

Order of Malta Retreat
February 5-7, 2016
Bethany Retreat Center

"The Name of God is Mercy"

Talk #1: What is Mercy?

- I. Introduction:
 - A. Thanks for the opportunity to spend this time with you
 - i. Thanks
 - 1. For bringing me to Florida in February
 - a. I can think of far worse places to spend a weekend!
 - 2. For sharing this Privileged Time away from the business of life
 - a. Jesus: "Go away onto the mountain to pray"
 - ii. What will happen to us during our mountain stay?
 - 1. We will receive Four gifts
 - a. To rest in the presence of the Lord Jesus to draw closer to Him
 - i.
 - b. To regain perspective in our lives
 - i. What is the key to success? (also the two enemies of perspective)
 - 1. Our blind spot
 - 2. Our Ego
 - c. To be refreshed in our ministries
 - i. To recall why we are doing what we are doing
 - d. To encounter Mercy
 - i. Not simply to learn about Mercy: important
 - ii. But to meet Him and experience this great gift
 - 2. Our retreat structure should allow us to do all four
 - B. Our Theme: an exploration of the great gift of God's Mercy that comes to us in Jesus Christ for two timely reasons
 - i. Jubilee Year: so we can profit spiritually from it
 - 1. Obvious Topic: because of this, it needs explanation
 - ii. As members of the Order of Malta:

1. Mercy and Compassion lie at the heart of the mission that God has given us

C. I am here to provoke questions and conversation

- i. Questions because we are exploring a great MYSTERY
 1. Mystery= understood only by experiencing it
 2. Problem= solved by reason alone
- ii. As a mystery, it is connected to other mysteries that will not always be easy to define, delineate or even understand
 1. Point: MERCY IS A PERSON= JESUS CHRIST

II. So what is Mercy?

A. Product of Jesuit education: Always easier to define what a mystery is not than what it is

- i. Saint Thomas Aquinas: “Never deny, seldom affirm, always distinguish”

B. Three things we can say that Mercy is not:

- i. Mercy is not an excuse for license in any person’s behavior
 1. Pope Francis’ remark: “Who are am I to judge?”
 - a. Some understood it is a radical departure from Catholic moral teaching
 - i. Rather: it was nothing more than the example of Jesus who gave license to nothing that would be contrary to holiness = as the path to His Father

ii. Mercy is not the same as forgiveness

1. Forgiveness is a separate divine gift from God, to those who are repentive of their sins
2. Relationship is one of “paving the way”
 - a. The gift of Mercy allows forgiveness to be sought and received

iii. Mercy is not an abolition of the law and its demands upon us

1. Mercy and Justice are never at odds
2. Mercy and the Truth are never at odds

C. So what is mercy?

- i. Story of the Adulteress in the Gospel: (John 7:53-8:11)
 - 1. The Pharisees tried to put Christ into a no win situation:
 - a. If he said stone her: he would be cast as hard of heart
 - b. If he said not to stone her: he would forsake the Law
 - i. They were setting the rules of the game
- ii. Jesus: Re-writes the rules of the game
 - 1. He never said that she did not sin
 - a. In fact he acknowledges it- observes the demands of the law
 - 2. He does not excuse her behavior
 - a. POINT: What he does say has nothing to do with her but with his protagonists
 - i. “He who is without sin cast the first stone”
 - 1. Exposes Self-righteous attitude of the Pharisees
 - 3. His statement to the woman has two parts:
 - a. Has no one condemned you.....MERCY
 - b. Then go and sin no more....FORGIVENESS
- iii. OUR GOAL: To rewrite the rules by which we see the world, conduct our affairs, live our lives

III. Gift of Mercy has two dimensions:

A. *Hesed*: The loving Countenance of God

- i. Old Testament: Psalm 85:11
 - 1. “Mercy and Faithfulness have met, justice and peace have embraced.”
 - 2. “Mercy” in Hebrew is *hesed*
 - a. Can be translated in different ways
 - i. Office: “Mercy and faithfulness”
 - ii. NAB: “Kindness and truth”
 - iii. NNAB: “Love and truth will meet”
 - 3. All these translations are correct because *hesed* implies two basic truths:

- a. FIRST: It is a gift that presumes persons who are bound to each other in “Covenant”= bond of LOVE
 - i. Covenant that is lived out in the rough and tumble of life, that accepts the beauty of every person, even when they have failed to love themselves or others properly
 - ii. POINT: COVENANT is unbreakable
 - 1. God does not cease to love His people, even when sinned

 - b. Second: It is a gift that comes from God
 - i. Why? Origin of the covenant and its promise of unbreakable love is not for us to make or fulfill
 - 1. Only God can do that
 - 2. Only God can inspire us to do the same
- ii. The gift of God’s love that is not merited or earned + given to all
 - 1. We are loved and sustained into existence
 - a. Since God does not need us and there is nothing that we can do for God that He does not already have
 - i. Great dilemma in the mandate: “Love God above all things”
 - 2. “Unmerited loving kindness, friendliness and favor”
 - a. A love that is freely given to sinners and saints alike
 - i. Why? Dignity of the human person
 - 1. Everyone is loved, period!
 - 3. A love that asks a response that
 - a. Begins with acceptance
 - i. Acknowledges our sins
 - ii. Accepts the call to holiness because holiness alone will allow us to grow in unity with God
- iii. Theologically: Mercy is rooted in the every life of God
 - 1. Old Testament

- a. Exodus 32-34: Moses goes up the mountain and the people who had heard the thunder makes for themselves a molten calf
 - i. Penalty was to be death
 - 1. Moses intercedes and God relents
 - ii. Moses also secures God's continued protection and guidance in the desert
 - iii. Moses asks to see God's glory and He agrees
 - 1. Exodus 34: 6-7: "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sins..'"

 - b. God is merciful to the poor (and not just the sinner)
 - i. Especially: widows, orphans and strangers
 - 1. Point: Those who are vulnerable
2. In Jesus Christ, the nature of God as Love is fully revealed
- a. Trinity: A love eternally expressed in a Communal Love
 - b. Incarnation: Great Emptying of God
 - i. It is a love that is freely given, unmerited
 - 1. GREAT EQUALIZER
 - ii. The Incarnation is the invitation to be drawn into this Love
3. For this reason, Pope Benedict (and not Pope Francis) speaks of the face of God as Mercy:
- a. "Mercy is in reality the core of the Gospel message; it is the name of God Himself, the face with which He has revealed in the Old Testament and fully in Jesus Christ, incarnation of creative and redemptive love."
- iv. Two implications:
- 1. First: Everyone has received the gift of Mercy in the Love that God shares with us

a. "Lie of Self-righteousness" that we will discuss more tomorrow

2. Second: Mercy is a spiritual gift that can be shared in many ways, including the corporal works of mercy

a. In fact, this is what makes the corporeal works of mercy essentially Christian

i. Because they manifest the loving mercy of God to those in need

1. Not solely because it answers their human needs, whatever they may be

B. Second Aspect: *Misericordia*:

i. Pope Francis defines *misericordia* as "opening one's heart to wretchedness"

1. From God's perspective: He gives of Himself, bows down to us and embraces us

a. "I have come not for the healthy because they do not need a doctor..I have come for sinners."

i. Sin: seek fulfillment of our desires in ways that lead us away from God

1. Mercy as "Medicine" for our sinfulness

2. From our perspective:

a. SIMPLE TRUTH: What we have received freely from God we must freely give to our neighbor

i. Root of COMPASSION: Talk #3

IV. This message of Mercy has resonated in the hearts of countless people: Why?

A. Context of our Age

i. Philosophical underpinning:

1. Descartes: "Cogito Ergo Sum": Turn to the Subject

a. "I think therefore I am"

B. Three tangible forms:

i. Secularism:

1. Secularism is itself a form of belief:
 - a. Belief in the “natural” as supreme
 2. Result: Loss of a sense of sin
 - a. Sin: needs an objective divine order to make sense
 - b. New manifestations:
 - i. Mistakes of others
 - ii. Loss of a sense of responsibility
 - iii. Victim Syndrome
 3. Corollary: Loss of a belief in the forgiveness of sin
- ii. Materialism:
1. Descriptions:
 - a. GK Chesterton: “When man ceases to worship God he does not worship nothing but worships everything.”
 - b. Peter Lynch: Americans buy things that they do not need, with money that they do not have to impress people that they do not like.”
 2. There is no problem with material possessions
 - a. They are goods given by God to be enjoyed
 - i. The problem is not that we possess things but that they possess us!
 1. Anthony DeMelo:
 - a. An attachment is anything in life that you have convinced yourself that you cannot live without
 - b. Can be my looks, my opinion, status, even my life
 - ii. Result:
 1. Loss of the true Center in your life and mine
 - a. Who is Christ alone
 - b. “Whoever values mother, father, sister or brother more than me is not worthy of Me.”
 3. Disorder Desires: (Bishop Barron: “The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path”):

- a. Four principal ways to these fleeting desires:
 - i. Power
 - ii. Honor
 - iii. Wealth
 - iv. Pleasure

- b. Dynamic is always the same:
 - i. We seek them, obtain them and then it escapes
 - 1. Result: We become obsessed with them
 - 2. Barron:
 - a. Tradition: “concupiscence”
 - b. His term: “addiction”
 - ii. Result: Addictive Society

- c. Result: Vicious cycle of unfulfilled desire
 - i. Leading to frustration...brokenness of life

- iii. Brokenness of Life:
 - 1. Three Characteristics of “broken life”
 - a. Loneliness
 - i. Alone is at time a good thing
 - 1. Loneliness is lack of connection
 - b. Anxiety
 - i. Nature: Undifferentiated Fear
 - 1. Life is not a friendly place but a hostile environment to be survived
 - c. Homelessness: Peter Berger
 - i. Social Construction Theory of Society
 - 1. Homelessness

V. Conclusion:

A. One last point:

- i. Story of the Adulteress Woman is a parable of Mercy because everyone received the gift that day:
 - 1. Pharisees and adulteress

B. For our evening meditation, we need to place ourselves in that story and ask ourselves this question:

- i. “Would we have been as merciful to the Pharisees as Jesus was?”