

The God of Mercy
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St. John the Apostle Lenten Parish Mission
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Introduction

Good evening and welcome to night two of our parish mission. I remember when I was a young boy living in Queens, NY. My family attended Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal church, and every year the parish had a Lenten Mission. I remember those missions fondly and thinking back on them, I started to wonder about where the idea of a parish mission originated.

The Catholic parish mission has its origin in 17th-century France and was targeted at combatting spiritual laziness and neglect in rural areas. Most historical accounts attribute their start to St. Vincent de Paul, around 1617. They were aimed at bringing intense, multi-day preaching, and confessions to abandoned areas, to rejuvenate faith. Later in the 19th century, parish missions became a staple in American Catholic life.

Throughout this week of prayer and adoration, we'll have talks focusing on various topics. There are of course, innumerable subjects we could consider but this evening I want us to reflect on *The God of Mercy*. I believe this topic is most appropriate as Lent is a season of repentance, but repentance without a proper understanding of God's merciful and loving heart, can easily and too often become self-loathing. And so I invite us, this evening to contemplate *The God of Mercy*, and I want to do so through what I've termed the five *Mysteries of Mercy*.

You might be asking yourself what are the *Mysteries of Mercy*. I've heard of the *Joyful, Luminous, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries of the Rosary* but never the *Mysteries of Mercy*. I would say you are correct. I've never read of them anywhere or heard of them either – but I pray them often. They are simply five scriptural passages that touch my heart deeply and, I believe, give us deeper insight into the mind and heart of God.

As an aside, I would submit that we have some liberty, when praying the Rosary or the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and need not limit ourselves to the four traditional sets of mysteries, but rather allow ourselves to reflect on any scripture passages that deeply touch our hearts or inflame our desire for God. But tonight we'll consider these five *Mysteries of Mercy*. They are listed on the back cover of your worship aid and hopefully this evening we'll learn something of God's desire, power, and readiness to show mercy. We'll learn something of humility, the proper disposition of heart for the penitent, and we'll grow to trust God's great promise of salvation and an eternal life of love with him in heaven. So let us begin.

1st Mystery of Mercy – Parable of the Prodigal Son

We begin with our gospel selection for the evening, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We are all very familiar with the story. I am confident we've all heard various homilies on its themes many, many times. So many in fact, I seriously doubt that I can offer any new insight on this important scripture passage, and so instead, I seek to offer an image. An image to hold in your mind and reflect on.

During the summer of 2021, I was sitting in a classroom at Franciscan University in Steubenville, OH. It was the first day of what was to be a two year program of study and prayer leading to certification as a spiritual director. As I sat in class, I found myself captivated by a picture on the wall. A grainy, black-and-white image of the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son sketched by Eugene Burnand. For your benefit, I've included a copy on the back of tonight's worship aid. This portrait captivated my attention for the better part of two summers. I would stare at it during class and imagine myself on the balcony with the father as he expectantly waited for his son's return.

I invite you to close your eyes and join me on that balcony. As you stand there, see the father as he scans the horizon. Look at him. The lines at the corners of his eyes, grown deep and long from worry and squinting in the sun. The dry and leathered look of his skin from countless hours in the hot day and the cold night, perched on the balcony longing for the return of the Prodigal. Feel the heaviness of his heart. What does this tell us about the heart of God?

Too often I believe we gloss over the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son came and asked for his inheritance, the father offended yes, angry maybe, acquiesces and gives him half of everything. The son then goes away, spends it all, and when penniless returns and is forgiven. Isn't that nice. Yes, but it is too simple, and it glosses over the depth of what must have been going on in the father's heart during the son's absence.

I am sure the father knew his son, his tendencies. In his wisdom, I suspect, the father knew what the son would do with the inheritance. Yet he gave anyway. We must consider not just the offense against the father but the sadness and worry that must have consumed him while the Prodigal wandered. Worry about how that lifestyle might harm his son. Then when a famine came, concerned for his son's life and safety. Life didn't just continue in the son's absence. Imagine for a moment the yearning. Feel the hole in the father's heart that existed as he stood on that balcony keeping vigil day after day.

Then suddenly, he spies the Prodigal far off. Overwhelming thankfulness and gratitude fill the father's heart. He runs breathlessly to embrace his returning son with joy. There was never a reason to question forgiveness, the father just wanted his son back. This is what Jesus seeks to teach us about the heart of God the Father. He longs for us. This is the lesson of the *First Mystery of Mercy* – God desires to forgive.

2nd Mystery of Mercy – Healing of the Paralytic

Not only does God desire to forgive, he also has the power. That is what the story of Jesus healing the paralytic, our *Second Mystery of Mercy*, teaches. Let me illustrate this power with a modern day example.

Maureen Digan of Lee Massachusetts was diagnosed in high school with lymphedema. Lymphedema is a painful form of cancer that prevents fluid flow causing swelling of the extremities. Maureen, a fallen away Catholic, suffered with this disease for many years and had many operations. At one point, her doctors decided because of the severity of the condition it was necessary to amputate her leg. It was not long after that, they determined they needed to amputate her remaining leg. However, before the second amputation, Maureen's husband Bob went to see the movie "Divine Mercy – No Escape." Convinced of the intercessory power of St. Faustina, Bob persuaded Maureen, with permission from her doctors, to visit the tomb of St. Faustina in Poland.

Let me inject a little about St. Faustina in case you are unfamiliar with her. She was an uneducated, Polish nun who lived in the early 1900s. She was also a mystic who had a series of apparitions of Jesus during which he described in detail the depth, breath, and immeasurable character of his mercy. Sr. Faustina in obedience to her spiritual director recorded her revelations from Jesus concerning his mercy in a diary. This book inspired the Church's devotion to the Divine Mercy of Jesus, and we will pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet later this evening. The message of Divine Mercy is simple. God loves us – all of us. He wants us to recognize that his mercy is greater than our sins.

Returning to Maureen's story, when she arrived in Poland at the Shrine, she went to confession for the first time in years and prayed at the tomb saying, "O.K. Faustina I came a long way, now do something." In her heart, Maureen heard Sr. Faustina say, "If you ask for my help, I will give it to you." Maureen thought she was having a nervous breakdown. All of a sudden, the pain seemed to drain out of her body and her swollen leg, scheduled for amputation, went back to its normal size. The doctors called the cure miraculous. The miracle, attributed to Sr. Faustina's intercession to the Divine Mercy of Jesus, contributed to Sr. Faustina's cause for beatification in 1993 and eventual canonization in 2000.

This is the message of the *Second Mystery of Mercy*, “That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” Jesus has the power to forgive us; to break the chains of sin, and restore us to son-ship and daughter-ship with the Father. We need just ask.

3rd Mystery of Mercy – Jesus Forgives the Sinner

The *Third Mystery of Mercy* is “Jesus Forgives the Sinner,” specifically the woman caught in adultery in John 8 and brought before him for stoning. As we consider this mystery, I want to ask you a question: what did Jesus do most during his public ministry? The answer you may say: “was he preached and perform miracles.” I would agree. But just how many miracles did Jesus perform? I didn’t know the answer, so I set out and did a little research.

It turns out that Jesus performed about (depending on how you count them) thirty-nine miracles (that we know of) during his three years of public ministry. The synoptic gospels record most, thirty-four. Add to these five unique to the Gospel of John: The Wedding at Cana, curing of the royal official’s son, curing of the paralyzed man at the Sheep gate, the curing of the blind man using mud, and the resurrection of Lazarus. Thirty-nine total miracles. Over twenty of these miracles were cures of some type. Think about that, well over half of the miracles Jesus performed during his public ministry were healings.

What can we make of this? Did Jesus just want to play doctor? No, certainly not. The physical ailments Jesus cures are symbolic of sin. Jesus came to heal, to forgive the wound of sin, to restore our broken nature. The fact that what Jesus did most was healing (symbolic of our sin) reveals Jesus’ intent. It is the very core of his public ministry. It was why the Father sent him, why he became incarnate, and he was all about achieving this end. He says to the woman, “Where have they all gone are there none left to condemn you. Neither do I condemn you.” This is the lesson of the *Third Mystery of Mercy* – Jesus stands ready to forgive.

4th Mystery of Mercy – Pharisee & the Tax Collector

We must however be open forgiveness. That is the takeaway of the *Fourth Mystery of Mercy*. We are not perfect. We may not like to admit it. Indeed the world may tell us to hide it, to conceal our wounded nature behind a facade of control. “I’m good. I have it all together. I don’t need anyone’s help, not even God.” But that is a lie. We need healing and forgiveness and Jesus came ready to do just that but to receive his forgiveness we need to humble ourselves. Let’s read from Luke 18:9-14, what I’ve termed the *Fourth Mystery of Mercy*.

⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In my own life, I recall experiencing this profound need for humility and forgiveness. But first I need to backup, you see, I was a cradle Catholic. I attended Catholic middle and high school. Active in my parish as a young man, I was surrounded by the life of the Church, yet somehow never developed a mature prayer life or serious relationship with Jesus. In my senior year of high school, I enlisted in the Navy and after graduation immediately left home for boot camp. Once I joined the Navy, I stopped maturing in my relationship with Jesus and what little spiritual life I had withered and died. I spent the next twenty-years as a cafeteria Catholic.

My spiritual conversion happened years later when my family was in San Diego. We were members of Corpus Christi parish in Bonita, CA. I was working as an admiral’s aide and I traveled with him frequently. I read

many books on cross-country flights. I read one book in which the author explained, “If our fundamental direction has been away from God... we will be repulsed by the very love which called us into existence.” This gave me pause but I brushed it aside and since I figured God in no way repulsed me, I was doing all right. Not true. A little while later I read a book about Mother Teresa, my wife had given me for Christmas. In it, I read about Mother Teresa’s abundant love for God. She wrote, “Jesus is my life. Jesus is my only love.” I remember discussing the book and being amazed by her level of devotion. At that point in my life, I remember thinking how impossible it was to imagine feeling like that, to love God that much.

Finally, I picked up St. Faustina’s Divine Mercy Diary. I was given this book as penance. I recall opening the diary and reading Faustina’s words. “O inconceivable and unfathomable mercy of God, who can worthily adore you and sing your praises, O greatest attribute of God Almighty, you are the sweet hope of sinners.” I immediately sensed its effect in my heart. That day I humbled myself before God, admitting I was on the wrong path. I repented, and I realized I could no longer be a cafeteria Catholic. I knew going forward my life had to change – things could not remain the same.

Fr. Jacques Philippe in his book *The 8 Doors of the Kingdom* writes that “humility [is the] recognition of one’s powerlessness together with [an] audacious hope and blind faith in the mercy and power of God.” It means being “truthful toward God, realizing our radical limitations as creatures, our total dependence on God.” This is the lesson of the *Fourth Mystery of Mercy* – Jesus came to forgive but we need to humble ourselves in order to receive that forgiveness.

5th Mystery of Mercy – Promise of Paradise to the Penitent Thief

The fifth and final *Mystery of Mercy* is the promise of paradise to the penitent thief. This mystery reminds us that God does not love us with a “because” or a “but.” He loves us unconditionally. Too often we attach a “because” or a “but” to our love and we therefore assume God does this same. “I’ll be your friend “because” you’re funny and make me laugh.” “I loved you “but” you hurt my feelings so now I want nothing to do with you.” However, there are no “buts” with God’s love and mercy. He forgives us no matter the sin.

The thief on the cross did not deserve mercy. He did not deserve paradise. He was essentially a bad person, a lifelong criminal. St. Josemaria Escriva writes, the thief “recognized that he himself deserved that awful punishment... And with a word he stole Christ’s heart.” In responding to the good thief “Jesus reveals to us a basic truth of our faith: We believe in eternal life. We believe that souls of all those who die in the grace of Christ – whether they must still make expiation in the fire of purgatory, or whether from the moment they leave their bodies they are received by Jesus Christ into paradise like the good thief – go to form the People of God which succeeds death.”

The *Fifth Mystery of Mercy* reminds us that for those who repent there is the promise of eternal life because of God’s compassion and mercy – not because we deserve or earned it.

Conclusion

There you have them. The five *Mysteries of Mercy*. You have never heard of them before. They are the fruit of prayer and in that they are a special gift. I submit that they are five simple scriptural passages that we can pray with this Lent and in doing so we will gain a deeper insight into the heart of God and his desire to forgive.

- Parable of the Prodigal Son. In it we hear how the “father saw him and had compassion” and we learn that God desires mercy.
- Jesus heals the paralytic and shows us “that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins;” Jesus has the power!
- The story of the woman caught in adultery, we witness Jesus’ compassion – “Neither do I condemn you” and we learn that Jesus stands ready to forgive.

- The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, it is the tax collector and not the Pharisee who “went home justified before God” and we discover the need to admit our sin and humble ourselves.
- Finally, Jesus’ promise to the good thief, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise,” revealing the profound depth of God’s promise of eternal life, not because of who we are but because of who God is.

The five *Mysteries of Mercy*. All listed on the back cover of your worship aid so you can take them home with you. They show us God’s desire, power, and readiness to forgive. Through them, we learn humility and God’s unmerited promise of salvation, love, and eternal life in heaven.