

OPENING TALK FOR ALL SAINTS LENTEN 33 DAYS OF MERCY RETREAT

From MAGNIFICAT YEAR OF MERCY COMPANION EDITORIAL:

With joy we enter into the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, which Pope Francis calls “a special time for the Church, a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective.” (MV 3) It is reported that a student once asked the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead, “What is the earliest sign of civilization in any given culture? According to the story, the questioner likely expected Mead to say a tool, a weapon, a piece of pottery, an artifact of domestic life, etc. Instead, the anthropologist answered: “A healed femur” (the big bone between the hip and the knee). A healed femur shows that someone took care of the injured person. Someone else had to step in to carry out the work of hunting and gathering until the individual’s fractured leg healed. For Mead, the first sign of civilization was the evidence of compassion. Pope Francis has called for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy to make that primordial sign of civilization plain and far-reaching in the world again. The pope has proclaimed a Jubilee of Mercy because, as he writes, “at times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives”. (MV 3)

Pope Francis tells us that this special Holy Year is a time “to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters” (MV 10), an occasion to “open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters”. (MV 15) We can do so when we recall how much God looked upon our own wounds and misery with untellable, unlimited love and mercy. Let us pray for the grace to be effective signs of the Father’s mercy to others, with the assurance given by Doctor of the Church Saint Francis de Sales:

“Do not look forward in fear to the changes in life; rather, look to them with full hope that as they arise, God, whose very own you are, will lead you safely through all things; and when you cannot stand it, God will carry you in his arms. Do not fear what may happen tomorrow; the same understanding Father who cares for you today will take care of you then and every day. He will either shield you from suffering or will give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.” Then, “touched by (God’s) compassion we also can become compassionate towards others.” (MV 14)

Just because the year of Mercy is over—doesn’t mean our pursuit of mercy is passé or out of date.

Certainly in the lifelong Christian pursuit of the heart of God (like King David), mercy is probably THE most necessary element—for it is the foundation of forgiveness and opens the door to love: both the true understanding of love AND the ability and the capacity to do so.

In fact, the Church has often been avant garde on these things—meaning that whatever the Church explores and emphasizes at any given time is something that is about to become tremendously and powerfully relevant to all the world.

- 1) Vatican II vs. the Summer of Love and culture that followed
- 2) Sr. Faustina 1931 vs. WWII
- 3) Year of Mercy vs. the Division and rancor in our world, communities and families

Mercy is needed—even required—for healing...just as Margaret Mead recognized, and Jesus implored and modeled.

Pope St. John Paul the Great canonized St. Faustina April 30, 2000 for this very reason: our world needed to highlight, embrace, understand, and imitate this Apostle of Mercy in today's day and age. She was, as many saints are, an unlikely candidate. Born Helena Kowalski in Glogowiec, Poland August 25, 1905, she was the 3rd of 10 children in a poor and very religious family. She felt called to the convent and religious life at a young age...but due to her parents concerns and poverty, she was delayed. Becoming a housekeeper she saved her money and continued to seek God in prayer. In 1924, at 18 years of age, she attended a dance with her sister, and there she saw a vision of a suffering Jesus.

Immediately she ran to the cathedral and there Jesus instructed her to go immediately to Warsaw and join a convent. She left the next morning, and after many applications was finally accepted to the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy—on the condition that she could pay for her own habit. More housekeeping ensued and she finally received her habit on April 30, 1926, and was professed in 1928.

In her first years she served as a cook and was moved from convent to convent—finally settling in at the convent in Plock, Poland. There on February 22, 1931, Jesus appeared to her again, this time presenting Himself as the King of Mercy, and requesting her to become the secretary and Apostle of God's mercy, in order to become:

- 1) A model of how to be merciful to others, and
- 2) An instrument for re-emphasizing God's plan of mercy for the world

To this end, Jesus asked that

- 1) An image of His mercy be painted for all to see
- 2) The image be blessed on the Sunday after Easter, dedicating that day as a Feast of Divine Mercy

The painting was completed, as seen here, and was blessed and the feast day dedicated by Pope St. John Paul the great. Additionally, Sr. Faustina's spiritual director asked that she be cleared by a psychiatrist and that she write and record the messages of Christ in a diary, as the visions were continuing and the messages developing. These requests of her spiritual director are common instructions to various mystics and saints over the years as it allows the Church and the world to determine the sanity of the individual and the authenticity of their messages. Sr. Faustina was cleared on both accounts.

All Saints parish, throughout the year of mercy, included in the parish bulletin excerpts from her diary, and has continued to do so even until now. These excerpts are short reflections that begin to reveal the desire of God for each of us to come and be healed by His grace and renewed by His mercy—and to become such agents for others as well.

God, from the very beginning, has designed this to be the way He desires to work!

- 1) Creator to Adam and Eve: be fruitful and multiply, have dominion and subdue
- 2) Re-creation to Mary, Apostles, and Church: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all I have commanded you.

He wants to work through us: to share the vision of the Master, the labor, and the glory. But it begins with our surrender in ultimate trust to Him—like a blind person being lead...but perhaps even more challenging: because we can still see the paths and the peril. Thus we need to receive first our own healing, our own conversion and restoration... and then extend that to others. NOT that we have to be perfect before we can act—because Peter and Paul's shortcomings are clearly delineated in scripture in the midst of their

ministries—but that only kept them connected to and refreshed in the dependence on and power of God’s mercy. Thus they could experience it, speak of it, and model it to others.

And so it is with us, and our times. God has never withdrawn His promise and vision of John 10:10—to give us life to the fullest. But we have to be willing to trust Him to receive it and enter into it. Nothing in our world today that distracts us, disturbs us, frightens us or overwhelms us is beyond Him; even situations that seem hopeless. Indeed, hopelessness has often been described as the place where the only thing we have left is hope. Whether it is illness, addictions, broken relationships, loss of faith, loss of friends, the divisions in family, community, country, or world; terrorism, war, natural disasters—any and all things that tempt us to fear, doubt or give up hope—Jesus invites us to respond faithfully and wholeheartedly “Jesus I trust in you!” Refusing to despair or give in to discouragement and anxiety—but rather trusting in the mercy, grace and plan of God, we can be sustained as lights of hope, joy and peace to a world desperately in need.

I am a firm believer that no one hurts another unless they are hurting. We lash out often from our own unseen, and perhaps even unfelt pain. When we come to Him in trust and hope, our own pain is healed and we become a model and witness to others of the source of their healing as well. To this end we have to be able to “gaze on mercy” as Pope Francis said, so that we can see NOT what is there in front of us, but what COULD be and indeed already IS in front of us—in the realm of the seen and unseen, the visible and the invisible.

Saturday night I saw the movie, *Hidden Figures*—a true story of the black women, who during segregation, were able to make their ways into the halls of NASA and contribute decisively to the complex mathematics required to send a man into space, even to the moon, and, more importantly, to bring him back again. In order to discover the math needed, and maintain the energy to sustain the intense mental labor required to do so in the time assigned, the NASA project chief tells one of the women, “You have to see beyond the numbers, you have to already be where you want to go.” That is not too unlike our pursuit of sanctity, our pursuit of the presence of Christ in our lives, families, communities and world. We have to see beyond the division and brokenness and pain; we have to already be where we want to go—and this the grace of God allows us to do. To aid us to this end, Jesus instructed Sr. Faustina in a new prayer and meditation called the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.

Its origins are rooted, interestingly enough, in two visions of Sr. Faustina, in which Divine Justice was about to be meted out against cities and populations of her day, akin to the chastisements of Sodom and Gomorrah. Suddenly she felt the urge, interiorly, to pray as never before, offering the Body and Blood of Jesus to the Heavenly Father, to beg His mercy on behalf of all affected. The angel of justice in her vision became powerless to act—he could not carry out the justice in the face of God’s mercy. Her prayers were then instructed by God to be prayed in a particular fashion using the beads of the Rosary—a prayer which came to be known as the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. To all who pray the Chaplet, and encourage other to do so, Jesus promised the following:

1. “I promise that the soul that will venerate this image (of Divine Mercy) will not perish. I also promise victory over (its) enemies already here on earth, especially at the hour of death. I Myself will defend it as My own glory.” (*Diary, 48*)
2. “The souls that say this chaplet will be embraced by My mercy during their lifetime and especially at the hour of their death.” (*Diary, 754*)
3. “When hardened sinners say it, I will fill their souls with peace, and the hour of their death will be a happy one.” (*Diary, 1541*)

4. “When they say this chaplet in the presence of the dying, I will stand between My Father and the dying person, not as a just Judge but as a merciful Savior.” (*Diary, 1541*)
5. “Whoever will recite it will receive great mercy at the hour of death.” (*Diary, 687*)
6. “Priests will recommend it to sinners as their last hope of salvation. Even if there were a sinner most hardened, if he were to recite this chaplet only once, he would receive grace from My infinite mercy...I desire to grant unimaginable graces to those souls who trust in My mercy.” (*Diary, 687*)
7. “To priests who proclaim and extol My mercy, I will give wondrous power; I will anoint their words and touch the hearts of those to whom they will speak.” (*Diary, 1521*)
8. “The prayer most pleasing to Me is prayer for the conversion for sinners. Know, my daughter, that this prayer is always heard and answered.” (*Diary, 1397*)
9. “At three o’clock, implore My mercy, especially for sinners; and, if only for a brief moment, immerse yourself in My Passion, particularly in My abandonment at the moment of agony...I will refuse nothing to the soul that makes a request of Me in virtue of My Passion.” (*Diary, 1320; also, cf. Diary, 1572*)
10. “Souls who spread the honor of My mercy...at the hour of death I will not be a Judge for them, but the Merciful Savior.” (*Diary, 1075*)
11. “The two rays denote Blood and Water...These two rays issued from the very depths of My tender mercy when My agonized Heart was opened by a lance on the Cross. These rays shield souls from the wrath of My Father...I desire that the first Sunday after Easter be the Feast of Mercy...whoever approaches the Fount of Life on this day will be granted complete remission of sins and punishment. Mankind will not have peace until it turns with trust to My mercy.” (*Diary, 299-300*)
12. “I desire that the Feast of Mercy...be solemnly celebrated on the first Sunday after Easter...The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion (in a state of grace on this day) shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment.” (*Diary, 699*)
13. “Through this chaplet you will obtain everything, if what you ask for is compatible with My will.” (*Diary, 1731*)
14. “My mercy is greater than your sins and those of the entire world.” (*Diary, 1485*)

Like the rosary, the chaplet is not a prayer that simply works by mere recitation. Rather it is meant to be accompanied by meditation, in which we reflect on the mercy of God, its mission in the life of the Church and humanity, in our lives and in the lives of our family, friends, community and world. This way the transformation of each and everyone of us into Apostles of Mercy can thus take place and our world can be more effectively changed as well.

To this end, the All Saints community is embarking on a Lenten journey of a study of Mercy—33 Days to Merciful Love: A Do It Yourself Retreat in Preparation for a Consecration—a Committing of Your Life to Divine Mercy...to conclude on the Feast of Divine Mercy—Mercy Sunday—the Sunday following Easter Sunday.

The first thing we will discover herein, is that the study, experience and revelation of God's mercy are not limited to one saint, nor one period of time. Reflection on the mercy of God is as old as the scriptures—from Genesis to the psalms, and into the Gospels and epistles. And it is shared and understood by saints in all ages, from St. Monica to Francis, from St. Therese to St. Faustina. In this book we will take the reflections of St. Therese and use them in conjunction with the thought and prayers of St. Faustina to round out a program of transformation in Merciful Love—Divine Merciful Love.

The second thing we encounter here, is that by looking at Divine Mercy through the eyes of Therese and her "Little Way" we find that Divine Mercy becomes a lifestyle, a way of reflecting the heart of Christ to a world gone crazy with sin. On this 100 year anniversary of Fatima, I think on Francesco, the little boy visionary—who, when it was asked if he would go to heaven, was told he would, but would have to say many rosaries...I try to imagine, in 1917 Portugal, in a small farming village, what trouble had a 10 year old boy gotten into that would put him in such a position?

And then I think of those 1930 Polish towns in Faustina's vision—that were about to meet the consequences of Sodom and Gomorrah as an act of Divine Justice. And I remember Fr. Benedict Groeschel's quote, "If God spares New York and San Francisco—He owes Sodom and Gomorrah an apology."

And then I think of today—what with all the opportunities for sin with which we are faced—and hear of crowds booing and hissing at prayer, and the name of Jesus at rallies and town halls...We have a great need for the world to be inundated with the Way of Divine Merciful Love.

Committing ourselves—consecrating ourselves—to being a vessel of that love in the world today is the answer to that need—in the face of anger, pride, lust, envy, greed, gluttony and sloth—all the expressions and the ONLY expressions of pain, brokenness, despair, and dissatisfaction our world knows how to manifest. In its face, God calls us, like Christ, to manifest Divine Merciful Love. Through prayer, reading, reflection and transformation we will seek to become Apostles of Divine Merciful Love to a world greatly in need.

ACCLAIM FOR 33 DAYS INSIDE FRONT COVER:

"Within the pages of 33 Days to Merciful Love lies an earth-shattering insight, certifying its place among the most important books of our generation. It is this: As an age, with a river of heinous sin overflowing the banks of humanity, we have quite simply exhausted our reparative capacity to sate the demands of Divine Justice. Seeing this very moment from the Cross, Merciful Love willed a new age in Salvation History to coincide with the dawn of the third Christian millennium. An age of Divine Mercy. An Age when all people can appeal to Perfect Mercy with out fear of Perfect Justice. With exquisite timing in the Jubilee Year, Fr. Michael Gaitley shows us the power of just such an offering to Merciful Love in the lives of the greatest saints of our time, methodically prepares us to follow their lead, and reveals what it can mean to us and the men and women of our time if and when we do."

Thank you for coming and desiring to embrace the challenge! I hope to see you all in small groups as we study together, and on Divine Mercy Sunday to complete journey!