



The Mercy of Visitation

At the onset of the Year of Mercy I delivered a recorded homily in all our parishes. Today, with an eye to its November conclusion, here I am busting into Sunday Mass again to think through an important question with you: What practical steps can you and I take to keep walking ever further into the *mystery* of mercy when the *Year of Mercy* is over?

I propose that we follow the path of Our Lady of the *Visitation*. For if we imitate Mary in her visit to Elizabeth, she will lead us straight into the Works of Mercy at the heart of this Jubilee Year.

The Visitation has long been woven like a thread into the very fabric of Catholic life. Each time you say the “Hail, Mary,” you quote Elizabeth’s words to Mary: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” The Church’s official Morning Prayer begins each day with the words of Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, in praise of the God Who “has *visited* His people.” And Evening Prayer brings each day to an end with Mary’s prophetic response to Elizabeth’s greeting: “From this day”—the day of Visitation—“all generations shall call me blessed.” Not a day goes by that the Church does not lift up the Mystery of the Visitation for our contemplation—and imitation.

On the surface the encounter of these two women seems utterly commonplace. What can

there be about such an obscure incident to merit its being called to our prayerful attention day after day, century after century? Could it be that this *ordinary* daily encounter hints at *extraordinary* practical possibilities that could transform our everyday visits into Works of Mercy like Mary’s? Let us look to Our Lady of the Visitation for guidance.

In the Gospel drama of visitation, Our Lady played two parts: the role of visitor and the role of visited. The newly pregnant Virgin who visited Elizabeth had just *been* visited herself—by the Angel Gabriel—and would soon be visited again—by the shepherds and by the Magi. Memories of these visits were Mary’s treasure, the Gospel tells us; over and over she pondered their meaning in her heart. Maybe we should search our memories too, you and I, for the times we visited others and the times others visited us.

When we do, long-ago visits come to mind that have left surprisingly enduring impressions. Pondering them in light of the Visitation, we begin to see why the Works of Mercy play such a central part in the teaching of Mary’s Son, Himself an invisible visitor to Elizabeth that day in the womb of His mother. “I was a stranger and you *welcomed* me,” He will say later on. “I was sick, I was in prison, and you *visited* me.” Does our experience of visitation leave us grateful like Jesus?

When I was a boy, we saw our grandparents only rarely, for they lived at a distance. In 1957, when I was ten, we learned that they were coming for a visit. Instantly my heart leapt in expectation. Day after day my anticipation intensified—especially for my grandmother. At last, in the dark of a Friday evening I heard the

tell-tale sounds of arrival outside: their car in the driveway, her footfall on the porch, a lilting voice at the door. Then in she walked—the longed-for visitation had begun! A black-and-white photo of the two of us playing cards forever captures the joy of her longed-for presence that night sixty years ago.

Three years later a different visitor came to our door—not just once, but often. I fell ill that year as school ended and had to spend all summer in bed while my brother and sisters happily (and tauntingly!) ran in and out of the house. The contrast with my forced isolation weighed me down. But then Father McTeigue started coming to visit. We didn't say much; he didn't stay long. He gave me Communion; he left to visit others. But for me, seeing Father was the only thing I had to look forward to all day, and I knew I could count on his coming. He stepped into my aloneness; he lifted my spirits; he kept me from feeling too sorry for myself. "I was sick, and you visited me," Jesus says. In my mind's eye I can still see Father McTeigue's compassionate face of visitation in that bed-ridden summer half a century ago.

I mention these memories of mine to provoke you to remember yours. For when we ponder our own memories of visitation as Mary did, we discover a common feature that links them to the Gospel account: visitation fills us with joy. "My spirit rejoices!" Mary proclaimed, as John the Baptist "leaped for joy" in Elizabeth's womb. Moreover, as my visits with my grandmother and Father McTeigue reveal, this joy is overlapping. The joy of *anticipation* leads to the joy of *visitation*, which is followed by the joy of *recollection*. That's the way this Work of Mercy plays out, over and over again: anticipation, visitation, recollection. Each stage

leads us deeper into joy.

This will not surprise us if we go back to the beginning, for our Creator made us to share *His* joy. Even before He fashioned Eve from Adam's rib, however, God perceived a mortal danger to His design for our happiness: "It is not good for man to be *alone*." To forestall this threat our Maker built into our hearts a profound human need for visitation. This need the Prince of Darkness was quick to grasp as a vulnerability he has never ceased to exploit. "It's not good for man to be alone," we can hear Satan saying; "so that's what I'll do: I'll get him to be alone. I'll frustrate his desire for companionship. I'll entrap him in loneliness!"

We learn this sad lesson when our experience of visitation goes bad. One Sunday in 1977 I attended Mass in a parish where not many knew me, where I was an anonymous irregular visitor. On the way out of church, the flow of the crowd swept me along toward an acquaintance I was happy to talk to. He looked at me kindly, shook hands—and turned back to the person with whom he'd been speaking. Our brief visit was over before it began. No one else recognized me. Unwelcomed, I walked away alone, turning over in my mind the pain of my failure to gain access to fellowship. To bridge the gap to my aloneness that day would have taken a Work of Mercy.

"I was a stranger and you did *not* welcome me," Jesus tells us. "I was sick, I was in prison, and you did *not* visit me." Those who are *not* visited with our welcome cannot know the overlapping joys of visitation. They have no one whose arrival they *anticipate*, no one they look forward to seeing, no one who looks forward to seeing them. Their clock chimes no

hour of *visitation*. They have no face to behold, no voice to listen to, no hand to grasp in friendship. Accordingly, the unvisited prison cell or isolated hospital bed knows no “afterwards” to savor the memory of an earlier visitor in the joy of *recollection*. “The greatest poverty,” Mother Teresa used to say, “is to be unwanted.” How well she knew from experience: “It is not good for man to be alone.”

“It is not good . . . to be alone” because we are made for *joy*—as the Church’s remembrance of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth reminds us daily. “Joy that comes from the depth of your being is like a compass by which you can tell which direction your life should follow,” Mother Teresa’s spiritual director told her as she set out on her mission to the poorest of the poor.

Each morning the words of Zechariah’s song of praise invite us to discover anew the joy of visitation. “You, my child, . . . will go before the Lord to prepare His way” with your kindness so that “the Dawn from on high will shine on those in darkness and the shadow of death” and “guide their feet into the way of peace.”

Each evening the canticle of Our Lady of the Visitation assures us that God has been true to “His promise of mercy” in the day now behind us. Throughout the world thousands of grace-inspired Works of Mercy modelled on Mary’s have “lifted up the lowly” and “filled the hungry with good things.”

However we name her, by whatever title—Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Fatima—Mary never ceases to be Our Lady of the Visitation. If you and I set out with

her on her way to Elizabeth, those we visit will come to know her as the Mother of Mercy long after this Jubilee Year has ended.