

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

*"The Name of God is Mercy"*

Talk #2: The Kindly Countenance of God

I. Introduction:

- a. Look at yourself in the mirror in the morning: What do you see?
  - i. Mom used to say: "The mirror does not lie"
    - 1. Some mornings I wish it did!
  - ii. But I am not talking about the surface:
    - 1. When you get beyond the wrinkles, make-up and shaving:
      - a. What do you see below the surface?
  - iii. Better way to ask the question: Do you see what God sees?
    - 1. MIRROR that we must use to see what God sees is precisely the Cross of Jesus Christ
      - a. This is where mercy (*Hesed*) as the kindly countenance of God looks at us in love

II. Cross as the Mirror of Mercy:

- a. Immediate Problem: Cross has become "ecclesial furniture": We have become passive and unmoved before the cross of Christ
  - i. We sign ourselves with the Cross when we pray:
    - 1. It is the sign of death:
      - a. What reaction, if any, does it provoke in us?
  - ii. We Decorate our Homes, our cars:
    - 1. What do these crosses say to us when we enter their presence?
      - a. Are they mute, unnoticed, stand silent in the shadows?
  - iii. For many non-practicing, the cross has become personal jewelry:
    - 1. Among young people: wear rosary beads

2. When the cross of Christ is “domesticated”, we rob it of the power to change, challenge, move, shake us up....
- b. This was NOT a PROBLEM for the early church: PRECISELY BECAUSE IT RESTED AT THE VERY HEART OF WHO THEY WERE AS A PEOPLE
    - i. 1 Cor. 1: 18-25: the cross for the earliest believers and non-believers demanded a response: COULD NOT BE IGNORED
      1. Jews: Based on idea that the righteous should enjoy a fruitful and happy life, cross is a scandal
        - a. Righteous should not suffer
        - b. Problem with Job
      2. Greeks:
        - a. “World”: measures power in terms of might: cross is an abysmal failure
        - b. Roman times:
          - i. Vehicle of domination
    - ii. Early Christians:
      1. Pagan Society of Rome
        - a. Penalty: Crucifixion of Christians
          - i. Response: To Sing!!
- III. THE CROSS AS A MIRROR OF MERCY: WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT CHRIST?
- a. Cross is the great act of love
    - i. Free act of our salvation: Why?
      1. Love: effectively willing the good of the beloved for the sake of the beloved
 

Saint Leo the Great, *Sermo* 15: “True reverence for the Lord’s passion means fixing the eyes of our heart on Jesus crucified and recognizing in him our own humanity.”
- b. The Physical Structure of the Cross tells us THREE THINGS:
  - i. FIRST: VERTICAL POLE:
    1. You needed to look up
      - a. LOOKING TOWARDS THE HEAVENS

2. Fathers of the Church: "FORGIVENESS OF SINS"
    - a. SALVATION OF SOULS
  - ii. SECOND: HORIZONTAL POLE:
    1. Fathers of the Church: "Embrace of the whole world"
      - a. All men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth
    2. Question:
      - a. SAINTS AND SINNERS
      - b. JEWS AND GENTILES
  - iii. THIRD: FROM CHRIST'S VANTAGE POINT:
    1. He was looking down on all around Him and loved them in the end
      - a. NOT TO CONDEMN US BUT
        - i. He loved us to the end!
- IV. SO WHAT DOES GOD SEE? " WE ARE BELOVED SINNERS"
- a. We are SINNERS: who have failed the Master:
    - i. Good Friday: Reading the Passion by the congregation: place yourself in the passion
      1. *We are members of the shouting crowd*
        - a. Shouting by our words
        - b. Shouting by our actions
        - c. Shouting by our silence
    - ii. Whose sins put him there? Our sins
      1. Matthew 25: When you failed to do these to the least of my brethren, you did not do it to me.....
  - b. We are NONETHELESS BELOVED of the Father, despite our sins!
    - i. Letter to the Romans: *"It is precisely in this that God proves his love for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rm 5: 8-9).*
    - ii. CONSIDER: Mystery of God's UNMERITED love
      1. You are so beloved by the Father that God cannot imagine creation without you from the beginning

2. Saint Thomas: You are so cherished by the Father that His Only Begotten Son of God would have suffered the agony, humiliation and death of the Cross even if you were the only person alive to be saved
3. Consider that on the day of your Baptism:...on the day you were incorporated into the death and resurrection of Christ
  - a. The Father looked into your eyes, your mind, your soul and found you so beautiful, so valuable, so precious that He chose you (and me) to be His eternal home
  - b. So that what His Son enjoyed by His nature as divine, we would also share through adoption as grace
  - c. Fathers of the Church: THEOSIS
    - i. God became man so that man, poor into poverty and death, could one day share the riches and power of God
    - ii. We are His because God is with us, loving us, up close and personal, always!
- c. It was Mother Teresa of Calcutta who reminded us that this mystery of God's love is the gift of His Presence, can best be described in the image of THIRST.
  - i. God thirsts for each of us and seeks to love us and be loved by us.
    1. His thirst is everlasting, seeking us not with preconditions or with the need to earn His love.
    2. He asks a response from us to dare to believe that God can love so freely, so completely, recklessly as is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of His Son
  - ii. He is KNOCKING on the door of your heart, your mind, your will, your home, your place of work, your hopes, your dreams, your fears and thirsts for a response....to open the door and invite Him to stay with us.....
    1. To refuse to open the door leads to fear and guilt
    2. To open the door is to have fill and have it to the full.
      - a. We celebrate today that we wish to open the door ever more, having seen with our own eyes the power of becoming one of "His Own"
- d. We are all Betrayers of the Lord but betrayal is not the end
  - i. CONTRAST BETWEEN: Peter and Judas
    1. Both betrayed Christ
      - a. Only one sought repentance

- ii. We are sinners called to be purified, sanctified, redeemed in the Blood of Christ
- e. “Wounds of Christ”
  - i. Saint Bernard: Meditation on the Song of Songs
    - 1. “Where can the weak find a place of firm security and peace, except in the wounds of the Savior”?
      - a. “I may have sinner gravely. My conscience would be distressed, but it would not be in turmoil, for I would recall the wounds of the Lord: he was wounded for our iniquities. What sin is there so deadly that it cannot be pardoned by the death of Christ? And so if I bear in mind this strong effective remedy, I can never again be terrified by the malignancy of sin.”
      - b. “Where have your love, your mercy, your compassion shone out more luminously than in your wounds, sweet, gentle Lord of mercy? More mercy than this no one has than that he lay down his life for those who are doomed to death.”

V. Two great spiritual obstacles to accepting mercy:

- a. First Obstacle: Self-righteousness
  - i. Story of the Pharisee and the Publican:
    - 1. Story of contrasts:
      - a. Awareness of each other
      - b. Substance of their prayer
      - c. Stance in the Temple
    - 2. Heart of the story:
      - a. Tension:
        - i. Saving the lost vs. Losing the Saved
    - 3. Real problem: “depravation of Awe” by the Pharisee
      - a. What is lost is the sense of awe before the loving mercy of God
        - i. We take for granted our own ability to be righteous and forget that we too have been shown mercy
      - b. “Justice without mercy”

- i. Law was observed in strict justice but led to sin
  - ii. Why is self-righteousness so dangerous?
    - 1. Arrogance:
      - a. Does not allow the water of God's mercy to fine even the smallest crack by which it can enter into someone's life
    - 2. "Corruption"
      - a. Pope Francis:
        - i. Sin that is elevated to a mental habit /way of life
        - ii. "The corrupt man is the one who sins but does not repent, who sins and pretends to be Christian and it is this double life that is scandalous."
          - 1. How? He tires of asking for forgiveness and soon ceases to ask at all
            - a. Examples:
              - i. Man who goes to Mass yet cheats his employees
              - ii. Man who condemns teaches CCD but is having a wedding affair
          - iii. For such people, we pray for a calamity or a great ordeal
            - 1. Which can shake them out of their complacency and
            - 2. Create a crack that will allow the water of God's mercy to flow through
- iii. They do not see Mercy as medicine
  - 1. You need to admit you need a doctor to consume the medicine
    - a. Pope Francis: "shattered heart"
      - i. The best path to receiving mercy
  - 2. Saint Jerome: *(Commentary on Joel: "I bid you not to tear your garments but rather to rend your hearts which are laden with sin. Like wine skins, unless they have been cut open, they will burst of their own accord. After you have done this, return to the Lord your God, from whom you have been alienated by*

your sins. Do not despair of his mercy, no matter how great your sins, for great mercy will take away great sins.”

- b. Second Obstacle: Despair
    - i. What is despair?
      - 1. A failure of Hope
        - a. Conclusion that Change is not possible
          - i. In me
          - ii. In the world
      - ii. More widespread than you think:
        - 1. Pope Francis tells of Italian students: Story of the Prodigal Son:
          - a. What happened to the elder son who came home after the story ended?
            - i. They believed that the father received the prodigal son back
              - 1. To punish him severely
              - 2. Force him to live with his servants
              - 3. Learn not to squander any more money
      - iii. Spiritual Sign of Despair:
        - 1. Many tire of asking for forgiveness
          - a. Image: “Licking our wounds”
          - b. Narcissistic tendency to take pleasure in bitterness:
            - i. Since it does not demand change
        - 2. POINT: God never tires of giving forgiveness
          - a. STORY: priest before the Lord wondering if he was too merciful in Confession
            - i. His answer: It is your fault, O Lord, because you showed bad example!
- VI. Spiritual Medicine: Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation
  - a. History of the Sacrament
    - i. Early Church there was no formal sacrament for Reconciliation
      - 1. Baptism was the only means for the forgiveness of sins
        - a. Augustine’s great challenge
          - 1. “I wish to convert but not yet”
    - ii. Pivotal Moment: Persecution of Diocletius

1. Can those who repent be taken back?
    - a. Decree: one grain of incense to be offered to the Emperor
      - i. Many died but many apostasized
    - b. Great fight:
      - i. Rigorists vs. Accommodators
  
  2. Result: "Order of Penitents"
    - a. Admission into the order
    - b. Interesting Order:
      - i. Public Penance followed by
      - ii. Reconciliation by the larger community
        1. Result: Readmission to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist
  
  3. Rise of oracular Confession among the Irish monasteries
    - a. Societal Order had collapses
    - b. Interesting twist:
      - i. Reconciliation was offered in anticipation of a penance to be done later
        1. Practice remains the same today
- iii. Why do you need to go to confession for forgiveness of sins?
1. Three reasons:
    - a. Communal Nature of sin:
      - i. Recognition that all sin is personal but not private
        1. Saint Philip Neri: "The harder we sweep, the more dust we raise.
    - b. Priest as persona Christi and person of the Community
      - i. Persona Christi: priest as the unworthy means of the gift received
      - ii. Person of the community:
        1. Story: Stone that hits the water alters every molecule of water in the pond
          - a. Point: Spiritual and temporal consequences to our sins
    - c. Assurance of forgiveness:



- i. Story: Doug's aunt and the psychiatrist
  - 2. Gift of Shame and Guilt:
    - a. Pope Francis: shame as a "grace"
      - i. Ezekiel 16
    - b. "Happy guilt"
      - i. Joke: Catholic guilt
        - 1. Healthy function
          - a. Psychopaths: Lack the ability to feel shame or guilt
- iv. QUESTION: Where has all the shame gone?
  - 1. ANSWER: Paradox of the modern world: "Me and Not Me"
    - a. On one hand: Bishop Barron: "My life is all about me":
      - i. NOT NEW: ORIGINAL SIN
        - 1. "Wounded nature"
          - a. St. Paul
      - ii. Result: Concupiscence
        - 1. Can refer to any intense form of human desire.
          - a. Christian theology:
            - i. The movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of the human reason.
            - ii. The apostle St. Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the "flesh" against the "spirit."
            - iii. Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin.
          - b. It unsettles man's moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins



- b. Friendship is a sublime form of love to which we are called to share with Christ
  - i. And then share with one another

VII. Conclusion:

- a. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?
  - i. Lord Jesus, who has shone his kindly face of mercy upon us