

Homily for Divine Mercy Sunday and the Holy Father's 80th Birthday Pope Benedict XVI

In Peter's 'good shadow'

On the Second Sunday of Easter, 15 April [2007], also known as Sunday "in Albis" and Divine Mercy Sunday, the Holy Father presided at a concelebrated Holy Mass in St Peter's Square. The celebration was also a Mass of Thanksgiving in remembrance of the Pope's 80th Birthday, 16 April. The following is a translation of the Pontiff's Homily, which was delivered in Italian.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This Sunday is called "in Albis", in accordance with an old tradition. On this day, neophytes of the Easter Vigil were still wearing their white garment, the symbol of the light which the Lord gave them in Baptism. Later, they would take off the white garment but would have to introduce into their daily lives the new brightness communicated to them.

They were to diligently keep alight the delicate flame of truth and good which the Lord had kindled within them, in order to bring to this world a gleam of God's splendour and goodness.

The Holy Father, John Paul II, wanted this Sunday to be celebrated as the Feast of Divine Mercy: in the word "mercy", he summed up and interpreted anew for our time the whole mystery of Redemption. He had lived under two dictatorial regimes, and in his contact with poverty, neediness and violence he had a profound experience of the powers of darkness which also threaten the world of our time.

But he had an equally strong experience of the presence of God who opposed all these forces with his power, which is totally different and divine: with the power of mercy. It is mercy that puts an end to evil. In it is expressed God's special nature — his holiness, the power of truth and love.

Two years ago now, after the First Vespers of this Feast, John Paul II ended his earthly life. In dying, he entered the light of Divine Mercy, of which, beyond death and starting from God, he now speaks to us in a new way.

Have faith, he tells us, in Divine Mercy! Become day after day men and women of God's mercy. Mercy is the garment of light which the Lord has given to us in Baptism. We must not allow this light to be extinguished; on the contrary, it must grow within us every day and thus bring to the world God's glad tidings.

In these days illumined in particular by the light of divine mercy, a coincidence

occurs that is significant to me: I can look back over 80 years of life.

I greet all those who have gathered here to celebrate this birthday with me. I greet first of all the Cardinals, with a special, grateful thought for the Dean of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, who has made himself an authoritative interpreter of your common sentiments. I greet the Archbishops and Bishops, including the Auxiliaries of the Diocese of Rome, of my Diocese; I greet the Prelates and other members of the Clergy, the men and women Religious and all the faithful present here.

I also offer respectful and grateful thoughts to the political figures and members of the Diplomatic Corps who have desired to honour me with their presence.

Lastly, I greet with fraternal affection His Eminence Ioannis, Metropolitan of Pergamon, personal envoy of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. To him I express my appreciation for this kind gesture and the hope that the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue may proceed with new enthusiasm.

Experiencing 'family'

We are gathered here to reflect on the completion of a long period of my life. Obviously, the liturgy itself must not be used to speak of oneself, of myself; yet, one's own life can serve to proclaim God's mercy.

"Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me", a Psalm says (66[65]:16). I have always considered it a great gift of Divine Mercy to have been granted birth and rebirth, so to speak, on the same day, in the sign of the beginning of Easter. Thus, I was born as a member of my own family and of the great family of God on the same day.

Yes, I thank God because I have been able to experience what "family" means; I have been able to experience what "fatherhood" means, so that the words about God as Father were made understandable to me from within; on the basis of human experience, access was opened to me to the great and benevolent Father who is in Heaven.

We have a responsibility to him, but at the same time he gives us trust so that the mercy and goodness with which he accepts even our weakness and sustains us may always shine out in his justice, and that we can gradually learn to walk righteously.

I thank God for enabling me to have a profound experience of the meaning of motherly goodness, ever open to anyone who seeks shelter and in this very way able to give me freedom.

I thank God for my sister and my brother, who with their help have been close to me faithfully throughout my life. I thank God for the companions I have met on

my way and for the advisers and friends he has given to me.

I am especially grateful to him because, from the very first day of my life, I have been able to enter and to develop in the great community of believers in which the barriers between life and death, between Heaven and earth, are flung open. I give thanks for being able to learn so many things, drawing from the wisdom of this community which not only embraces human experiences from far off times: the wisdom of this community is not only human wisdom; through it, the very wisdom of God — eternal wisdom — reaches us.

Seeking Peter's 'shadow'

In this Sunday's First Reading we are told that at the dawn of the newborn Church, people used to take the sick out into the squares so that when Peter passed by his shadow might fall on them: to this shadow they attributed a healing power. This shadow, in fact, was cast by the light of Christ and thus in itself retained something of the power of divine goodness.

From the very first, through the community of the Catholic Church, Peter's shadow has covered my life and I have learned that it is a good shadow — a healing shadow precisely because it ultimately comes from Christ himself.

Peter was a man with all the human weaknesses, but he was above all a man full of passionate faith in Christ, full of love for him. It was through his faith and love that the healing power of Christ and his unifying force reached humanity, although it was mingled with all Peter's shortcomings. Let us seek Peter's shadow today in order to stand in the light of Christ!

Birth and rebirth, an earthly family and the great family of God: this is the great gift of God's multiple mercies, the foundation which supports us. As I continued on my path through life, I encountered a new and demanding gift: the call to the priestly ministry.

On the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul in 1951, as I faced this task, when we were lying prostrate on the floor of the Cathedral of Freising — we were more than 40 companions — and above us all the saints were invoked, I was troubled by an awareness of the poverty of my life.

Yes, it was a consolation that the protection of God's saints, of the living and the dead, was invoked upon us. I knew that I would not be left on my own. And what faith the words of Jesus, which we heard subsequently on the lips of the Bishop during the Ordination liturgy, inspire in us! "No longer do I call you servants, but my friends...". I have been able to experience this deeply: he, the Lord, is not only the Lord but also a friend. He has placed his hand upon me and will not leave me.

These words were spoken in the context of the conferral of the faculty for the administration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and thus, in Christ's Name, to

forgive sins. We heard the same thing in today's Gospel: the Lord breathes upon his disciples. He grants them his Spirit — the Holy Spirit: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven..."

The Spirit of Jesus Christ is the power of forgiveness. He is the power of Divine Mercy. He makes it possible to start all over again — ever anew. The friendship of Jesus Christ is the friendship of the One who makes us people who forgive, the One who also forgives us, raises us ceaselessly from our weakness and in this very way educates us, instills in us an awareness of the inner duty of love, of the duty to respond with our faithfulness to his trust.

Seeing a 'wounded' God

In the Gospel passage for today we also heard the story of the Apostle Thomas' encounter with the Risen Lord: the Apostle is permitted to touch his wounds and thereby recognizes him — over and above the human identity of Jesus of Nazareth, Thomas recognizes him in his true and deepest identity: "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28).

The Lord took his wounds with him to eternity. He is a wounded God; he let himself be injured through his love for us. His wounds are a sign for us that he understands and allows himself to be wounded out of love for us.

These wounds of his: how tangible they are to us in the history of our time! Indeed, time and again he allows himself to be wounded for our sake. What certainty of his mercy, what consolation do his wounds mean for us! And what security they give us regarding his identity: "My Lord and my God!". And what a duty they are for us, the duty to allow ourselves in turn to be wounded for him!

God's mercy accompanies us daily. To be able to perceive his mercy it suffices to have a heart that is alert. We are excessively inclined to notice only the daily effort that has been imposed upon us as children of Adam.

If, however, we open our hearts, then as well as immersing ourselves in them we can be constantly aware of how good God is to us; how he thinks of us precisely in little things, thus helping us to achieve important ones.

With the increasing burden of responsibility, the Lord has also brought new assistance to my life. I repeatedly see with grateful joy how large is the multitude of those who support me with their prayers; I see that with their faith and love they help me carry out my ministry; I see that they are indulgent with my shortcomings and also recognize in Peter's shadow the beneficial light of Jesus Christ.

At this moment, therefore, I would like to thank the Lord and all of you with all my heart. I wish to end this Homily with a prayer of the holy Pope, St. Leo the Great, that prayer which precisely 30 years ago I had written on the souvenir

cards for my ordination:

"Pray to our good God that in our day he will be so good as to reinforce faith, multiply love and increase peace. May he render me, his poor servant, adequate for his task and useful for your edification, and grant me to carry out this service so that together with the time given to me my dedication may grow. Amen".

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lormail@catholicreview.org

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5817 Old Leeds Road

Irondale, AL 35210