

On April 30, 2000, Pope John Paul established this Sunday as the Feast of Divine Mercy. In the image of Christ shown to St. Faustina in her vision, two rays of divine mercy come from the heart of Christ. In John's Gospel we proclaim that blood and water flowed from the pierced heart of Jesus at His death. These are signs of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, by which we are first cleansed of sin and then nourished on our daily journey. Today, John's letter reminds us that Jesus came not only in water, but also in blood. The Christian journey begins in Baptism, but it requires nourishment at this great Eucharistic banquet until the day we commit ourselves into the hands of our Lord and petition for entry to the real banquet in the Kingdom of God that this sacrificial meal prefigures.

Moreover, fellow sinners, if we are to come to that banquet we must confess our sins confess that we are sinners at the beginning of the Mass for, in Zechariah's words, knowledge of salvation comes through the forgiveness of sins promised to the Apostles that Resurrection Day. All of this is encapsulated in the message of the Divine Mercy. It is so important that, with the simple actions of Mass and confession, full turning away from sins and a prayerful thanks to Jesus for His mercy

The reality of Divine Mercy Sunday is actually the reality of our existence. We live, breathe, work, play and pray surrounded by a sea of Divine mercy and compassion. It's as if we were drowning—suffocated by our own sinful desires and habits—and Jesus leapt from His divine throne to pull us from the ocean of death and give us the breath of life with His own dying breath. You don't have to imagine someone doing that for you. The Son of God did it for you, did it for me.

The best homilies, I have come to believe, are not the ones that make us feel good, but the ones that encourage us to do good. So take advantage of this Sunday and unite with Jesus to allow God's grace to flow into your heart and that of the whole world. But let's also take advantage of the opportunity to reflect on what a banquet our Savior—our Divine lifeguard—has prepared for us. Ironical, isn't it? He rescues us and then, instead of demanding payment, He gives us gifts in this Eucharistic sacrifice. The Mass is a gift. It's not something we do for God, because God needs nothing of ours. It is the daily re-presentation of the rescue, a daily gift that helps us to love God more and love our neighbor in our constant work and prayer.

Pope Emeritus Benedict reminds us of the seriousness of this sacrificial meal, which is far more serious than the memorial meal we might have at a local restaurant when a friend dies. "The Eucharist is far more than just a meal; it has cost a death to provide it, and the majesty of death is present in it. Whenever we hold it, we should be filled with reverence and awe in the face of this mystery, with awe in the face of this mysterious death that becomes a present reality in our midst. . . The Christian feast, the Eucharist, plumbs the very depths of death. It is not just a matter of pious discourse and entertainment, of some kind of religious beautification, spreading a pious gloss on the world; it plumbs the very depths of existence, which it calls death, and strikes out an upward path to life, the life that overcomes death." (God is Near us at 44)

So God has rescued us and has invited us to a banquet in which we will relive the rescue and be given gifts that help us to avoid falling into that ocean again. Let's take some time over the next week to think how we might want to act before, during and after such a banquet.

First, we want to show our respect and honor our host by presenting ourselves in appropriate dress. Here in a hospital it is difficult but when we return home. Assume from this moment that we are all wearing our "Sunday best."

Every movement in Liturgy is meaningful. I give a slight bow before proclaiming the Gospel. I bow profoundly to the altar—for Christ is the altar of sacrifice. I kiss the Gospel book at the end of the proclamation. Each of us has his own set of gestures proper to our function in the Body of Christ—bowing to the altar as we arrive, genuflecting as we make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Let's reflect for a moment on our sacred signs at and after communion.

In the new, ordinary rite, we receive standing and most receive in the hand. The temptation is to treat the Body of Christ as any other food. This is why the Church tells us—as a kind parent would instruct her child—to make a profound bow or other reverence before presenting ourselves. Because Christ is also truly present under the form of wine, the Church also reminds us to make a reverence before the cup—even if we are not receiving under both species. What you do when you show that respect is really an act of evangelization. You strengthen others' faith with your actions of reverence. If you just pop the host into your mouth and walk past the cup with a bored expression, you may inadvertently be giving the impression that you are just going through the motions.

Finally, when you return to the pew, spend a few moments quietly thanking God for His rescue, and try as well as you can to participate in the hymn of thanksgiving. I know there may be a line over at the supermarket, but stay until the end of Mass. We wouldn't run out of the rescuer's banquet before saying goodbye, would we? If we did, we would miss the big line, *Ite, Missa est*, which literally is your charge to go out as Church and show the Divine Mercy. Who would want to miss that?

Sometimes I hear folks say after homilies like this one, "Jesus accepts me as I am." That's very true. But if we don't show our reverence and gratitude to our rescuer by our actions, what we may be saying is "Jesus should be glad that I showed up at all." And I doubt that we intend to make that kind of statement to the one who rescued us from sin and death. Change is inevitable; growth is optional.

II

"Oh, if only all souls knew who is living in our churches...!"
- From the *Diary of St. Faustina*, 409

By Frederick Hermann

As soon as he started, I knew it was going to be bad.

The old priest began his sermon with a faltering voice, and proceeded to tell an obscure story that made no sense to me at all. I was quickly lost and bored.

This was not my usual church. I was traveling, and had just dropped in for evening Mass.

But I knew right away that this sermon was going to be one of the worst ever. The priest seemed unprepared, vague, and detached.

So I tuned him out, and started fuming inside my head. Slowly I became more incensed than the incense burning near the altar.

"Why didn't he prepare better?" I thought. "Don't they train these guys in Seminary? Here we are, after 2,000 years of Church history, and we still haven't figured out how to give a decent homily! No wonder our faith is so weak, it's because the sermons are so bad!"

There I sat, stupefied, practically gnashing my teeth. If I had been sitting in the back pew, I would have been tempted to sneak out.

At long last, an eternity it seemed, the priest ended his sermon. I seethed within myself, like a cartoon character who suffers under a dark cloud raining down daggers and lightning bolts.

I remember nothing of what he said. It was that boring. For the rest of the Mass, my mind wandered elsewhere, indignant and dismayed.

After Mass, I walked to my car in the parking lot. No longer able to contain my protest, I complained out loud to a man walking beside me; "What did you think of that sermon?"

He walked in silence beside me, lost in thought. Then he gave a gentle reply; "That was the most beautiful sermon I ever heard."

I was stunned, and looked up at him, expecting to see him grinning sarcastically. To my astonishment, I saw that he was weeping. His face was tear-stained, and his eyes glistened in the twilight.

Suddenly embarrassed, I asked what he meant.

He thought for a moment, then responded with a smile; "I've spent most of my life estranged from God, going my own way, and doing my own thing. Last year I found him, or rather he found me, and now I find him speaking to me in the most wonderful ways. Like that sermon we just heard. It was all about waking up, and listening, and hearing God in new ways. That describes my life, and the love I have found."

In the face of this testimony, I was speechless. I shook his hand sheepishly and thanked him. "He may not speak to me, but he speaks to thee," I thought.

As I drove home, I marveled at how God could use such a dull and ordinary priest to speak in such an extraordinary way to one of his beloved.

What is meaningless for me to hear, and a cross for me to bear, may be the fruitful words of life to a person sitting near.

Now I am a more humble and appreciative listener. Ever since that experience years ago, I cannot hear a boring sermon without imagining that someone, somewhere out there in the pews may be wiping a tear from their eye and smiling.

They may be hearing the voice of God speaking directly into their heart, with healing words

raining down on them like a spring shower on a dry and thirsty desert.

"God thunders with His voice wondrously, doing great things which we cannot comprehend" (Job 37:5).

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III

To better get a grasp of what is Divine Mercy, we could apply "homeopathic theory" to our situation.

It will take a dose of what made us sick to cure us.

Our sins are what made us sick, and are what drove Jesus to experience his Passion, but His resurrection and glorified wounds heal us with Divine Mercy.

First, the dosage:

1). The scourging with sharp pellets which hung from the ends of leather strips and slung violently against his uncovered body, cutting deeply and puncturing.

2). The crucifixion with a single iron nail through the ankle bones, nails through the wrists.

The third and final phase of the execution was the breaking of the legs, which was done to make certain that no one was removed from the cross until they were dead.

However, Scripture tells us that when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs; but one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance, and immediately there came out blood and water (John 19:34).

When asked about the meaning of the rays from His pierced Heart, Jesus explained to St. Faustina, "The pale ray stands for the Water which makes souls righteous. The red ray stands for the Blood which is the life of souls. ... These two rays issued forth from the very depths of My tender mercy when My agonized Heart was opened by a lance on the Cross" (Diary, 299).

These then are the active ingredients of Divine Mercy: the blood and the water, communicated to us by the Holy Spirit.

1 John 5:7-8 says: For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

The early Christians writers noted that the water represents the spiritual cleansing through the Word of God, called the washing by the Word, followed by regeneration or being born again by water in baptism (St. John Chrysostom).

The washing of the word is from Ephesians 5:26, which is the ongoing remedy that can take the desire for sin away from us by the inner conviction of the Word of God, which continually washes.

The other active ingredient of Divine Mercy is the blood, which is the Eucharist. We receive Jesus: Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity with the reception of the holy Eucharist.

So our healing today is that Jesus promised that "The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion shall obtain the complete forgiveness of sins and punishment." (Diary 699). He went on to say, "I want to grant a complete pardon to the souls that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion on the Feast of My Mercy." (Diary 1109)

The words, "complete pardon" or "total pardon" only happens once in baptism, which is the gateway sacrament, received only once whereby all temporal punishment and the forgiveness of sins are washed away forever.

For sins committed and confessed after baptism, there is the need for penance, reparation, satisfaction, expiation even after God freely forgives the sin and thereby takes away the guilt.

The great news is that here, on Divine Mercy Sunday, we receive the effects of baptism whereby all sins including temporal punishment are removed. To receive those special graces — "the complete forgiveness of sins and punishment" ... in other words, a complete renewal of baptismal grace in our hearts — all we need to do is to receive Holy Communion in a state of grace on Divine Mercy Sunday, with trust in our Lord's great mercy.

Whether your last confession was 10, 20, 30, or even more days before today, on Divine Mercy Sunday, as long as you do not have the stain of unconfessed mortal sin on your soul, then you are spiritually alive in Christ and able to receive His special grace from Holy Communion on this great feast day of Divine Mercy Sunday.

Jesus told St. Faustina about the image of Divine Mercy, "I am offering people a vessel with which they are to keep coming for graces to the fountain of mercy. That vessel is this image with the signature: 'Jesus, I trust in you'" (Diary, 327).

When we exist as a forgiven people we are able to be at peace with our histories, so that now God's life determines our whole way of being—our character. We no longer need to deny our past, or tell ourselves false stories, as now we can accept what we have been without the knowledge of our sin destroying us because we have received Divine Mercy.

Key thought: Victorious but not unscarred!

Divine Mercy is available to us because Jesus carries these marks of his crucifixion with Him even when he ascends to heaven (Rev. 5:6). The wound on Jesus' resurrected body reveal that he is forever fixed in the act of love in which he died. They are forever present before the Father as "expiation for our sins, and....for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:2)

A few years ago there was a contest to judge the funniest joke in the world. The winning joke went like this:

Two men were out hunting in the woods. Suddenly one man clutches his chest, gasps for breath, and drops to the ground. His friend immediately gets out his cell phone and dials 911. He tells the emergency operator, "My friend just died. What should I do?"

The operator says, "Take it easy sir. First, make sure that he's dead."

There are a few seconds of silence followed by a gun shot. The man gets back on the phone and says, "Okay, what's next?" *

Well, that's one way to make certain someone's dead.

Certainty is very difficult to attain in this world. There always seems to be room for doubt. However, doubt can be disheartening. So some wise people have taken doubt to its logical conclusion and begun to doubt their doubts. And they have found their way to a most satisfying life.

Such a man was the author Robert Louis Stevenson. Like many young people in his early years Stevenson rebelled against his upbringing. He was raised in Scotland in a very strict Calvinist home. As a college student he quickly shed his rigid upbringing, which he called "the deadliest gag and wet blanket that can be laid on a man," and adopted a thoroughly bohemian lifestyle. He called himself a "youthful atheist."

As he became older, however, Robert Louis Stevenson began to have "doubts about his doubts." He came to see that for all its claim to wisdom, the world had no satisfying answers to the deepest questions of life. Later Robert Louis Stevenson would write, "There is a God who is manifest for those who care to look for him."

In the later years of his life Stevenson was a man of deep and profound faith. Toward the end of his life he described his religious outlook as a "cast iron faith."

Our Scripture Lesson from John's Gospel is about the world's most famous doubter. You already know his name.

The news of Jesus' resurrection spread quickly among his disciples. You can imagine the quickened pulse and the rapid, excited speech of those who had encountered the risen Christ as they shared their experience with others. You can also imagine the difficulty that those who heard their story had in believing them.

The first recipients of the good news of Easter were his male disciples and, typically, they considered it the idle nonsense of distraught and hysterical women and did not believe it. But as more and more of the disciples and followers of Jesus encountered the risen Christ the stories gained credibility.

The most famous holdout was a disciple named Thomas, also called the Twin. "Unless I see the print of the nails in his hands," said Thomas, "and place my fingers in the print of the nails, and unless I can put my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Many of us have had times in our lives when we could identify with Thomas. We too have rebelled. We too have doubted. Here is something you need to know: **Doubt is one of the most important tools that God uses to produce mighty men and women of faith.**

I worry about someone who says to me, "I have never doubted for one moment my faith in God." My friend, are you alive? Do you have a brain? Do you ever use it? I am convinced that God has deliberately placed many obstacles to faith in our world. If He meant for us to walk with utter certainty, why does He not reveal Himself more clearly?

Woody Allen once said that he would have no difficulty believing in God. All God would have to do would be to deposit \$1,000,000 in a secret Swiss bank account in Woody's name.

We might not go that far, but it is a good question why God does not give us an understandable answer to such questions as why good people suffer? It would be so much easier to believe then. And why didn't God give us a guidebook that is not open to as many diverse interpretations as the Bible? Why doesn't He just speak to us in a clear voice at the close of the service and reveal Himself so that, like those early disciples, we could leave here and tell our friends, "I have seen the Lord."

It seems clear to me that God intends for us to struggle with the great questions of life. It may be that such a struggle is essential to a strong, mature faith. Never to have doubted is never to have taken the walk of faith seriously.

Do you remember Christian in John Bunyan's classic portrayal of the life of faith which he titled, *Pilgrim's Progress*? Christian's journey to the Celestial City is not at all smooth and easy. Rather, his way is filled with discouragements and detours.

He becomes bogged down in the Slough of Despond and lost in Bypass Meadow. He spends some time in Doubting Castle as well as in Vanity Fair.

Bunyan is trying to say to us through the use of allegory that faith was never intended to be easily attained. This world was intended to be a training school to produce strong souls. God uses obstacles to train us--to make us strong. Doubt is one of those obstacles.

Let me use an analogy from the world of commercial fishing.

Years ago seafood companies had a perplexing problem with the shipment of codfish to consumers who lived inland.

Shippers discovered that frozen codfish loses its flavor in the shipping process. Shipping live codfish is no better. In the holding tanks they become soft and mushy and later tasteless.

So somebody came up with the idea of throwing in some catfish into each of the tanks of live cod. Catfish and codfish are natural enemies. In a quest for survival, the codfish are kept in constant motion as they seek to escape the catfish. Thereby these cod are kept in peak condition from the ocean to your dinner table.

In a sense, doubt and frustration and other such obstacles are the catfish that God has placed in our tank to keep us swimming, to keep us at our best. There is far more hope for the honest

doubter than for the person who says, "Of course, I believe," and never really struggles with the meaning and the misery of life.

That wonderful writer Frederick Buechner, put it this way, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep faith alive and moving." Doubt is one of God's most effective tools for producing mighty men and women of faith.

However, in order to experience the true joy that God intends for each of His children, there must come a time when we begin to doubt our doubts. Doubting our faith is easy, but doubting our doubts is far more profitable.

In *Pilgrim's Progress* there is another character named Mr. Ready-to-Halt. Mr. Ready-to-Halt was so hung up on his doubts that he went all the way to the Celestial City on crutches. He got there but it was a torturous journey with very little joy.

Much of the doubt that we experience in young adulthood is a need to rebel against our upbringing. Again, I suspect this is part of the plan of God. If parents and children didn't disagree on something, offspring would never leave home.

Jesus did not condemn the prodigal for leaving. All of us must do it sometime. That is part of the maturation process. However, one lesson that we learn from the prodigal is that we don't want to spend a lifetime in a pigpen either. Spiritual maturity comes when we are ready to doubt our doubts.

J. Wallace Hamilton once told a story about a Russian girl who was brought up as an atheist. She had taken a government examination and, like all students, was worried about some of the answers she had given.

One particular question on the exam had bothered her. The question was this: "What is the inscription on the Samarian Wall?"

She had written the prescribed answer: "Religion is the opiate of the people."

This, of course, was the famous anti-religion declaration of the author of communism, Karl Marx. But the girl wasn't sure of her answer, so she walked seven miles to the Samarian Wall to check it out and, sure enough, there it was: "Religion is the opiate of the people."

Greatly relieved, she forgot for a moment her upbringing, and exclaimed, "Thank God! I had it right."

Well, there are times when even an atheist must thank somebody!

Communist governments, whether in Russia or China or Cuba or anywhere else on earth, have discovered after generations of propaganda that it is very difficult to purge people of their belief in God. There is something within the human heart that is ever reaching outward and upward. There is something within our very nature that senses an incompleteness to life.

We see through the glass darkly, but somehow we sense that the room into which we are seeking to peer is not empty. This world is far too wonderful to have occurred by chance. There

is within us a hunger that only a relationship with the Divine can satisfy. It is very difficult for most of us not to “doubt our doubts.”

But there is a final thing to be said. **Christian faith can only be analyzed from the inside.** Here is where those who have made a god of the scientific method are going to have a problem. You cannot find God with the most powerful telescope ever built. You cannot find him with a slide rule, or a test tube or an enormous computer. There is only one way to find God and that is to take a step of faith, entrust your life to Him, and enter into a daily walk with Him as Savior and Lord of your life. I cannot prove to you the existence of God, but you can prove Him to yourself.

Let's use an analogy. Could I prove to you that love exists? A scientist could attach electrodes to the skin of a person in love and measure the pulse, the respiration and the blood pressure of a person in the presence of their beloved. But that would not prove love. Too much caffeine that morning at breakfast might cause the same bodily reactions.

The only way you and I can ever prove love is to have experienced what it is to love and to be loved.

So it is with faith. There are only two ways that the existence of a loving God can be proved. The first is by the testimony of others. We can say with utter certainty that there have been millions of persons who have experienced God as a reality in their lives. That is one proof--though it will not satisfy the skeptic.

The most conclusive evidence of the existence of God is to experience Him yourself. As the old song says, “You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart.”

The richest man in the world, Croesus, once asked the wisest man in the world, Thales, “What is God?”

The philosopher asked for a day in which to deliberate, and then for another, and then for another, and another, and another--and at length confessed that he was not able to answer, that the longer he deliberated, the more difficult it was for him to frame an answer.

Tertullian, the early Church Father, eagerly seized upon this incident and said it was an example of the world's ignorance of God outside of Christ. “There,” he exclaimed, “is the wisest man in the world, and he cannot tell you who God is. But the most ignorant [workman] among the Christians knows God, and is able to make him known unto others.”

Tertullian was making this very point. Christian faith must be experienced from the inside. Faith grows as you walk daily with the Master. It is unlikely that Thomas the doubter would ever have experienced the faith if he had not remained among the other believers. And his sense of loss would have been profound. He would never have experienced the joy and the relief he experienced when he fell to his knees at the feet of Jesus and exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

What happened to Thomas after his experience with the risen Christ? His later career is wrapped in mystery and legend. An apocryphal book, called *The Legend of Thomas*, claims to give his history. It says that when the disciples divided up the world to conquer it for Jesus, Thomas received India. And there in India Thomas died for the faith that he once had doubted.

Indeed, in South India today you will find a church called the Thomist Church of South India which claims that Thomas was its founder. Thomas dropped his doubts at the pierced feet of Jesus and became one of those by whose testimony we have the faith today.

Thomas was a doubter. He had to see for himself. Jesus did not condemn him for that. However, Jesus did say, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Doubt is an obstacle that, when overcome, can cause us to have a deeper, richer, more meaningful faith. In the struggle for meaning the wise person learns to doubt his doubts. The way to prove faith is to surrender yourself to the Lordship of Christ, walk in his way and experience his love for yourself.