

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Peter 1:3).

Today we continue this Octave of Easter with our celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday. This celebration was inaugurated when Saint Pope John Paul II canonized Sister Maria Faustina Kowalska on April 30, 2000. He intended that hereafter the Second Sunday of Easter would become Divine Mercy Sunday.

In his homily during the canonization Mass, the Holy Father expressed that “in fact, love of God and love of one’s brothers and sisters are inseparable, as the First Letter of John has reminded us: ‘By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments’ (John 5:2). Here the Apostle reminds us of the truth of love, showing us its measure and criterion in the observance of the commandments. It is not easy to love with a deep love, which lies in the authentic gift of self. This love can only be learned by penetrating the mystery of God’s love. Looking at him, being one with his fatherly heart, we can look with new eyes at our brothers and sisters, with an attitude of unselfishness and solidarity, of generosity and forgiveness. All this is mercy!”

The readings this Sunday express in a beautiful way the spirit and solidarity which infused the hearts of the disciples of Jesus following his resurrection. The Acts of the Apostles provides an exciting chronicle of the enthusiasm and unity which marked the early Church. There was an esprit-de-corps among its members; they prayed together each day at the temple area; they shared their resources in common; they ate meals together (“they ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart”. Acts 2). The energy of those followers inspired others who joined their ranks by the thousands. This experience in the Scriptures is important to remember because the “awe” experienced by the disciples would carry them through difficult and trying times in the future.

The mark of true discipleship is yes, to live out the teachings of Jesus Christ. Another consequential mark is faith, patience and perseverance. The love which was shown by early Christian companions is the same mark which is given to us by the gift of Baptism and which sustains us through all the myriad experiences of life.

In his canonization homily, Saint Pope John Paul II expressed a sentiment which seems so powerfully poignant in our own time as we experience the effects of the Coronavirus. “Sister Faustina Kowalska wrote in her diary: *‘I feel tremendous pain when I see the sufferings of my neighbours. All my neighbours’ sufferings reverberate in my own heart; I carry their anguish in my heart in such a way that it even physically destroys me. I would like all their sorrows to fall upon me, in order to relieve my neighbour’*. (Diary, p. 365). This is the degree of compassion to which love leads, when it takes the love of God as its measure!

It is this love which must inspire humanity today, if it is to face the crisis of the meaning of life, the challenges of the most diverse needs and, especially, the duty to defend the dignity of every human person. Thus, the message of divine mercy is also *implicitly a message about the value of every human being*. Each person is precious in God’s eyes; Christ gave his life for each one; to everyone the Father gives his Spirit and offers intimacy.”

These are encouraging and grace-filled words to sustain us as we navigate these difficult times. I know I am not alone in feeling some anguish, sorrow and fear of what we have seen but also about what lies ahead for us. We can more easily perhaps place ourselves with the disciples in the Upper Room, where they were literally living ‘shelter in place’ out of fear. Jesus comes to them and says, “Peace be with you!” not once but three times in two visits to the Upper Room. In that moment of grace converging upon them, with the reassuring voice of their Master, he also challenges them: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retained are retained.” In one instance, Jesus offers his disciples the assurance that he is with them in their trials and tribulations; he calls them to serve as he has served; and to serve with a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation.

I have often thought that Thomas gets a bum rap for “doubting” the presence of Jesus to his companions, which he was not present to witness. It is easy to be pious and say we wouldn’t doubt as he did; however, if we examine ourselves more closely, there are many times when we cast doubt, times when we have difficulty believing and having faith. What often gets eclipsed or overshadowed is Thomas’s profession of faith. “My Lord and my God!” It took him awhile, but he got it! Thomas is a good example of acknowledging that faith does not always come so easily, but when it does, changes and transforms us!

Fr. Tom