

The Bread and Breath of Life

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."... When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:19, 22)

The disciples were afraid of death. That fear would be their master no matter where they might hide. But if someone stronger than death were to break its chains and pass through the walls and doors of their fear, then that someone would be Master of death and liberator of all who fear death. And someone did, in fact, accomplish that: His name is Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God.

For him there are no locked rooms, no tombs. Because he is sinless, he is deathless. To each one of us, as to the astonished apostles, he says: "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18).

Inside the Castle

The "peace be with you!" of Jesus interrupts the flow of fear's logic; he pierces it from the inside. Just as he destroyed death

by dying, so he comes triumphantly and stands inside the locked room of every fearful heart, instilling everlasting joy.

Saint Teresa of Avila compares the soul to an interior castle.¹ Probably no one is without one or another locked room, or reserved floor, in his or her castle. There are many fears locked in the human heart. Some are born of great pain caused even by those who would be closest to us. Others are born of sin, of an unwillingness to be open to God or neighbor, to give and receive and even to be healed. But ultimately all our fears come down to one: the fear of death.

The sting of the tragedy here is not so much that we *will* die, for we certainly shall; it is that we can live pretending we will not. This self-invented immortality is the work of evil in us. Indeed, deception is evil's most classic tactic. Fake immortality is an illusion, one that death is glad we espouse. It keeps us from finding the Way, the Truth and the Life.

But Jesus is neither daunted by our barricades nor deceived by evil's tactics. Never! He comes and stands triumphantly within and shows the wounds of his love. He shows how deeply he holds us in his heart. In the locked rooms of every interior castle, Jesus continues to show those same glorious wounds.

Jesus breathes on the disciples, giving them the Holy Spirit to forgive and to retain sins. The heart of his mission, and thus the apostolic mission, *is* the forgiveness of sins. We need to shake ourselves to remember that our sins pierced open the heart of God. Jesus expired from God's own depths his very breath of life so that we might be forgiven and have life in his name. Before he died he gave his Body at the Last Supper as our *bread of life*. After he rose, he gave his Spirit of forgiveness as our *breath of life*. Both are exquisite gifts of the

exquisite love of the exquisite Redeemer. Both he entrusts to the apostles to be handed on to all who, although not seeing, would yet believe in him.

Just as we are united in the body of Jesus, through the ministry of bishops and priests, by partaking of Holy Communion, so we are reconciled in the body of Jesus, through their ministry, by participating in holy reconciliation. We cannot and must not separate these two, the Bread and the Breath. The more we sincerely grow in love for the one, the more we will grow in love for the other.

The fresh bread of the Eucharist and the fresh breath of reconciliation are like the body and soul of faithful Christian living. Just as no one can sit at home and make the Eucharist for himself, so no one can sit at home and make reconciliation for himself. Jesus chided Thomas for not believing in the witness of the apostles; would he perhaps chide us for being slow to believe in their power to forgive sins?

Until he returns in glory, Jesus' love wants the words of the priest to make him truly present in the bread and wine of Communion. He also wants the words of the priest to make the Holy Spirit of power and forgiveness truly present in confession, breathing into every last room of our interior castles. No priest consecrates bread and wine or forgives or retains sins on his own authority or by his own power or because he is better than anyone else. He does these things only in the power and authority of Jesus living in his body, which is the Church.

What is more, no priest *is* a priest on his own authority but only by the call of Jesus in the Church. Once ordained a priest, he is no longer just some man. However unworthy he may be in his own heart, he is consecrated in the holiness of

Jesus the Priest and sent to you to act in the person of Jesus, to speak the words of Jesus, to serve the sacraments of the love of Jesus to his bride the Church. Surely this is what the parish is all about!

Victorious Words

Just as Jesus forgave the good thief, the adulterous woman and the apostle Peter, so Jesus through your priests forgives you with a certainty and definitiveness that are stronger than death and hell. The power of absolution is the power of resurrection. It is a re-plunging into the waters of baptism. Jesus recreates the heart sick with sin and broken with sorrow and holds it within the embrace of his Cross, the embrace of God himself.

How many times have we heard of the power of absolution, of its freeing and dignifying effects? Absolution restores our hearts to hope, confidence and trust. It enables us to bring forgiveness into our relationships, our marriages, our homes; gives impetus and direction to our choices; calms the gnawing anxiety of guilt and depression; mends what is broken and alienated within us; reinvigorates our souls with the desire for the kingdom of God!

We must neither accommodate sin nor compromise with it, not one cancerous inch. But only his almighty mercy can enable us to resist sin. How can we refuse or be lukewarm toward such a strong hand stretched out to us?

Saint Faustina, the saint of Divine Mercy, is a good intercessor for us. Let's pray often, with simple and humble faith, for our priests' ministry of reconciliation. The peace of Jesus and the joy of the apostles are for every interior castle. In the sacramental intimacy of individual confession, let us

be open to hear those simple, victorious words of the priest: “I absolve you from all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

On Reflection

Do I fearfully lock the sacrament of confession out of my life?

What prevents me from seeing it as the most powerful means of interior liberation that exists?

What is the relationship between the Bread and the Breath in my life?

Do I fear the forgiveness of Jesus because I don't want to admit my sins?

Is lukewarm belief in the sacrament of confession due to a weak understanding of Christ's relationship to the Church? Why does Christ forgive through the ministry of the Church?

What could encourage me to renew my faith in, and practice of, confession?



Merciful Son of the Father, breathe once more upon your Church and on the hearts of all believers, that we may be refreshed by the grace of confession. Free us from the inane fear of revealing our spiritual brokenness to your priests, the ones you have chosen to be the missionaries of your sacramental forgiveness. May your presence fill us with joy and confidence to welcome your liberating love. Let those victorious words, “I absolve you from all your sins. Peace be with you!” resound in our hearts. *Christe, eleison.*

Divine Mercy

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21-23)

I do not intend here to explain why the Second Sunday of Easter has come to be named “Divine Mercy Sunday,” nor to recount the inspiring story of Saint Faustina. I prefer rather to sound aloud the bugle. This is in obedience to what Jesus once said to Saint Faustina: “Priests are to tell everyone about My great and unfathomable mercy.”¹

Here I will reflect on only one of mercy’s resplendent qualities. It appears frequently in Saint Faustina’s writings. It is, I feel, the key to opening one of the most stubbornly closed doors in the human heart—namely, our crazy distrust of the mercy of God as Jesus has revealed it to us.

The key quality of which I speak is faithfulness, the unfailing availability of divine mercy to all. God is inexorably merciful. Mercy is “love’s second name,”² and Jesus is “Love and Mercy itself.”³

A Bad Hangover

Often our distrust of mercy is not a clear-cut attitude but a vague and heavy spirit of resistance, a gnawing reluctance.

And while we would rather be free of that attitude, and so know deep peace, a number of things stop us.

For one thing, we procrastinate. We try to tell ourselves the attitude will go away, like a bad hangover. We are reluctant to let go of the things that cause it. We feel shame and frustration at not understanding our own humanity. We are angry at our own foibles and still angrier that we have to admit them, even to ourselves—never mind to God, not to speak of the priest.

One way or another, many of us get like this. The problem is that this heavy spirit of resistance is like a bad cold. If left untreated, it turns into a kind of spiritual SARS. It becomes a dark, deep and deadly distrust if we rationalize it and try to justify ourselves. And it infects others very easily.

We start calling evil good, and good evil. We attribute to our own conscience an infallibility that we would deny even to the pope. We blame the Church for giving us guilt complexes, for being out-of-date in its moral doctrine. We make a convenient yet spectacularly artificial separation between Christ and the Church, as if Christ had decided to dispense his graces without her. In effect we say, “Christ, yes; the Church, no.”

We blame our parents, living or dead, not just for our hang-ups but for our indecisiveness in dealing with them. We blame our siblings, teachers, the government. We blame, we blame! The very aspect of our face comes to communicate self-righteous blame, and our actions and words smell of it, like hard liquor on someone's breath.

At the root of our resistance lie the mystery of iniquity and its fatally clever conniving. It is pride that resists admitting guilt and creates an inner fantasy world, a spiritual

Disneyland where we play at life, leaving the challenges of reality and maturity outside. We fear the pain of renouncing our fantasies in order to embrace true healing. Pride flourishes in distrust—and ends in despair. In an amazing show of manipulation, it convinces us that we are being coherent when we contradict ourselves.

While pride persuades us that our sin is too big for divine mercy and our humility more breathtaking than Christ's humiliation, it also tells us that we are too important and too tragic to accept the fact that by merely saying "I'm sorry" we could be restored to God. Pride would have us believe that we are beyond right and wrong, grace and sin, redemption and perdition, God and the devil—indeed, beyond Christ, Church, sacraments, heaven, hell and humankind itself. These all mean nothing when pride has its way.

If you find yourself thinking and acting like this, you may be lingering on a sorry path to nowhere. Thomas wanted proof of the Resurrection; Judas would simply have had no interest in it. Much of civil society and some of our lawmakers and law-caretakers would simply look the other way if the risen Lord appeared to them to say this or that law or scientific project was not the way to go. Behind the personal and societal loss of the sense of true, objective morality lies a cancer of the soul: distrust of divine mercy.

How the Phoenix Arises

But how can I seek divine mercy if I believe I can do no wrong? How can I appeal to conscience to excuse myself from obeying the truth, when if Truth in person were to speak to me, I would ignore him? If science is the new dogma, if technicians are its high priests and physical well-being the only,

or principal, criterion of morality, why pay lip service to God?

In such a world it is no surprise that God should be kept out; indeed, it becomes an imperative to get him out, be it of the oath of allegiance, the national anthem, the dollar bill or the classroom! The false understanding of the separation of church and state leads to the elimination of God and, ultimately, the self-destruction of the state.

But the cold of eliminating him is far better than the lukewarm pretending to do him homage and then flatly provoking him to his face: "What you do with your mercy is your concern; what we do with science is ours!" Distrust of divine mercy manifests the devastating effect of sin in the human heart.

Can the phoenix arise from such devastation? Can my crazy distrust of the mercy of God be discarded so that I can have life? Can the Church and society speak of and to God with its heart and actions on fire, not with cold or lukewarm lips?

The answer is yes! And the power to say and mean yes is Christ Jesus our Lord. As if to prove how well he loved us, he absorbed in his own humanity our sins and afflictions. He died for us while we were still sinners and rose for us that we might become just and holy in him. His act of love for sinners is definitive and irreversible. On the cross he spoke of our craziness: "Father, forgive, for sin has made them crazy. They don't see what they are doing" (see Luke 23:34).

On the cross Jesus accepts us in our very act of rejecting him. He says, "I forgive you; peace be unto you." He confounds the logic of pride with the wisdom of mercy. He takes the power out of sin by forgiving it.

We no longer have to cling to our shame before him, for it is no more! In the beautiful words of Saint Augustine, "...What is mercy but a certain feeling of compassion in our hearts, evoked by the misery of another and compelling us to offer all possible aid?"⁴ Mercy is the heart of our relationship with God and each other.

We can always hope for God's mercy. There is no situation of moral or spiritual misery, however grievous, from which the mercy of God in Jesus cannot rescue us. His mercy hounds us, seeks us. Like rays of light seeping through the cracks around the closed door of a darkened room, his mercy draws us to that door. From the other side he is gently calling and knocking in the hope that we will open to him.

His mercy is unrelenting, unabated, ever persistent, faithful, always vigilant. Like the air we breathe, like the very consciousness we have of ourselves and of our beating hearts, divine mercy is simply always there.

Mercy is revolutionary in that it renders rebellion and duplicity meaningless. Jesus turns sin against itself by making it a chance for the sinner to experience the depth of his love. This does not mean that we should sin so as to know his love. Think of Our Lady, the sinless virgin who knew God's love to the full. Mercy justifies us but not our sin. Knowing that mercy is available means that we need not feel cornered or checkmated by sin.

Moreover, divine mercy does not exist in the abstract: It's not a thing. It is the powerful bond of spiritual love born in the personal encounter between the faithful God of compassion and the sinful human being. Mercy recreates our unsullied relationship with God, passing first and necessarily through the Church and through Jesus. The entire treasure of

divine mercy subsides in the flesh of Jesus, poured out for us on Calvary, transmitted to us across the centuries by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of priests in the confessional and at the altar.

Pope John Paul II calls the Eucharist “a great mystery, a mystery of mercy”⁵ but explains that Communion requires sacramental confession, at least for those who are conscious of mortal sin. This is so logical in the supernatural realm! No one’s rights are being violated; rather, no one’s sin is being blessed.

How can I be truthful in receiving Holy Communion if my life in Christ’s eyes—which see me through the Church—is sick with the deceit of mortal sin? If my soul is not disposed to receive mercy and I am not willing to change my life according to the demands of mercy, how can I sincerely receive the Body and Blood of Christ? To take Communion in such a state is to partake unworthily of the Body of the Lord and to aggravate one’s own sinfulness (see 1 Corinthians 11:27-30). And yet the beauty of mercy is that I can, in sacramental confession and if I truly repent, receive complete and total forgiveness even of that terrible mistake.

The mystery of mercy in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of reconciliation calls me to maturity and seriousness in all my relationships. And as is true in any solid relationship of love, maturity and commitment can be built only on the solid rock of unconditional trust.

Miracles of Mercy

Strangely, we may fear to approach the overwhelming beauty of divine mercy. We fear the tears that unleash the terrible pain and absurdity of our own sin, buried tragically inside.