

ESSAY ON DIVINE MERCY AS DESCRIBED IN THE BEATITUDES

Mercy is a very allusive word and often misunderstood by many. It is a virtue or state of mind equivalent to pardon. We show mercy to others when we refrain from harming or punishing offenders, enemies, or persons under our control. It is a kindness in excess of what may be expected by earthly standards or demanded by fairness, forbearance, or compassion. It is a disposition to forgive serious wrongs and extend clemency. And it is also a sign of great holiness, encompassing both the corporal and spiritual works of mercy as described in the Catechesim of the Catholic Church.

We see in the Holy Bible significant development in our understanding of God's revelation - His plan for our salvation. Under the old law Israel was told to follow the "golden rule" by "doing to others what you would have them do unto you." It contained an element of justice by giving things back in the same manner they were received, both the good and the bad. But with the coming of Christ, the idea and application of mercy was greatly expanded and perfected. Jesus admonished us to do good to others above and beyond what they may deserve or have done to us, because God did the same thing by forgiving us even when we were stooped in our sins! He proclaimed, "If you love only those who love you, what merit is there in that. Even the Pharisees do as much. So I tell you, love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, and in so doing give glory to your Heavenly Father." Jesus also said, "blessed are you when people revile and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven, as were the prophets before you." By extending mercy to others, we demonstrate our humility; we minimize our sense of self-preference, our pride, and our desire for vengeance by doing God's will, even at the expense of ourselves.

God was the first to extend divine mercy by coming to us while we were still in our sins. Jesus taught us in the beatitudes how

to practice His divine love by giving to others all the love and mercy we ourselves have already received. He perfected the old law when He said, "I command you, love one another even as I have loved you." He also said, "No greater love has any man, but that he give up his life for his friends." Divine mercy is perhaps the greatest form of charity because it best reflects God's own divine love for us! Indeed, our heavenly Father first bestowed His love and mercy on us by sending His only Son to free us from the effects of our own sinfulness. And by His own suffering and death, He brought us pardon and restoration. If God has already shown us His mercy, who then are we to withhold it from others? Acting mercifully means forgiving and even sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others, even our enemies! While self-centeredness and self-preference are prime conditions which occasion sin and separation from God, self-giving especially at some cost to ourselves is the essence of Christian love. And God continues to bestow his own merciful forgiveness on His people through us, His servants.

But lately a serious crisis in faith has arisen within the ranks of the faithful about the true meaning of mercy. Many in the Church view mercy as merely a one-way street. They say, divine mercy is what they hope God will ultimately extend to us at the time of our personal judgment, and not what we should bestow on others here and now. Many also feel striving for holiness is a thing of the past and consider divine mercy merely as a security blanket. They feel they can practice the bare minimum of virtue, without self-denial or exerting themselves for others. They minimize the serious effects of sin or redefine it as not applying to them. Because they say, "we are no worse than others," they feel comfortable that Christ will be merciful to them at their final judgment. Furthermore, they say that mercy is something God does for us and not what we should do for others. Many even view Christ's mercy as something of an entitlement; they deserve it despite their worldliness. Such thinking is a cop-out and dead wrong!

We are all called to seek holiness and practice divine mercy as it is described in the beatitudes as part of our daily living! Divine mercy is not necessarily Christ's pardon for our sinfulness at our final judgment, as it is the moral conditioning of our lives while we are still living on earth. The beatitudes also represent the steps we are commanded to take while traveling on the road to spiritual perfection, and the attainment of holiness! And we can't practice the virtue of divine mercy (the 5th beatitude) with any degree of success unless we first practice, step by step, the spiritual principals contained in the four beatitudes which precede it. You see, in order to assist us in terms of perfecting our spiritual development, Jesus taught us how to practice divine mercy when He gave us the beatitudes. They are more properly called "Evangelical Counsels" and when practiced they provide the means for our growth in divine life! They are easy to understand, but often tough to practice!

My point in this talk is that Jesus has already bestowed His mercy on us at His passion and death, bringing us His Father's forgiveness while we were still in our sins. Because it has already been bestowed on us, it is not something exclusively reserved for our last judgment! And if we refuse to extend God's mercy to our neighbor, how then can we possibly expect to receive God's mercy at our judgment? The virtue of mercy is also akin to the notion of forgiveness as seen in the Lord's Prayer. In it, we humbly ask our loving Father to forgive us our sins, but only to the extent that we ourselves have forgiven others.

But how, you may ask, do we acquire this necessary and important virtue of mercy? Again, Jesus taught us how to be merciful in the beatitudes. And we can never hope to master the virtue of bestowing God's mercy upon others in the fifth beatitude unless we first master the commands of the first four. You see, each beatitude beginning with the first provides us with the spiritual capacity to perform the next, leading us step by step like climbing the rungs of a ladder

to perfection in holiness, and union with Christ. The first four are primarily concerned with our own personal growth. They call us to humbly empty ourselves of all self-preference and self-will. This creates a void in our spirit, which can be filled, with nothing less than Christ Himself. The 5th Beatitude marks an end in our efforts toward spiritual perfection, and now calls us to share God's goodness and mercy with others. Now let us focus on the beatitudes leading us to the practice of divine mercy.

The first is: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." It requires that we first make an honest self-appraisal, not of our earthly or physical poverty, but more importantly, our spiritual poverty, our bankruptcy of spirit, our sinfulness. By this exercise in humility, we recognize and acknowledge our true spiritual condition, our sinfulness and the awful effects that sin has had on us and others. We also recognize our utter inability to get to the Kingdom on our own, and how dependent we are on God's merciful gifts. We leave behind the burdens of the world with all its distractions, affections, and anxieties!

The second is, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Having acknowledged to our spiritual deficiencies in the first beatitude, we are next brought to a condition of mourning and sorrow for our sins and shortcomings. We begin to realize just how much our sinfulness has contributed to Christ's own suffering, and the depletion of our own spiritual condition. We also acknowledge how much our lives have become devoid of meaning and purpose. We therefore we seek to be comforted by the only source that can do so. Having realized our total dependence on God's grace, we are therefore led to the 3rd beatitude.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Meekness doesn't mean weakness, lack of self worth, or self defacement but docility and total responsiveness to the healing and comforting Word of God. We begin to experience growth in humility, becoming

more spiritually impressionable, more open to God's insights and influences. In fact, Jesus described himself as follows, "Come to me, all you who are heavily burdened, for I am meek and humble of heart." We realize that our strength comes only from Him. The meek don't seek to bring praise and credit to themselves, but to give credit where it truly belongs, to God alone. In addition, these gifts should not be used merely for our own ends, but directed for the benefit of others. Now, having attained a true sense of meekness and humility, we are then naturally led to hunger and thirst for more of God's blessings in the 4th beatitude.

"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for Righteousness, for they will be satisfied." It logically follows, that when we realize that it is only God's gifts that can sustain us, then we ardently seek more and more of His blessings! When we realize that our ultimate good comes from God alone, and that the trappings of this world are short lived, leave us empty and unsatisfied, then we must conclude our only hope rests in Him alone. Having received God's blessings and goodness in full measure, we next seek to share them with others. Sharing them not only with those who wish us well, but even with those who do not, consistent with God's will. So now we are naturally led to the 5th beatitude.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." In the first four beatitudes we have primarily been concerned with improving ourselves and our spiritual condition by attempting to imitate the likeness of Christ Himself. Now we must share this special quality of His love with others, with both the good and the bad. In a sense, we have become Christ for others, called to give to others, all that we ourselves have received. For we have come to realize that God loves us intensely even in our sins, and that each one of us is so very special, unique in all His creation. Almighty God may hate the sin but always loves the sinner, calling him to conversion. Therefore, we must become mercy to others; to be God's instrument to rescue others from the same form of bondage

that we ourselves have previously experienced. Indeed, if God has shown us so much mercy, who are we to withhold it from others? With the 5th beatitude, we seek to become transparent, we seek to decrease so that our Blessed Lord may increase within us.

Finally, the person who practices divine mercy is much more inclined to overlook the flaws and failings of others. In fact, he puts the needs of others ahead of his own, thereby achieving a condition of serenity and peace that no earthly concern can disturb. By His suffering and death, Jesus atoned for our sins. How then can we continue to sin against Him, who has shown us so much mercy? Realizing that we are all sinners as well as brothers and sisters in the Lord, shouldn't we be the toughest people to offend? Jesus warned us of the folly of one who would gain the whole world, but do so at the expense of his own immortal soul. And He assures us that the standard for our own judgment will be whether during our lives, we have shown mercy to others; whether we have fed the hungry, sheltered the homeless, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned. He concluded, "if you have done these things to the least of these my brother and sisters, you have done them to me. Enter into the Kingdom which has been prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

God bless you all