

MERCY – THE MESSAGE OF EASTER

AN EXPLANATION OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EIGHTH DAY

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There is something very special about the number “eight.” In chemistry, for example, there exists a law that when a number of elements are arranged in order of their atomic weights, each element resembles the eighth one before or after it.

In modern music, harmony is built upon groups of eight notes that keep recurring, but in a higher or lower register. They are called “octaves” from the Latin word that signifies the number eight.

The name “octave” has also been given to the eight-day period after a liturgical feast — as well as to the eighth day itself. This eighth or octave day of the feast is thus itself considered as a recurrence of the first day.

Each regular Sunday throughout the year is also known as “the eighth day” — a recurrence of the Feast of the Resurrection. The Octave-Day of Easter, therefore, is the model of all other Sundays of the Church Year and can be considered as the “greatest day” of the Feast itself.

This Christian practice of observing the octave day as the “greatest day” of a feast finds its roots in earlier Jewish celebrations, especially the dedication of Solomon’s Temple and the annual observance of the Feast of Tabernacles. The latter is significantly mentioned in the 7th chapter of St. John’s Gospel. There we read:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me; let him drink who believes in Me. Scripture has it: ‘From within him rivers of living water shall flow’” (Jn 7:37-38).

We need to take time to consider the meaning of these things and the connections that exist among them. What good is it to put these days on our calendars and call them “great feasts” if their meaning is not realized in our lives? We must understand them and enter into them with wholehearted participation.

This is particularly true of the “Octave Day of Easter.”

When Jesus revealed the Sacred Image of Himself as The Divine Mercy to St. Maria Faustina Kowalska on February 22, 1931, he declared:

I desire that there be a Feast of Mercy. I want this image, which you will paint with a brush, to be solemnly blessed on the first Sunday after Easter [the eighth, or Octave - Day of the Resurrection]; that Sunday is to be the Feast of Mercy (*Diary*, 49).

I remind you, My daughter, that as often as you hear the clock strike the third hour, immerse yourself completely in My mercy, adoring and glorifying it; invoke its omnipotence for the whole world, and particularly for poor sinners; for at that moment mercy was opened wide for every soul (1572).

One day, as Saint Faustina was offering all her prayers and sufferings so that this feast would be established as Our Lord desired, she said to Him: “They tell me that there is already such a feast and so why should I talk about it?” Jesus answered:

And who knows anything about this feast? No one! Even those who should be proclaiming My mercy and teaching people about it often do not know about it themselves. That is why I want the image to be solemnly blessed on the First Sunday after Easter, and want it to be venerated publicly so that every soul may know about it (340).

These words, I believe, help us to understand what Saint Faustina wrote for her spiritual director: “There will come a time when this work...will be as though utterly undone. And then God will act with great power, which will give evidence of its authenticity. It will be a new splendor for the Church, although it has been dormant in it from long ago” (378).

“Dormant!” That means “not active: in a state of suspension ... sleeping!” And “new splendor” can surely mean “a new awakening.” The spontaneity with which the celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday has been observed throughout the world today certainly attests to the truth of Saint Faustina’s prophecy. The idea of this special celebration of God’s mercy on the Sunday after Easter is not a new or radical idea stemming simply from private revelation. Our Lord, through Saint Faustina, is simply reemphasizing what was strongly urged by St. Thomas the Apostle in the earliest liturgical document in existence, the “Apostolic Constitutions.” There we read:

“After eight days [following the Feast of Easter] let there be another feast observed with honor, the eighth day itself, on which He gave me, Thomas, who was hard of belief, full assurance, by showing me the print of the nails and the wound made in His side by the spear.”

One of the greatest Doctors of the Church, St. Gregory of Nazianzen, also supports this feast, declaring that the Octave Day of Easter is even a greater feast than Easter — though it takes nothing whatever away from the greatness of the Day of the Resurrection itself. Easter Sunday is the boundary between death and life (a creation). But its eighth day, the Octave, is the fulfillment of what Easter is all about— perfect life in eternity (a second creation, more admirable and more sublime than the first).

Saint Gregory’s reasoning is very much in keeping with the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas who, following Aristotle, distinguishes a two-fold perfection: “The first looks to the essence of the thing,” he writes, “the second to its operation; and this second perfection is greater than the first.”

If, as St. Thomas teaches, creation is the first great manifestation of God’s mercy, then the attainment of the purpose of creation — eternal life in its fullness — is an even greater gift of mercy.

Easter Sunday represents our creation in the life of grace through faith in the Risen Savior. The Octave Sunday of Easter represents the fulfillment of that “creation in grace.” Thus it is, as St.

Augustine says, “the most privileged octave-day” and certainly merits the title Divine Mercy Sunday. All this depth of meaning connected with the Octave-Day of Easter in the early Church is virtually lost to us today. (And there’s a great deal more that space doesn’t allow me to go into here.)

In fact, although the title “Octave” is retained and emphasized in connection with the Feast of Christmas, this has not been the case with the Feast of Easter. Providentially, however, Pope St. John Paul II has established the Octave-Day of Easter as Divine Mercy Sunday for the whole Church. Yet many of the faithful still do not understand its significance as the Octave-Day of Easter. Our Lord surely knew what He was saying to Sister Faustina::

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Most Sundays and Feasts of the Year are identified in the Gospel passage read during the liturgy. It is significant then, that, except for the Feast of Thomas the Apostle, the passage from John describing Our Lord’s appearance to Thomas is read only on the Octave-Day of Easter and on Pentecost Sunday.

Let’s take a closer look at the passage I previously quoted from the Church’s most ancient liturgical document. Thomas writes:

“Let there be another feast observed with honor, the eighth day itself, on which He (Jesus) gave me full assurance, by showing me the print of the nails and the wounds made in His side by the spear” (see John 20:27).

What assurance did Thomas receive by the sight of the Lord’s wounded side? Not that Christ was truly risen (for that was obvious), but that He is divine and therefore has the power of reversing sin. This assurance was accomplished by the sight of the wounded source of the “stream of mercy,” the source of Christ’s “transfusion” of His life-blood to the Church through the Sacraments, especially of Baptism, Reconciliation, and the Eucharist. (“From within him rivers of living water shall flow.”)

We have the key here to understanding the Image of The Divine Mercy with its rays signifying the Blood and Water that flowed from Christ’s pierced side — and to Our Lord’s insistence that this image be specially venerated on the first Sunday after Easter, which is now celebrated throughout the whole Church as Divine Mercy Sunday.

We can also see these rays as simultaneously symbolizing the Holy Spirit, whom Christ breathed into the Disciples during that same Octave-Day appearance. On the strength of that Holy Breath, all sins are forgiven and “at-ONE-ment” with the Father is accomplished. Here, God is reconciling the world to Himself (see 2 Cor 5:18). And here the Church, the newly-born Body of Christ, is commissioned to be the instrument of reconciliation down through the ages.

This is Christ’s GREAT PROMISE of complete pardon of sin and punishment on Divine Mercy Sunday through the reception of the Sacrament (which is a participation in Christ’s death to sin and rising to divine life).

How grateful we should be to Saint Thomas and Saint Faustina for their cooperation with the Lord in drawing us to the depths of His Mercy!