

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

17th April 2016



Every day in the liturgy the Church, the Bride of Christ, asks God for the graces which she knows we need, and these are summed up in the prayer called the Collect. Here more than anywhere else we see fulfilled this promise: “the Spirit also helpeth our infirmity. For we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit himself asketh for us ” (Romans 8:26).

And on this third Sunday after Easter the Church invites us to make this prayer our own: *O God, who shewest to them that be in error the light of thy truth, to the intent that they may return to the way of righteousness: grant unto all them that are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that they may shun those things that are contrary to their profession; and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same.*

Our Mother the Church, assisted through the centuries by the Holy Spirit, truly knows what we need. How necessary this prayer is for every single one of us! The theme of this prayer – asking that the light of God’s truth be given to those in error so that they may return to God’s friendship – is so urgently needed today, when there is so much confusion! Every time we have been able to share the faith with a nonbeliever, every time we ourselves have received the benefit of a fraternal correction when we were in spiritual danger, the grace of this prayer was being granted.

I said that this prayer is urgently needed today. That is because we are living at a time when God’s most beautiful attribute, his mercy, is being falsified. This is true mercy: *O God, who shewest to them that be in error the light of thy truth, to the intent that they may return to the way of righteousness.* False mercy, on the other hand, does not bring the light of truth or the way of righteousness; it tries to hide the truth so that those in error do not become uncomfortable.

What is mercy anyway? We know how much God loves this virtue. When in the Old Testament he said, “I desired mercy, and not sacrifice” (Osee 6:6), he was teaching us that the outward practice of religion is insufficient without mercy; and when Our Lord comments on this verse he adds, “I am not come to call the just, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). Jesus Christ is God’s mercy in human flesh.

If I can put it this way, mercy is the chemical reaction that happens when love interacts with misery. St. Thomas puts it a bit more technically when he says, “mercy is heartfelt sympathy for another’s distress, impelling us to help him if we can” (II-II, Q. 30, art. 1). Love – the virtue of charity – desires others to be happy; God wants us to be perfectly happy, which can only happen in heaven.

Misery is the condition of being deprived of happiness. The greatest misery of course is sin because it excludes us from God's friendship and if we die that way we will never go to heaven: without denying the very real earthly miseries that exist in our world, the reality of sin puts them in perspective, from loneliness to unemployment to environmental damage. God has mercy on us when he saves us from our sin. And one of the main ways he does this of course is by giving us his truth: as Christ said to Pilate, "for this came I into the world; that I should give testimony to the truth" (John 18:37). And that is why one of the spiritual works of mercy is to instruct the ignorant. "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

So what do I mean when I warn about false mercy? Well, if mercy is the reaction of love when it confronts misery, then false mercy is a purely sentimental mercy based on a false love or on a false sense of misery. As Christians we love others because they, like us, are created in the image of God. This is the foundation of charity, loving others as ourselves because we want them to go to heaven. Secular love, though, is not the virtue of charity: as I have told you before, it is what we might call "affirmation." This false love is not based on the image of God we share – an image that is damaged by our sins – but it is based on the false notion of human autonomy: I can make my own destiny and do as I please, and you need to affirm my decisions or else you are being hateful. So, if we adopt this false worldly vision of love, then we will also adopt a false mercy. If little Bobby wants to eat five pounds of sugar before he goes to bed, then mother is being unmerciful if she tells him "no." If go back on the vows I made when I got married and go to live with someone else, then you need to affirm my decision and if you don't then you are not being merciful. This false mercy is so widespread today.

Likewise, if we have a purely sentimental understanding of misery – of the suffering or confusion people experience – then this can also lead to false mercy. Socrates, the great Greek philosopher who was condemned for his teaching, met his friends who came to visit him in prison. They saw him in chains, which certainly is a form of misery, and they told him how awful it was to see him unjustly condemned. He wisely responded, "would you rather see me justly condemned?" In other words, he understood that it is better to suffer injustice rather than to perform it. Imagine a doctor who has to diagnose a patient with a threatening cancer. He sees that she is nervous, of course, and so to spare her this misery of being nervous about a possibly painful cancer treatment, he tells her that she is healthy. One week later she is dead. The real misery of course is not the nervousness but the cancer itself. If this doctor had really been merciful, if he really loved his patient and saw things in the right perspective, he would have told her as kindly as he could that she was very ill; he would have outlined the treatments that could save her life; he would promise her that he would help her at every step of the way. That is mercy. If you as a Christian see me committing spiritual suicide and all you can say is,

“let’s just hope he doesn’t know what he’s doing; as long as he feels included that’s the main thing,” then you are not being merciful.

As Christians, we have received God’s mercy: especially the day of our baptism, and also whenever we go to confession. “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). We also are called to show true mercy to others. The psalm says, “Mercy and truth have met each other: justice and peace have kissed” (Psalm 84:11). Although there is a right way to share God’s truth, *hiding* it is never merciful. Letting a patient’s body die from cancer, letting someone’s soul die from sin, is never merciful. There can never be a contradiction between truth and mercy. It is sad that today even in the Church, where we should all know better, we sometimes hear the illogical idea that we can hold on to doctrine but we can just change disciplines and practices willy-nilly, as if the way we live our faith does not reflect what we believe.

My dear friends, be very cautious about half truths. Pope Leo XIII once pointed out, “There can be nothing more dangerous than those heretics who admit nearly the whole cycle of doctrine, and yet by one word, as with a drop of poison, infect the real and simple faith taught by our Lord and handed down by Apostolic tradition” (*Satis cognitum* 9). In the Collect today we asked the Lord: *grant unto all them that are admitted into the fellowship of Christ’s religion, that they may shun those things that are contrary to their profession.* In these confusing times when the spirit of the world is wreaking such havoc, we know that we are just as weak as anyone else. But this is Eastertime, the season when God reminds us that sacrifice leads to glorification. This prayer is necessary for us all: dear Lord, through no merits of our own, you have called us into the fellowship of your Church; again and again you have shown us your mercy after we have insulted you again and again through our repeated sins: do not let us waste this mercy; give us the light of your truth, so that we may share it with others – with kindness, patience, and humility; do not let us murder the souls of our brothers through a false mercy that makes excuses for sin; help us all to shun the dangers to our salvation, whatever it may cost.