

Mercy Sunday: Absolutely Liturgically Correct

For those of us who have been trusting the wisdom of the Church, this statement comes as no surprise. For the remainder of us who have questioned the placing of Divine Mercy Sunday on the Second Sunday of Easter, there needs to be some serious clarification.

Serious, because today the fate of many souls lies in the correct understanding and celebration of this all important Feast of Divine Mercy. No longer can we accept statements that criticize the Church or the Venerable Pope John Paul II. The Pope had acted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and established the Feast of Mercy on the Octave Sunday of Easter saying that he had fulfilled the will of Christ in doing so.

Instead of making comments about the Pope that only show our lack of understanding of the liturgical correctness of placing the Feast of Mercy on that exact Sunday that Jesus had requested, we should instead be looking at the readings for that particular Sunday.

When Jesus had first requested that Saint Faustina work on establishing the feast on that Sunday, she met with some resistance from her superiors. In fact, when she approached Jesus about it and told Him “they tell me that there is already a feast and so why should I talk about it”, Jesus responded forcefully “And who knows anything about this feast? No one! Even those who should be proclaiming My mercy and teaching people about it often do not know about it themselves. That is why I want the image to be solemnly blessed on the First Sunday after Easter, and want it to be venerated publicly so that every soul may know about it” (Diary 340).

Three very important things to note here: one is the indication of a feast that was already there; two, the need for priests to preach about mercy; and three, Jesus wanting the image of Himself, as the Divine Mercy, to be solemnly blessed and venerated on that day.

The feast that they were talking about was the Octave of Easter. At that time, in the 1930’s, that Sunday had been nicknamed “Low” Sunday and appears to have been an effort to squelch the importance of that Sunday and to shift the attention on to Easter Sunday itself. There was a serious problem with this thinking and that is why Jesus had gotten so worked-up about it saying “And who knows anything about this feast?”

The Octave of Easter, as the Church fathers have taught, is actually, not only part of the Easter festival, it is actually the most important day, having within it, the gifts that Jesus wants to shower on all who will turn to Him with trust and repentance. That gift, as Jesus explained, is the total forgiveness of all sins and punishment for anyone who confesses their sins and receives Holy Communion which is equal to what we receive in Baptism.

Easter is such a great feast, that it can’t be celebrated in just one day, but is celebrated throughout an 8 day period, culminating in a “Grand Finale” on the last Sunday. Saint Thomas Aquinas, St. Gregory of Nazianzen, and St. Augustine, all doctors of the Church, agree on this central point of the octave Sunday being the greatest day of the 8 day feast.

The meaning of octaves goes all the way back to many of the Old Testament feasts. One of these is the Feast of Tabernacles significantly mentioned in St. John's Gospel, (7: 37-38) where John recalls what happened on that last day, "On the 'last and greatest' day of the festival, Jesus stood up and cried out, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me; let him drink who believes in Me. Scripture has it: From within him rivers of living water shall flow'". There must be a very significant reason why St. John noted this in his Gospel.

The Gospel for that Sunday after Easter, which has been in place since the beginning of the Church, (John 20: 19-31) recalls the events between the night of the Resurrection and the following Sunday when St. Thomas finally sees and believes that Jesus is risen. This Gospel covers a period of 8 days and perfectly reflects on the need to trust in Jesus.

Look again at the words of Jesus on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is easy to see the correlation between the Octave of Easter/Mercy Sunday and the point that Jesus is trying to emphasize: approaching Him with trust and receiving an abundance of graces that would pour forth from us onto others. Jesus told Faustina "When a soul approaches Me with trust, I fill it with such an abundance of graces that it cannot contain them within itself, but radiates them to other souls" (Diary 1074). "From within him rivers of ..."

When the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship published the decree (May 5th, 2000) establishing Divine Mercy Sunday, it specifically prescribed that "the texts assigned for that day in the Missal and the Liturgy of the Hours are always to be used for the liturgical celebration of this Sunday". This is for a very good reason. The readings for that Sunday are already perfect. Let's look at those readings, starting from the Opening Prayer.

In the Opening Prayer we see references to the water and blood that flowed from the side of Christ, portrayed in the Divine Mercy image and also references to the renewal of grace. "God of mercy, you wash away our sins in water, you give us new birth in the Spirit, and redeem us in the blood of Christ. As we celebrate Christ's resurrection increase our awareness of these blessings, and renew your gift of life within us".

The purpose of the Octave of Easter is to increase the "awareness" of the celebration of Easter and to receive the gifts that the Lord has prepared for us as the result of Him dying on the Cross for our sins. It is interwoven with the entire Paschal Mystery. The entire 10 days from Holy Thursday to the Octave of Easter/Divine Mercy Sunday is not to be separated, but celebrated fully as the most important ritual period of the entire year.

Cardinal Arinze, the Prefect for the Vatican's Office of Divine Worship stated how well the Novena of Divine Mercy, that Jesus requested to be started on Good Friday, fits in perfectly with the Paschal Mystery, using the word "eloquent". There is no greater way to honor our Lord's suffering and death, then to pray for the salvation of souls for the entire period from Good Friday up until the Octave Sunday of Easter/Mercy Sunday.

It is interesting to note that in the Latin Mass (the Extraordinary Form), the Epistle from 1 John 5: 4-10, includes the mention of the blood and water portrayed in the image, not just once, but 3 times for each one. This is important to note, because the establishment of the feast was for the entire universal Catholic Church. Jesus had made reference to a lack of knowledge of the feast when the Latin Mass was being celebrated in the 1930's.

The Gospel for that Sunday is the same regardless of the rite. That Gospel selected by the early Church fathers was from a request found in the earliest liturgical document that is attributed to the Apostles (the Apostolic Constitutions). St. Thomas himself had asked that a “feast be observed with honor” on the eighth day after Easter, when he had finally seen Jesus and believed on that first Octave Sunday, which we now call Mercy Sunday.

The first part of the Gospel recalls the event on the night of that first Easter where Jesus miraculously appears into the Upper Room and bestows the power of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles to forgive sins. This was Jesus’ first instruction after His resurrection and shows us the importance of the Sacrament of Confession as the primary duty of priests.

Now we can see why Jesus was so adamant about the need for His priests to be teaching people about His mercy. His promise of the total forgiveness of sins and punishment on that day for anyone who goes to Confession and receives Holy Communion is a perfect enticement for souls and a perfect opportunity to preach about the need for Confession. After all, it was the first thing that Jesus instructed His Apostles to do after He had risen.

The second part of the Gospel, recalls the event that happened on the following Sunday where Jesus appears in the Upper Room again. This time, Saint Thomas is there. Jesus approaches St. Thomas, perhaps just as He is portrayed in the Divine Mercy image, and shows Thomas His wounds. Thomas says “My Lord and My God”. Jesus admonishes him for not trusting and says “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed”.

Now we can see why Jesus wants the image of Divine Mercy to be solemnly blessed and venerated on that day with the words “Jesus, I trust in You”. In the image, Jesus walks toward us, not only showing us His wounds, but showering us with “a whole ocean of graces” and is asking for us to “believe” in Him. The “blood” light ray in the image portrays the Eucharist and the “water” light ray signifies the washing away of sin.

That is the great gift of the Octave of Easter, the total forgiveness of sins and punishment. It is an annual preparation for the Judgment. How could we ever let anyone walk out of our churches on Easter without an invitation to come back the following Sunday, on the greatest Octave Sunday of all, to receive the greatest gift of all, the absolute and complete forgiveness of all sins and punishment? Ask yourself “what would Jesus want from me”?

For those that might question the validity of those promises, the Vatican issued a special plenary indulgence specifically for Divine Mercy Sunday that is to remain perpetually in place. Add to that, the fact that Pope John Paul II quoted that he had fulfilled the will of Christ and died on that feast just five years after its establishment. It is the responsibility of all pastors to get the word out about the indulgence as listed in the “duties of priests”.

It would be prudent on the part of every priest and bishop to heed the words of Jesus and the Church and become knowledgeable about the Feast of Mercy that the Church has established as Divine Mercy Sunday and to do everything that they can to save souls.

For more information on how to celebrate Mercy Sunday, go to www.MercySunday.com.