

The Truth about Easter and Divine Mercy Sunday

There has been so much confusion and discussion about Divine Mercy Sunday and how it all relates to Easter and it is about time that all of the misunderstandings get cleared up quickly.

Though it started out from a revelation that was made by Jesus to Saint Faustina, it is now an official feast in the Catholic Church. Divine Mercy Sunday is not to be considered part of a private devotion. There are still some things that are considered devotional that are associated with “Divine Mercy”, like the Chaplet and the Novena, but these devotionals should not be confused with what the Church has set in place for the observance of Divine Mercy Sunday.

Many have added to the confusion by suggesting that priests must provide special devotional services for Divine Mercy Sunday. This had caused many priests to shy away. Mercy Sunday is not a “party for devotees”, but it is in all truthfulness an astonishing “refuge for sinners.” It is an outstanding, timely gift from God. Make no doubt about it, the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit has fulfilled every request that Jesus made, but only because it had seen the hand of God.

The Church has not added anything new by naming this new feast, but just sort of re-energized what was always celebrated as a great feast in the early Church. Over the years, the Church had lost some of the fervor for the Octave of Easter. Octaves have always been associated with the celebration of great feasts. Some of the Jewish feasts in the Old Testament, such as the Feast of Tabernacles, were celebrated for a full 8 days and the very last day was always the greatest one.

The Gospel of John recalls the observance of the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles in the 7th chapter (John 7:37-39) and Saint John calls it the greatest 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’”. It is important that every word in these passages is taken to heart and analyzed very thoroughly.

The first day of an octave and the last day are considered as the same day, in fact, every day in between the first and last are part of the feast. Just look at the days of the week between Easter and the Octave of Easter: from Monday thru Saturday, they are all called “Easter” and each and every one of these days is the highest form of celebration called a solemnity. On each of those days, the Gloria and the Creed are recited, just like on Sundays. Each is considered a Sunday.

Don’t forget that the Gospel that has always been read on that Octave Sunday after Easter (John 20:19-31) covers the time from the evening of the Resurrection up until the following Sunday, an eight day octave. The first part of that Gospel narrates Jesus bestowing on the Apostles the power to forgive sins by breathing on them and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” The second part of that Gospel is what happens on the very next Sunday, the octave, when Thomas finally sees Jesus in that same Upper Room as the rest of the Apostles had seen Him, just that very Sunday before.

Now recall the words of Jesus on the last and greatest (octave) day of that Feast of Tabernacles, “let him drink who (believes) in Me....” Now what did Jesus say to St. Thomas? “Blessed are those who have not seen and have (believed)”. Souls must believe to be blessed. The complete scenario of these two events has very great meaning. The Lord is showing us the importance of (believing) and trusting in Him in order to receive His (blessings) or, in other words, His grace.

He is also showing us the great importance of octaves. It was no accident that Saint Thomas wasn't present on that first Easter. That scenario was ordained by God to get us to understand the importance of trusting (believing) in Jesus in order to obtain grace. It was also ordained by God that the very first act that Jesus performed after His Resurrection was none other than the institution of the sacrament of Confession. These two events play a crucial role in salvation.

On Easter Sunday, and all throughout the week, we celebrate the creation of grace that Jesus has obtained for us by His Passion, Death, and Resurrection. On the following Sunday, the Octave of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday) we celebrate the fulfillment of what Easter is all about and we receive a big outpouring of a whole ocean of graces. The obtainment of these graces is brought about by trusting in Jesus and by approaching His ministers and going to Confession.

Mercy Sunday is really designed to get souls back to the practice of their faith. That is why the Catholic Church has attached a special plenary indulgence to this Sunday and has decreed that it remain "perpetually" in place. It has also, in that decree, issued a specific directive to priests entitled "Duties of Priests: Inform Parishioners, Hear Confessions, Lead Prayers". These duties are the guidelines for the correct celebration of the octave and the Holy See has left no options.

The specific duties, which can be seen on the Vatican website, were originally issued in August of 2002 and presented to all bishops. They are all clearly presented in the last paragraph of that special plenary indulgence and include the proclamation of that indulgence by all "priests who exercise pastoral ministry, especially parish priests". It also asserts that they "should promptly and generously hear their confessions" and also "lead the prayers after the masses" on that day.

It is very clear that the Church, moved by the Holy Spirit, has acted compellingly to insure that everyone has the opportunity to obtain these incredible graces that are offered on this octave. It has set in place a renewed enthusiasm for Easter. It is imperative that Easter be celebrated for a full eight days and in a solemn way. No longer can we let the Easter-only Catholics walk out of Church on Easter Sunday without an invitation to come back and to celebrate the Easter Octave.

Although the Easter season extends for a full fifty days until Pentecost, the Easter feast itself is only 8 days long, from the Easter Vigil until the evening of that octave, Divine Mercy Sunday. It is very important that we celebrate Easter correctly and that includes celebrating the octave.

Pope John Paul II, who may be beatified soon, had stated that he had fulfilled the will of Christ by instituting this Feast of Divine Mercy. This statement by a Pope of the stature and holiness of Pope John Paul II, must be taken seriously. Jesus requested this Feast of Mercy to be placed on that Octave Sunday of Easter and He made a very special promise to forgive all sins and all punishment to any soul that would go to Confession and receive Holy Communion on that day.

The Church made it an official feast on the Octave Sunday of Easter (Second Sunday of Easter) in the year 2000 and by God's providence, Pope John Paul II died on the Vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday just five years later. JP II's last written words that were read on Mercy Sunday, the day after he died, called for a greater acceptance and understanding of Divine Mercy. This must be viewed as a great sign and a mandate for everyone to follow, especially all bishops and priests.

There have also been many inquiries as to using the Divine Mercy image on Mercy Sunday and its permanent installations in churches. Pope Benedict, in his book, "The Spirit of the Liturgy", wrote of the importance of having such an image to assist in every liturgy and as a sign of hope

to lead people to the Second Coming of Christ. He wrote of the “void” that was caused by the removal of icons and sacred art from our sanctuaries and the importance of having the images.

Jesus also insisted that the Divine Mercy image be venerated and solemnly blessed on Mercy Sunday. And why not? The image perfectly represents everything that happens in that Gospel. It even supports the other readings including the reference to the washing away of sins in water, redeeming us in the blood, and the new birth in the Spirit, found in the Opening Prayer. It also represents that it is through “trust” that we receive grace, with the words “Jesus, I trust in You”.

The Divine Mercy image portrays, in the two rays, the sacraments of Baptism, Confession, and the Eucharist. The focus on that Sunday has always been on the institution of confession and the need to trust and believe in Jesus to receive grace (blessings). Jesus promised an outpouring of a whole ocean of graces on that Feast of Mercy and Jesus said that the repentant sinners that would receive them would not be able to contain them, but would radiate them to other souls.

Recall again what Jesus said on the “last and greatest (octave) day” of the Feast of Tabernacles, “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’”. (John 7:37-39) Every word that Jesus spoke has great meaning and St. John recorded that it was specifically on that last and greatest day that Jesus shows us that believing and trusting in Him will yield great graces on the octave.

Three of the greatest Doctors of the Church, St. Gregory of Nazianzen, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine support the celebration of octaves and they clearly indicate and uphold that the octave Sunday of Easter is the fulfillment of, the perfection of, and most important Sunday without taking anything from the greatness of the Day of the Resurrection itself. Easter is the greatest feast and it is “on the last and greatest day” that we receive an outpouring of graces.

Correctly celebrating Easter involves correctly celebrating the Octave of Easter. The Church has acted, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to insure its proper celebration by adding that special plenary indulgence for that octave, Divine Mercy Sunday. It has set into place the “Duties of Priests” to insure that everyone be told about it. It wants to insure the salvation of all souls. It is only through humble obedience to the Magisterium that this calling will be fulfilled.

There is no issue more important than the salvation of souls. Jesus wants to prepare us for His Second Coming. The Church has acted decisively. Jesus wants to pour out His graces in great abundance to give souls a chance to be completely washed clean before He comes. The Church in its explanation of the Feast of Mercy, indicated, that the promise of Jesus for the forgiveness of all sins and punishment is “equal to the grace that is received in the sacrament of Baptism”.

It doesn’t take a genius to see the times that we are living in. The signs of Jesus coming are all around us. The number of Catholics that do not attend Sunday mass is at worse than epidemic levels. The Church has acted appropriately and has given us this feast with the ability to renew souls and subsequently renew and rebuild the Church itself. Jesus told us of the importance of leaving the 99 and going out to find the lost one. It is about time that all Catholics get to work.

There is one more thing that is of the utmost importance and it would be a grave injustice to the Lord not to proclaim it. Jesus said that the Feast of Mercy would be the last hope of salvation. These words can be found in the diary of St. Faustina “Divine Mercy in My Soul” entry #965. If this be true, then everyone must be told about it, including fallen-away and lapsed Catholics. Proclaim it from the rooftops and tell everyone about those special graces on Mercy Sunday!

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