



DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY
April 19, 2020

· **Reflections on this Sunday's Readings**
 · **Dealing with Faith and Doubt**
 · **'Healed by His Wounds'**
 by Flor McCarthy
 · **Pope Francis Contemplates God's Boundless Love on Divine Mercy Sunday**

This past weekend, our Church began the 50 days of the Easter Season. The focus of the Easter Season is New Life in Christ which we all receive when we are baptized.

First Reading. During the Easter Season, the first reading is not from the Old Testament but rather from the *Acts of the Apostles*, sometimes called the first Church History since it does relate many things regarding the early life of the first Christian communities. The *Acts of the Apostles* is also full of new life in Christ stories, starting with Peter and the other Apostles who are fearless in their witnessing to Christ.

Second Reading. During Cycle A in our Liturgical calendar, the second reading is from the *First Letter of Peter*, written to Christians living in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In this letter, Peter's main focus is to encourage the people to remain faithful to their Christian beliefs in the midst of trials and persecution.

Gospel. The Gospel we hear proclaimed during the Easter Season for all three cycles is from John, with two exceptions.

This Sunday's First Reading — Acts 2:42-47

Today's first reading is one of three summaries of the life and activities of the first Christian communities. These verses are the first of three summary statements on the community life of the early Christians. *Four characteristics* are identified: instruction/teaching, table-fellowship, prayer, and sharing all things in common. These verses are an idealized version of how a community filled with the Spirit *should* live.

The reading underlines the communal dimension of Christianity. While we do not need to come to Church to commune with God, there is absolutely no basis in the New Testament, and especially in the Acts of the Apostles, for a 'church-less Christianity.' In the early church, to be a Christian meant that one must also be a member of a community. To practice a "God and me only" Christianity is to deprive ourselves of the Eucharist and other sacraments.

We have about 40 Small Christianity Communities that gather weekly to share faith and fellowship. This is a difficult time for these groups as they seek to remain connected during this period of social distancing. Some groups are able to partially overcome physical separation through 'Zoom' meetings.

When it comes to keeping together our 40+ small groups, I am grateful to several people.

- ◆ I am grateful to Maria Sittig who continues to type everything I handwrite. I am grateful to Teresita Baltazar for carefully proofing what Maria types.
- ◆ I am grateful to Laura Dodson for holding together our 40+ small groups.
- ◆ I am grateful to our facilitators for their part in keeping their small group together.
- ◆ I am grateful to the hundreds of parishioners who participate in small groups. It is a wonderful practice to gather together to share their reflections on God's Word and enjoy fellowship and support for each other in time of trial.

This Sunday's Second Reading — 1Peter 1:3-9

Peter's letter is addressed to several Gentile Christian communities living in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), who recently converted to Christianity. The communities are suffering harassment and ostracization for being followers of Christ. They are made to feel like marginal people, 'aliens' in their own society. A very existential question for them would have been: How can a person continue to be faithful to Christ in such a hostile

environment? This pastoral letter seeks to give encouragement to those grieved Christians. The letter also contains a list of exhortations on domestic matters, such as household duties, husband/wife relations, and concern for the public face of the church living in a pagan society.

The God of Jesus Christ is praised for giving us, through Jesus, a new birth, a new hope, and an imperishable inheritance (Heaven). The gift offered to us is very precious and worth suffering for. The 'inheritance' of the believer is God himself. This is cause for rejoicing even in the midst of trials.

God's presence does not mean that we will not suffer, but it does mean that we will have the strength to endure it. The power of the Resurrection at work in us gives us the ability to endure whatever comes our way. 'Faith' is described in terms of a love and a trust without sight (v.8). Joy in the midst of trial springs from the realization that the road to salvation has been secured.

FAITH & DOUBT: WHAT WEAKENS AND STRENGTHENS FAITH

Last Saturday, at the Easter Vigil, we started a new *liturgical season*, the Easter Season, sometimes called the *Fifty Days of Easter*. During this period, our Church family celebrates the Resurrection of Christ, his victory over evil, sin and death, and the promise it offers us: new life here and eternal life in the world to come.

If *repentance* was the focus of Lent, *new life* is the focus of the Easter Season. In the sacrament of Baptism, each of us received the *new life* of Christ into our beings which penetrates every fiber of our being, whether we think about it or not. Our lifelong challenge is to *become* what we are, namely, a *new creation* in Christ.

How do we allow the new life of Christ to grow in us? Mainly by *honest* and *open prayer*, as opposed to rote prayer that probably has little or no impact on our lives. Those of you who are married or have a deep friendship with someone know that honest and open communication is the key to growth in your relationship. If this is lacking, the relationship will diminish or be superficial, at best. So it is in our relationship with God. Being open and honest with God involves sharing with him our true feelings and thoughts, our fears, anxieties, doubts, disappointments (with him, ourselves or others), lusts, jealousies, joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams, etc. If we are not used to sharing our thoughts and feelings with anyone, it is probably not going to be very easy or natural for us to do it with God.

The *new life* of Christ also grows in us when we try to fulfill his Great Commandment to love God, others and self.

Faith and doubt

A big challenge for the followers of Jesus is to believe that he is truly risen from the dead. Can you imagine how hard that must have been? Thomas is not the only one who doubts. All of them are slow to believe. Mark 16:14 says that Jesus "*upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.*"

What is so refreshing and good about Thomas' reaction to the news that Jesus is risen is that he is open and honest about his doubts. He does not hide his distrust and lack of belief. Very often, one's honesty about his/her doubt and disbelief is the stepping stone to a deeper faith.

It seems that some people are very blessed when it comes to believing or accepting a truth, while others are plagued with doubts. People may have doubts about the existence of God, doubt about the goodness of God, doubt about the divinity of Jesus, doubt about the existence of the next life, doubt about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, doubt that God has truly forgiven their sins, doubt that they will be saved—even if they have placed their trust in Christ and tried to live a good life. It may be consoling to know that some of the saints were plagued with the same doubts. St. Thérèse of Lisieux experienced serious doubts about God before she died at the age of 23.

How should we handle our doubts? *Three suggestions:* 1) Continue to make acts of faith in God even if you *feel* nothing spiritual; 2) Talk to a priest or an experienced spiritual guide; 3) Surround yourself with people of faith who can pray for you and with you. You should not be ashamed about having doubts, especially when you realize that some saints endured them. Doubts do not make us less of a believer.

Doubt may also be a part of the maturing process of a Catholic Christian. Questioning beliefs has led many a person, including myself, to a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith. As with sin, the devil wants to use doubt to diminish our faith in a good God. God wants to use it to lead us closer to him. Our task is to work with God and not with the devil.

Four things that can weaken our faith

There are several things that can weaken our faith, especially if it is fragile and without deep roots in Christ. Let me name four of them.

First, the poor example of some Catholics, especially among the clergy and other Church leaders, can make people of fragile faith cynical and cause them to quit Church. Other supposedly good Catholics (neighbors, parents, co-workers) can also scandalize those with weak faith by their poor example.

Unfortunately, any of us at some time in our lives could be a poor example to others. In 1Cor.10:12, Paul writes: "*Therefore whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.*" It even happened to the Apostles. Judas betrays Jesus, Peter denies him, all of them flee, and Paul has a big fight with Barnabas. If our faith is deeply rooted in Christ, the poor example of clergy, lay leaders and other Catholics may sadden us, surprise us, even shake us up a bit, but it will not cause us to leave the Church because our faith is not in people, but in Christ.

Second, when we or family members get hit with a lot of bad stuff, our faith in a good and loving God may also be rattled. Some Catholics and other believers quit Church and prayer when they encounter setbacks. They feel God has abandoned them and let them down. I think we can all identify with people who seem to get more than their share of adversities. It has to be a most difficult challenge to keep believing in a God of love when there is a lot of pain in our lives. But praise God, every parish has outstanding examples of people who have unwavering faith even when they are handed all kinds of bad stuff. We should be most grateful for the wonderful example of these people and perhaps ask them how they sustain such a deep faith.

Third, if we do not have a solid understanding of our *Catholic faith*, we may lose it when others question us and use Scripture to show us how "wrong" we are in our beliefs. This happens a lot to young Catholics after they leave home. And to others, too, who may not be well informed on Catholic doctrines. If they face off with a non-Catholic who is well-versed in the Bible, they may well end up convinced that their Catholic beliefs are "mere human tradition." It would help one to talk to a priest and/or read the book *Surprised by Truth*, stories of twelve fundamentalist Protestant ministers who believed that God called them to lead Catholics out of their 'wayward' church. But as they explored Catholicism, each of them was very *surprised by the truth of Catholicism* and ended up joining the Catholic

Church. (One could also join my *Catechism* classes on Tuesday evenings or Friday afternoons.)

Fourth, if we practice our faith in a rote, mechanical way, we may also lose it, just as couples who go through the motions of vapid communication often end up losing their marriage. Faith, like marriage, requires work. If we fail to work at deepening our faith in Christ and his Church, we may end up losing both.

Nurturing our faith

A fire not "fed" with wood gradually dies. A marriage relationship that is not nurtured eventually goes cold and breaks down. In like manner, faith that is not nurtured weakens or fades. If we do not care for our faith, we will wake up one morning with little or no faith. This happens all the time. We see it especially with regard to the Eucharist. People at one stage in their lives may have a strong faith and love for the Eucharist. Then "stuff happens" and they stop going to Church. It could be due to a stressful event or because they become too busy with other things that they neglect their spiritual life. As with a marriage relationship, a crisis can either lead to a stronger faith life or to a break with God and Church. On any given weekend, some people are returning to God and Church while others are consciously or unconsciously distancing themselves. The following are some concrete ways that can help us nurture our faith.

- Have a regular quiet time with God in prayer. But we must be *open and honest* with him about what is going on in our lives. Rote prayer causes faith to gradually die, just as rote conversation does nothing to nurture a relationship.
- Be around people of strong faith. Their example is contagious and can help to nurture and bolster our own faith when it is weak and faltering. Join one of our Small Christian Communities. (For more information, contact Laura Dodson at ldodson@ascensioncatholicsch.org.)
- Read good spiritual books and become better informed about our Catholic faith.
- Go to Mass regularly. (In saying that, I'm sure I'm preaching to the choir.)

HEALED BY HIS WOUNDS - Flor McCarthy, SBD

On Easter Sunday evening the apostles were gathered in the upper room behind locked doors. They were wounded men. They were wounded, not in body, but in heart and in spirit. They were wounded individually by fear, doubt, guilt, and grief. And they were wounded collectively because one of their number,

Judas, had killed himself. Like all people in pain, they had erected a barrier around themselves.

Jesus knew how they were feeling. In one bold move he broke through the barrier, and stood among them. He didn't scold them for failing him. Instead, he greeted them with the lovely words, "Peace be with you." He repeated those words to make sure they got the message. In receiving his peace, they received his forgiveness.

Then what did he do? He showed them his wounds. Now we would have expected his risen body to be without spot or blemish. Yet that body still bore the wounds of his crucifixion. Why was this?

Firstly, those wounds helped the apostles to recognize him as the same one who died. Secondly, those wounds were the proof of his love for them. They were the mortal wounds the Good Shepherd suffered when he laid down his life for his sheep.

Jesus didn't just talk about love. He gave an example of it, and had the wounds to prove it. He didn't insulate himself against human pain. On the contrary, he made himself totally vulnerable by taking to himself our fragile, mortal humanity. And he paid the price. He bore the marks of our violent world on his body.

Jesus showed his wound to Thomas. On seeing those wounds, Thomas' doubts vanished, and his faith was re-born. More marvelous still - through the wounds of Jesus, he and his fellow apostles found healing for their own wounds. (1 Peter 2:24)

In one way or another all of us are wounded. Many people carry wounds in their bodies. But the part of us that is most deeply wounded is the heart. The heart is wounded by such things as disappointment, ingratitude, grief, rejection, and betrayal.

We have a tendency to hide our wounds, because wounds seem to suggest weakness, and displaying weakness does not create respect. Jesus didn't hide his wounds. For him they were not things to be ashamed of. They were more like badges of honour. They were eloquent witnesses to how costly real love can be. Wounds are the greatest form of witness.

The sacred wounds of Jesus are a source of consolation, courage, and hope to us. They help us to believe in Jesus' love for us. And they help us to find healing for our own wounds. By his wounds we are healed of self-pity and the sense of victimhood.

Those who do not disguise their own struggles, and who live through them, give hope to others and become a source of healing for them. What does it matter if our struggles leave us a little fragile. This fragility makes us gentler and more sensitive in dealing with the wounds of others.

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DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY

The second Sunday of Easter is also *Divine Mercy Sunday* which celebrates the wonderful mercy of God. This devotion was popularized in recent times by St. Faustina Kowalska, a Polish nun who had apparitions of Jesus in which he makes known his mercy for humanity. Our parish motto is "**Our Mission is Mercy and Love.**"

POPE FRANCIS REFLECTS ON GOD'S LOVE

Regarding Pope Francis' homily on Divine Mercy Sunday 2018, Sr. Bernadette Mary Reis, fsp, writes:

In his *homily* during the celebration of the **Divine Mercy Sunday** liturgy, Pope Francis points out that the verb "to see" is repeated over and over in the Gospel text (John 20:19-31). Although the disciples see the Lord, the Gospel "does not describe how they saw him," the Pope said. By mentioning the detail "he showed them his hands and his side" (v.20), the Gospel seems "to tell us that that is how the disciples," and Thomas, "recognized Jesus: through his wounds."

"Seeing" for ourselves

Thomas wanted to "see inside," Pope Francis continued. He wanted to touch "with his hand the Lord's wounds, the signs of his love." This is how Thomas is our twin, because so often we need to know for ourselves that God exists rather than taking others' word for it. "No, we too need to 'see God,' to touch him with our hands and to know that he is risen for us," the Pope said.

A Love Story

Pope Francis tells us that it is by seeing Jesus' wounds that the disciples of all time know that we have been forgiven because we "contemplate the boundless love flowing from his heart"—a heart that beats for each person. When Thomas touched the Lord's wounds, Jesus became "My Lord and my God." Pope Francis describes the appropriation of God as mine as a "love story." The uncertain, wavering disciple then falls in love with the Lord telling him: "You became man for me, you died and rose for me and thus you are not only God; you are my God, you are my life. In you I have found the love that I was looking for, and much more than I could ever have imagined," Pope Francis said.

Savouring this love

The Pope says we can begin to savour this newfound love through the same gift Jesus granted on the evening of his Resurrection: the forgiveness of sins. Before forgiveness we may hide behind the doors of shame, resignation and sin.

Grace helps us understand shame as the “first step towards an encounter” and as a “secret invitation of the soul that needs the Lord to overcome evil,” Pope Francis said.

Resignation tempts us to believe that nothing changes when we find ourselves lapsing, like the disheartened disciples after the “‘Jesus chapter’ of their lives seemed finished.” At a certain point, Pope Francis says that “we discover that the power of life is to receive God’s forgiveness and to go forward from forgiveness to forgiveness.”

The last closed door to open is sin. Pope Francis reminds us that Jesus “loves to enter precisely ‘through closed doors,’ when every entrance seems barred.” When we go to confession, we will learn that the very thing we believe separates us from God—sin—instead “becomes the place where we encounter him. There the God who is wounded by love comes to meet our wounds.”

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DIVINE MERCY CHAPLET

Thousands, perhaps millions of Catholics throughout the world, pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet every day or every Friday. (For more information on this devotion, google Divine Mercy Chaplet.)

Every first Friday of the month, some Ascension parishioners gather together in Church to pray the Chaplet. I am grateful to Deacon Sergio for leading this monthly gathering. On EWTN, the Divine Mercy Chaplet is prayed in song daily at 3:00pm.

DO YOU KNOW ME?

I am a little thing with a big meaning.

I help unlock doors, open hearts,
dispel prejudice.

I create friendship and good will.

I inspire respect and admiration.

Everybody loves me. I bore nobody.

I violate no laws. I cost nothing.

Many have praised me,

none have condemned me.

I am pleasing to those of high and low degree.

I am useful every moment of the day,

in many ways.

I am called “COURTESY.”

A Blessed Easter Season,

