

2nd Sunday of Easter – Cycle A (Divine Mercy Sunday)

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

On April 30, 2000, His Holiness John Paul II, in response to the wishes of the Christian faithful, declared that “the Second Sunday of Easter henceforth throughout the Church will also be called Divine Mercy Sunday.” The desire for this celebration was expressed by Our Lord to Saint Faustina as can be found in her Diary (§699):”... My daughter, tell the whole world about My inconceivable mercy. I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners. On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy. The soul that will go to Confession, and receive Holy Communion on this day shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment...”

1st Reading - Acts 2:42-47

The Acts (Deeds) of the Apostles were written by Saint Luke toward the end of the first captivity of Saint Paul in Rome, about 62 A.D. The earliest tradition of the Church concurs in attributing this inspired book to Saint Luke, author of the third gospel. This book, like the gospel, is dedicated to Theophilus, of whom we know nothing.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, sometimes lovingly referred to as the fifth gospel, relates: (1) the history of the early Church in Jerusalem and Antioch, and the history of Saint Peter until the year A.D. 42, when he left Jerusalem; and (2) the history of Saint Paul until his captivity in Rome in the Year A.D. 61.

Our reading today takes place immediately after Peter’s stirring address on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 were baptized. This is the first of three summary passages (Acts 4:32-37; 5:12-16) which outline the chief characteristics of the Christian community in Jerusalem: adherence to the teachings of the Twelve and the centering of religious life in the Eucharistic liturgy; a system of distribution of goods that led the wealthier Christians to sell their possessions when the needs of the poor of the community required it; and continual attendance at the Temple.

42 They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles

The instruction normally given new converts. This is not the proclamation of the gospel to non-Christians but a type of catechesis (which became more structured and systematic as time went on) aimed at explaining to the disciples the Christian meaning of sacred

Scripture and the basic truths of faith which they had to believe and practice in order to attain salvation. Out of this grew the credal statements of the Church.

and to the communal life,

Other translations have “fellowship”. The Greek word *koinonia* is used only here in Luke but is used 13 times in Saint Paul’s writings. The profound solidarity among the disciples resulted from their practice of faith and their appreciation of it as a treasure they all shared; a gift to them from the Father through Jesus the Christ. Their mutual affection enabled them to be detached from material things and to give up their possessions to help those in need.

to the breaking of the bread

This refers to the Eucharist and not just an ordinary meal. This was a special way the early Christians had of referring to the making and distribution of the sacrament of the Lord’s Body and Blood. From Pentecost onward the Mass and Eucharistic communion form the center of Christian worship.

and to the prayers.

What we have just seen, in this description of the very early Christian Church are the four elements of catechesis: The teaching of the apostles (the creed, the Profession of Faith); the communal life (the commandments, Life in Christ); the breaking of the bread (the sacraments, the Christian Mystery); and the prayers (Prayer). These four classical divisions of catechesis are reflected in the four major parts of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* today.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

This is the religious awe the disciples felt when they saw the miracles and other supernatural signs which the Lord worked through His apostles. A healthy type of fear, denoting respect and reverence for holy things, it can cause a great change of attitude and behavior in those who experience it.

⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need.

The sharing referred to here was not a permanent communistic or socialistic kind of system. The more well-to-do Christians freely provided for those in need. Each of the disciples retained ownership of what property he had; by handing it over to the community they showed their charity.

⁴⁶ Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area

In the early days of the Church the Temple was the center of Christian prayer and liturgy. The early Christians regarded it as God's house, the house of the Father of Jesus the Christ. Although Christianity involved obvious differences from Judaism, for a while it was quite natural for them to maintain certain external aspects of the religion of their forefathers.

and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying favor with all the people.

The Temple was not the only place in Jerusalem where Christians met for prayer and worship. The reference to "their homes" reminds us that they did not have a building specially reserved for liturgical functions – they met in private homes. For financial as well as policy reasons (persecutions, etc.), it was not until the third century that buildings designed for liturgical purposes began to be erected.

And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

2nd Reading - 1 Peter 1:3-9

This first letter of Peter was written from Rome very probably around A.D. 63-64, given that it contains no references to the persecution unleashed by Nero after July 64. The letter is addressed to the Christians of Asia Minor – gentiles evangelized mainly by Saint Paul.

In this letter, Saint Peter seeks to console and strengthen the faith of Christians who are experiencing difficult times; this is quite in keeping with his role as head of the Church. This message (letter) which we will study as our second reading all through the Easter season, is a faithful reflection of the catechesis of apostolic times.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth

The spiritual rebirth of Christians to a new life is the main topic of this part. The form of this prayer is a blessing common in Jewish tradition (see Genesis 9:26). We are given this new birth by baptism (see [John 3:5](#)).

to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

This refers not only to the "living hope" but also to "new birth"

⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you

Notice the family covenant imagery. The promises made to Israel are seen as fulfilled also in the Christian Church. In the Old Testament, the inheritance is primarily the land of Israel (Deuteronomy 15:4). As opposed to the land, the New Covenant inheritance is imperishable; it is eternal life in the heavenly kingdom.

“An incorruptible inheritance must be an infinite one, since everything finite is corruptible. The inheritance of the first Adam was corrupted by sin, but the inheritance of the second Adam can never be touched by the stain of sin.” [Saint Hilary of Arles (ca. A.D. 428), *Commentary on 1 Peter*]

“Our inheritance is imperishable because it is a heavenly life which neither age nor illness nor death nor plague can touch. It is undefiled because no unclean person can enter into it. It is unfading, because the heavenly blessings are such that even after long enjoyment of them the blessed never grow tired, whereas those who live in earthly luxury eventually have their fill of it and turn away from it.” [Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 416), *On 1 Peter*]

⁵ who by the power of God are safeguarded through faith,

“Faith” has a wide range of meanings in 1st Peter. Here, it means that trust in God is essential for salvation. For those who have this faith, the security of their inheritance is like a land with strong military protection – it is guarded by God’s power.

to a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the final time.

Salvation, the goal of Christian faith, is presented as a future event. Not once saved, always saved, but a hope for eternal salvation.

⁶ In this you rejoice, although now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Once you have accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, the battle is just beginning. Your faith will be tested and refined (made pure) throughout your life so that when the end time comes, you will stand ready to accept your inheritance.

“Just as gold is tried by fire and becomes useful, so also you who live in the world are tried in it. So then, you who remain in it and pass through the flames will be purified. For just as gold casts off its dross, so also you will cast off all sorrow and tribulation, becoming pure and useful for the building of the tower.” [Hermas (ca. A.D. 140), *The Shepherd*, Visions 3,1]

⁸ Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ as you attain the goal of (your) faith, the salvation of your souls.

As the glory of Christ's resurrection was preceded by His sufferings and death, the new life of faith that it bestows will be subjected to many trials while achieving its goal: the glory of the fullness of salvation at the coming of Christ.

Gospel - John 20:19-31

Having celebrated Jesus' resurrection last week at Easter, we now hear of His first appearance to His apostles after that event.

19 On the evening of that first day of the week,

The first Easter Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead. John wants to make it clear that this is the apostles' first encounter with the risen Christ. Every resurrection account which is dated in the gospels occurs on a Sunday.

when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews,

After what had happened to Jesus, they feared for their lives.

Jesus came and stood in their midst

Through locked doors. Emphasizes the spiritual qualities of the resurrected body of Christ.

and said to them, "Peace be with you."

Shalom

20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

The showing of the wounds demonstrates that the Risen One is the Crucified One. Answers the question of "Where have they put him?" (John 20:2).

21 (Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you.

Shalom. This is also a promised gift in John 14:27 - "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you".

As the Father has sent me,

Jesus was sent to reconcile people with God and had the authority to forgive sins.

so I send you."

Sent with the full authority of God. When you hear the bishop, you hear God speaking.

“Apostle” means “one who is sent”.

22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them

An outward sign instituted by Christ. When God breathed on the clay, He breathed life into Adam (Genesis 2:8). Here, Jesus is breathing life into His creation, the Church.

and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit.

Receipt of the Holy Spirit is a grace; a grace which gives supernatural life. The Baltimore Catechism defines a sacrament as “an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace.” What we have here is a sacrament in one verse.

23 Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

This is the power given to the Church to continue the judicial character of Christ in the matter of sin; a character of Jesus which so upset the Pharisees that they sought to kill him. This is the origin of the sacrament of penance, though it is equally true that the Church’s power over sin is also exercised in baptism and the preaching of the redemptive word. The apostles were not given the charism of clairvoyance; they must hear the sins if they are to know which to forgive and which to retain.

24 Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve,

The designation of “the Twelve” remains even though one of them has defected. Matthias will be selected by lot to replace Judas in forty days (Acts 1:16ff).

was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples said to him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

Doubting Thomas. How many today do not believe in the Real Presence because it fails the “duck test”?

26 Now a week later

Again on a Sunday

his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked,

Christ appears under the same circumstances as before.

and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side,

and do not be unbelieving, but believe.”

Again, a repeat of His previous appearance. Here and in verse 20 is the only explicit evidence from the Bible that Jesus was nailed rather than tied to the cross. Luke 24:39 implies that His feet were also nailed. The Second Sunday of Easter can be called Saint Thomas' Easter since he was not present at the first appearance of the risen Lord.

28 Thomas answered and said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

Whether Thomas actually took Jesus up on His offer to probe the wounds is not stated but his response is the most complete affirmation of Christ's nature to be found on the lips of anyone in the gospel. The combination of “Lord” and “God” is found in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) to translate the name of the God of Israel; it was also a combination used as a divine designation in the Greek world.

29 Jesus said to him, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”

This blessing insists that all those Christians who have believed without seeing have a faith which is in no way different from that of the first disciples. Their faith is grounded in the presence of the Lord through the Spirit. A small number of very early manuscripts read “continue to believe” rather than “come to believe” suggesting that the audience consists of Christians whose faith is to be deepened by this reading.

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are not written in this book.

Other than appearing in a room with locked doors, there are no “signs” in this reading. This has led some commentators to suggest that this verse was originally the conclusion to the collection of miracles used by the evangelist. In that context Jesus' resurrection would have been understood as the final “sign” of His relationship with the Father.

31 But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

This final verse summarizes the purpose of the gospel as having faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God as the source of eternal life. As Jesus said in John 6:29 “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent”. If you trust in God and not yourself, then you will do whatever He tells you – no matter how bizarre it may seem. “Eat My Flesh, drink My Blood”.