father's heart (John 17:3; CCC 514-518). This is why Jesus tells Philip, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Everything Jesus says and does reveals the Father (CCC 516) and aims at "restoring fallen man to his original vocation" (CCC 518) of love.

Thus, the Jubilee Year of Mercy is a special moment of grace to daily re-orient the gaze of our hearts towards the merciful gaze of the Father that tenderly awaits us. This gentle and loving gaze of the Father reveals the love that alone is the origin, goal, and meaning of our life. As Pope Saint John Paul II says, "Man and man's lofty calling are revealed in Christ through the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love" (*Dives in misericordia* 1). May we live this Jubilee Year by creating the space in our daily lives—particularly through prayer and frequent reception of the Sacraments—to encounter Jesus and to let our merciful Father love us. We ask Mary, Mother of Mercy, to help us open our hearts and be more receptive to the Father's love. May we give her permission to use us as instruments of God's mercy in the lives of others so that we can share the gift of His love with those whom God entrusts to us.

Experiencing God's Mercy

By Fr. Frank Donio, S.A.C.

During a parish mission for Lent that focused on the Jubilee of Mercy, I found that a simple review of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy had a profound impact on those who participated. My short reflections on the works of mercy were not meant to be at time of group guilt about what had not been done, but instead provided an opportunity for the participants and for me to reflect, and then - hopefully - act. In the reaction of the participants, I witnessed a revival of faith and a rekindling of charity that, I believe, will lead to deeper living as apostles or missionary disciples.

God's mercy and love are offered not just for a moment, but forever. Lent is a perfect time to experience again God's mercy and live well the works of mercy. We strive to know Jesus Christ more fully through the Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Sometimes almsgiving is seen as something simply monetary. If almsgiving, however, is not only related to our treasure, but also to our time and talent, then we can see how easily the corporal and spiritual works of mercy can help us express all three aspects of this Lenten practice.

Pope Francis invites us to reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in his Lenten Message,

"For all of us, then, the season of Lent in this Jubilee Year is a favorable time to overcome our existential alienation by listening to God's word and by practicing the works of mercy. In the corporal works of mercy we touch the flesh of Christ in our brothers and sisters who need to be fed, clothed, sheltered, visited; in the spiritual works of mercy - counsel, instruction, forgiveness, admonishment and prayer - we touch more directly our own sinfulness."

May the charity of Christ urge us on to live well the works of mercy!



The Gift of Mercy, The Gift of Hope

By David Burkey

On the Sunday following Easter, the Church recognizes Divine Mercy Sunday, a day that carries an even greater emphasis during the Year of Mercy as announced by Pope Francis. Divine Mercy Sunday 2016 is a day that carries a special significance to my family.

My family will mark the tenth anniversary of the passing of my grandfather, known best to his grandchildren as "Pop-pop." He was a man of great generosity both to his family and to each of his patients, who he spent his career serving as a cardiologist. He was also a man of great faith, who in his passing left his family with the greatest gift, one of faith in God's infinite mercy.

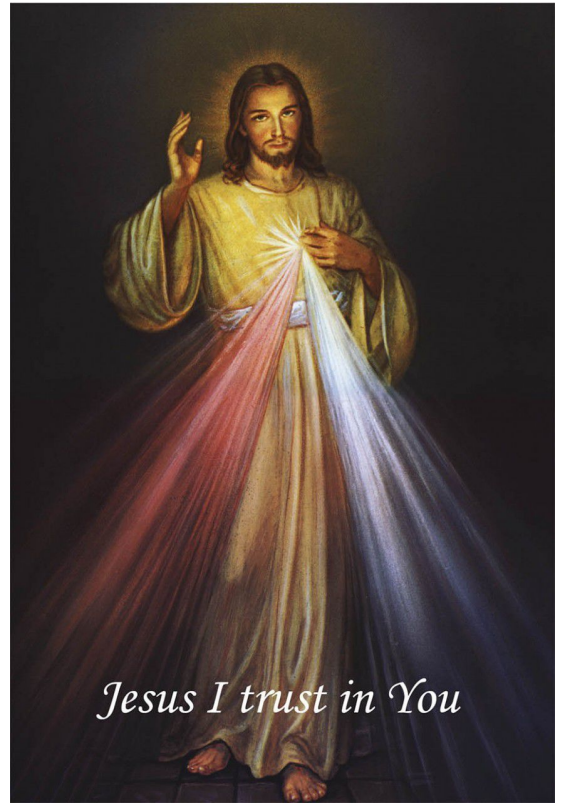
In the months before his death, as he gradually grew weaker and his cancer spread, he found a great peace in praying the Divine Mercy Chaplet. He was especially fond of praying the chaplet in song and even when he was too weak to say it himself, family and friends would pray it with him. It was widely known that at 3pm each day the television would be tuned to EWTN so he could recite the chaplet.

Providentially, a local Catholic film producer was filming a new production of the Divine Mercy Chaplet in song, entitled Generations Unite in Prayer and they were looking to film someone elderly with a devotion to this prayer. Despite concerns over my grandfather's declining health, he was insistent on being a part of this project and doing whatever he could to help spread the message of Divine Mercy. Also known for his sense of humor, on the day of filming, Pop-pop remarked, "It's a good thing Jesus is the star of this show, because I don't look so good" as the crew captured scenes of our family praying the chaplet at his bedside. Following the filming, my grandfather felt a renewed sense of determination: he wanted to live to see one more Divine Mercy Sunday. Although this was still many weeks away, by the grace of God he lived to see that day. In fact, on Divine Mercy Sunday he insisted on getting out of bed and kneeling before the image of Divine Mercy that hung by his bedside to offer a prayer of thanksgiving with the intercession of St. Faustina. He passed away two days later.

I was first introduced to the Chaplet of Divine Mercy when my grandfather was ill and still today I take great comfort in its words, particularly the words to the closing prayer:

Eternal God, in whom Mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion inexhaustible, look kindly upon us and increase your Mercy in us that in difficult moments we might not despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence submit ourselves to your holy will, which is love and mercy itself.

When facing personal trials I've found a great sense of hope in this simple prayer. Hope that whatever challenges I may be facing, God will grant me the peace and perseverance to see it through. Hope that despite my imperfections as a sinner, that I too may share in the glory of the resurrection. And the prayerful hope that death did not have the final word on that April day ten years ago, and that one day our family will join Pop-pop in his eternal reward.



The Threshold of Mercy

By Evan Ponton

The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy officially began on December 8, 2015, when Pope Francis opened the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica. Each of the four Major Basilicas in Rome features a Holy Door opened in the Jubilee year.

This Jubilee marks the first time in the history of the Catholic Church in which cathedrals and select churches and shrines in dioceses across the world were invited to designate Holy Doors outside of Rome. Pope Francis celebrated this historic gesture by opening the Holy Door at Bangui's Notre-Dame Cathedral in the Central African Republic. On December 13th, the Third Sunday of Advent, congregations celebrated the Rite of Opening of Holy Doors in local churches.

To promote the visitation of these Holy Doors around the world, the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization has compiled a list of the registered Doors of Mercy worldwide. The Holy Doors are prophetic symbols of the mission of mercy of the universal Church embodied in every local parish. For example, even amidst the turmoil in the Middle East, every parish in the Iraqi archdiocese of Erbil will feature a Holy Door. There are Holy Doors covering the globe from the Island of Fiji to a frigid shrine in Alaska.

In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII inaugurated the first Holy Year in the Catholic Church. Since then, the Catholic Church ordinarily celebrates a Jubilee every 25 years. The last Jubilee Year was in 2000 under the pontificate of Pope Saint John Paul II. Because a full 25 years have not passed, this Jubilee Year of Mercy is considered an "extraordinary" year.

The Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica consists of 16 panels by the Italian sculptor Vico Consorti telling the history of salvation—which is the story of God's mercy. Cardinal Virgilio Noe, the Master of Ceremonies for Blessed Paul VI, likened the Holy Door to "verses of a hymn, which sing of God's infinite mercy... They enlighten every moment of any situation with the certainty of divine forgiveness."



The Church's celebration of the Jubilee and the opening of Holy Doors has developed over time, but the tradition and symbolism find their roots in the Old Testament. Following seven seven-year periods (the number seven representing God's rest and the Sabbath), the fiftieth was a Year of Jubilee for the Israelites (Lev 25:8-10). This was a time specifically devoted to practicing mercy: debts were forgiven, slaves were set free, and the land was given rest by letting it lay fallow. Another symbol of mercy from the Old Testament includes Moses producing water by striking a rock (Numbers 20:11). We too receive abundant grace through our pursuit of mercy.

Crossing the "threshold" of the door has also featured prominently in the theology of the holy door. In crossing the threshold, we pass over from one state in life to another. As Pope Saint John Paul II encouraged the world to "cross the threshold of hope," Pope Francis similarly enjoins Christians to cross the threshold of mercy. Liturgists and anthropologists call this transforming experience "liminality," (limina meaning "threshold"). The same symbolism shapes the tradition of Bishops, who are required to make regular Ad Limina (literally "at the threshold") visits to Rome to visit the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul and meet with the Pope so they may prayerfully renew their mission of mercy and love for the diocese they shepherd.

Mercy is a truly transformative. We are changed upon entering and exiting the church through the Holy Doors. We encounter mercy in the Body of Christ gathered in the sanctuary, as well as in the confessional, and are then sent out to show mercy. Our mission is mercy.

Jesus is the one who opens the door to all who seek mercy (Luke 11:9). The door testifies that the Church is always more than just a building; it is testimony that Jesus is "the gate," (John 10:9), and those who enter find mercy and salvation.

Deep Abiding Love

By Elizabeth Pawelek

At the graduate school I attend, there is a simple chapel on the second basement level. I typically find myself the most comfortable sitting in the back of the chapel for daily Mass. One day, I scooted in a minute before Mass started, leaving the only space for me in the front pew (GASP, I know!). As I settled into the pew, I looked up, seeing the front of the chapel much closer and in a new way. In front of me was the reason why sitting in the back was more comfortable.

I faced His dislocated shoulders, His God/Man shoulders bloody, His bowed head spurned with thorns, His emaciated figure hanging, His flesh slashed, His knees worn from His falls, His side pierced, and those nailed hands, those feet. I could not keep my eyes from Him and I could not comprehend, "Why?"

I get quite used to the pretty crosses, the ones that are bedazzled, the Southern rustic ones, the ornate, or the ones where He is not even present and His suffering can be watered down to a pretty symbol. You could say I get comfortable with them.

The Crucifix in this small, simple chapel does not forget His suffering. No, it is displayed loudly, proudly next to the tabernacle, right next to the Eucharistic Table. His sacrifice is not reduced. The scandal of the King hanging on the cross is revered, and yet I worked hard to keep my eyes from the weight of the cross.

Later in the day, I found myself in the chapel alone. This time, I slowly made my way up to the large Crucifix. I realized my heart was pounding loudly in my chest. I knelt underneath the Crucifix. I looked up to see His head bowed down. I saw His sacrifice for the first time. And mostly, I was in a disposition of responsibility for the first time, and the weight was crushing. I could not hide.

I am spending more time kneeling in front of this Crucifix, facing my sins and facing my Savior. I encourage you to do the same! You see, by beginning to take in the weight of His sacrifice, the next questions that will arise are, "Why me? Why this sacrifice in this way?" As you ponder His wounds, His shoulders, His crown, His side, His hands and feet, you will hear in a still voice, "Love, Love, Deep Abiding Love for you."

Taking in the shocking death of the Savior only leads us to grasping the true reason of this Lenten journey: the agape love of the Christ. How can we bear our own crosses, the struggles and weaknesses that are a part of the human condition, if we haven't grasped the passionate love He has for His children? We may try and hide it, water it down, bedazzle it, but the Crucifix is Divine Love thinking of you.

"Look into My Heart and see there the love and mercy which I have for humankind, and especially for sinners. Look, and enter into My Passion." –Jesus to St. Faustina (Diary 1663)



Jesus Lives

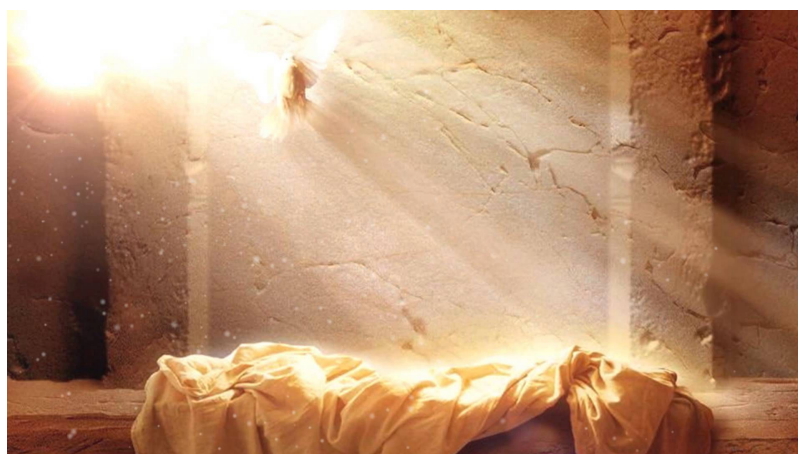
By Thomas Wong

Vivat Jesus! In the proclamation “Jesus lives!” which originates from St. Francis de Sales, the Church finds and experiences for herself the mystery of salvation. This then energizes and animates all her works. Because Christ has risen from the dead, we are assured of a most glorious hope that God loves us and that no trial nor any tribulation can overshadow the truth of such saving grace.

Doesn't it feel so liberating to once again be able to exclaim, “Alleluia!”, or burst into the Gloria at Mass? That innate feeling of wanting to, needing to, and being compelled to praise God in these ways reflects a deeper desire to share this incredible Good News with others—there just isn't any room for passivity in the Christian life. Certainly, the Resurrection event gained for us the eternal reward in Paradise that we could not achieve ourselves. But to really benefit from it, the experience needs to change us, that is, to make us marvel at God's merciful love and then continuously reveal that to all the world. Donald Cardinal Wuerl made this observation in January 2016 for the occasion of the dedication the new altar of the Pallottine Seminary at Green Hill, home of the Catholic Apostolate Center:

In His command, “Do this in memory of Me,” Jesus invites each one of us into the Mystery of His Death and Resurrection. We're not just going to be passive bystanders who come to know Him. We're not just going to be someone who looks on the merry-go-round and says, “Isn't that wonderful?” We're invited into the Mystery itself.

In doing so, we manifest the glory of the Lord; it is our mission as Christians. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reminded us at his installation Mass, “the purpose of our lives is to reveal God to men.”



The Resurrection cannot be confined to a mere moment in history two thousand years ago. All that it accomplished cannot be measured; its effects continue to affect and move us even now. Today we are truly experiencing the great joy that the Risen Lord promised His disciples. And this authentic joy does not fade in times of mourning or despair. Especially in those times, we can look up in hope, knowing the same Risen Christ is with us at every moment to offer courage and mercy. It is in this reality—not mere speech and daydreams—that the Church exists and works from. As Benedict XVI continued, “The Church is alive — she is alive because Christ is alive, because he is truly risen.”

As Christians, we bear the Name of the Savior through Baptism. We invite the world to encounter Christ, Whose presence we manifest through the charitable actions of our lives. Just as we share with one another the light from the Paschal candle during the Easter Vigil, so, too, do we share the light of hope and faith with those in darkness. By the grace of God and the support of each other, may we, at every moment of our lives, join with the whole Church and the heavenly host to praise God for His mercy and goodness. As Timothy Cardinal Dolan reminded us, “Our Savior, Jesus Christ, has destroyed death, and brought us light and life!” No wonder we [reply], ‘Alleluia!’”

Honesty, Courage...and Procrastination

By Jay Schaefer

"The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works." -St. Augustine

I'll come right out and say it: I dislike going to Confession. I really do. And so I avoid it like the plague. We all have our struggles in faith, and this is my biggest one.

"Why do I have to seek out a priest, another human, and tell him all the bad things I've done? Can't I just talk to God directly? Doesn't God hear everything in your heart?" We've all heard these questions—challenges, really—about the need for regular visits to the confessional. After all, God does know everything in our hearts. We can talk to him directly, and we should do so often! But we need more than just that internal dialogue with God. Our faith, after all, isn't one lived alone.

St. Paul tells the Romans, "We, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another." (Romans 12:5) I may be a toe, you may be an earlobe, but we all, collectively, make up the one Body of Christ in the Church. So if that's what we truly believe, and one of those parts gets hurt, the whole rest of the body feels that pain. If you stub your toe, the whole of your body stops everything and focuses on that pain. So, too, when we stub our spiritual toe, we create a ripple throughout the rest of the Body.

We could talk at length about the nature and effects of sin, but that's for another discussion. The point is that each of our sins have an effect, not just on ourselves and on God, but on the whole of the Church, too. And so we have three people or groups to reconcile with when we've sinned: ourselves, our Creator, and the larger Body of which we are each a part. And who better to forgive our sins than a priest? He's a spiritual father, a representative of the Church, and, most importantly, someone who acts "in persona Christi," or "in the person of Christ."

By virtue of his ordination, each priest has been given some pretty awesome powers. He can baptize people, he can bless places and things, he can call down the power of God onto simple bread and wine, miraculously turning it into Christ's Body and Blood. So if he can do all those things, can't he also exercise the power Christ gave the Apostles after his Resurrection? "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." (John 20:23) That's crazy! But it's our faith, and it comes from Christ himself. We profess this in the Apostle's Creed: "I believe...in the forgiveness of sins..."

Now we're all thinking, "Okay, that's all well and good, but Confession is still too uncomfortable." And you're right! It is. That's why I dislike going. I don't like being uncomfortable. I don't like to acknowledge the messy parts of life, including my own failings and shortcomings. I don't like to admit that I'm wrong, especially when I keep doing the same wrong thing over and over again. But every time I finally buck up the courage (sometimes after months or years) to walk into a confessional, I'm never disappointed. The result is always the same: God has forgiven me and wiped the slate clean. And I feel so good about it!

It's not that I'm afraid of God's mercy. In fact, I crave it. The problem is that I'm too afraid of my own self, of my own fragile and broken humanity, to even ask for this mercy. In my heart of hearts, I don't believe I deserve it. And that's the thing: none of us deserve it. Not one of us can ever be sorry enough, contrite enough, penitent enough, to make amends for what we've done and continue to do over and over again.

We can never fully make it up to God; that's why he sent his Son. Jesus took the sins of the whole world on his shoulders, beaten and bloodied though He was, until he became sin itself: "For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." (2 Corinthians 5:21). He took every sin each of us will ever commit, carried them up on the cross, and died as payment for it. He's already paid the price for us. It's like a spiritual gift card that never expires, but we have to use it to take advantage of the gift. That's why Confession is so important: the mercy is guaranteed; we have but to ask for it.

Pope St. John Paul II once said, "Confession is an act of honesty and courage - an act of entrusting ourselves, beyond sin, to the mercy of a loving and forgiving God." In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, may we all be honest and courageous enough to do that. Whether you just went to Confession last week or, like me, have been putting it off for way too long, be courageous and just go. Let the Year of Mercy have some personal meaning for you, and let God forgive you for what He's already paid for upfront.

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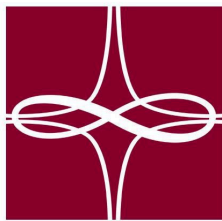
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