

Our Sunday Visitor



Study Guide

Celebrating Mercy

Introduction

Pope Francis tells us that our salvation depends on contemplating the mystery of mercy. But he adds that contemplation alone will not enable the Holy Spirit to work in our lives: we must also *celebrate* our faith. Because of this need for celebration, the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization has put together this pastoral guide for celebrating the Jubilee of Mercy through words, rituals and liturgy. We hope that with these suggestions, you and your parish family will discover new and empowering ways not merely to celebrate mercy, but to become a living witness to to “sweet smelling fragrance of the Father’s mercy.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Although mercy is to be celebrated throughout the Jubilee Year, a special emphasis is placed on Lent. Why is Lent such a “privileged time” to “give even greater witness to the merciful face of the Father”?
2. Holy Doors are an essential part of a Jubilee Year. During this Jubilee of Mercy, passing through a Holy Door has special significance in terms of sorrow for sin. Have you walked through a Holy Door as part of this or a previous Jubilee year? Why do you think the Church places significance on a Holy Door for pilgrims to walk through during a Jubilee year?
3. Chapter Three discusses several ways that personal prayer is an important aspect of celebrating mercy. Take some time to read about such devotions as Praying the Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, saying the rosary, making a pilgrimage, saying the Stations of the Cross etc. Which appeals to you the most? Which appeals to you the least? What benefit might you obtain by performing a devotion that doesn’t immediately appeal to you?
4. Have you ever heard of the concept of “Spiritual communion”? (Page 29). Why might you practice “spiritual communion” as a way of expressing both penance for sin and to celebrate God’s mercy? How might “spiritual communion” become part of your daily life during the Jubilee of Mercy?

5. The saints have often recommended Lectio Divina (Chapter 4) as a way to hear, meditate on, and pray the Scriptures. What experience have you had with Lectio Divina? Why is this be such a powerful way to pray the Scriptures?
6. What are some aspects of celebrating mercy that you think are most important in your parish? In your family? In your life? What are some concrete steps that you can take to begin celebrating mercy in your life today?

Process Activity:

Plan to participate in some of the special liturgical celebrations designed for the Jubilee Year. For example, on March 4th and 5th, take part in the special initiative called “24 Hours for the Lord.” At least once during the say, designate a Saturday afternoon where the Cross of Our Lord is displayed and revered. Start a Lectio Divina group where you contemplate some of the passage of Scripture that show God’s mercy such as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32) or the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Print a verse from a penitential psalm asking for mercy each week in the bulletin or on the parish website.

Prayer:

Merciful God, your mercy is inexhaustible. Bless Pope Francis for designating this as a special year in which we celebrate your mercy to us and to the whole world. Help us to receive your mercy and to share it with others. In particular, grant us the grace to be witnesses of your mercy – especially to those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. May we also never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to us. Help us to always live in your mercy. Amen.

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The Psalms of Mercy

Introduction

All of life is reflected in Psalms. Composed in Hebrew in the sixth and eighth centuries, the Psalter was used for prayer by the communities of those times. The psalms are written poetically and are rich in symbols of human experience because they are musical. In Hebrew the psalter is called the “book of praises” and in Greek it is called *psalmos* or “song.” This does not mean that there was always an instrument used in the recitation of the psalms, but that they were used for early liturgical gatherings. The psalms contain some of our earliest liturgical compositions of thanksgiving and praise, grief and lamentation, salvation and mercy. In *The Psalms of Mercy*, one of the official catechetical texts for the Year of Mercy, the splendor of the psalms and their beautiful appreciation of God’s mercy is presented in the hope that you will discover the great gifts of prayer for mercy contained within them.

Reflection Questions:

1. “Mercy is one of God’s most highlighted characteristics in the Psalter.” Why do you think the psalms so often emphasize God’s mercy?
2. How is divine mercy linked to the Old Covenant? What role does divine mercy play in the New Covenant?
3. In Psalm 42 and 43, the Jewish people are in exile and feeling far from God. Verse 9 asks the Lord, “Why have you forgotten me?” Have you ever felt far from God? How might you help someone who is “in exile” from the Church?
4. Which symbol(s) from the psalms most resonates with you? (Eagle’s wings, lion, bird, ox, mother, oil, etc.) Why did you select this particular symbol?

5. In Psalm 103, the Psalmist links mercy with compassion. How do mercy and compassion interrelate? Can we have one without the other? Why or why not?
6. Which psalm of mercy speaks the most to you? How can you incorporate this psalm into your prayer life this week?

Process Activity:

Psalm 136 is a Psalm of Thanksgiving for the many ways the Lord shows mercy to His people. Read this Psalm aloud as a group. Take a few moments to pray and reflect on this Psalm and then write your own Psalm of Thanksgiving for God's mercy in your life.

Prayer:

My God, I know that your mercy endures forever. I give thanks to you, oh Lord of lords, for you are good and merciful to all. Thank you for extending your mercy to me, a sinner. Help me to share it with others—especially to those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. May I never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to me. Help me to always live in your mercy. Amen.

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The Parables of Mercy

Introduction

In this booklet, *The Parables of Mercy*, Jesus' teachings about mercy as explained through his parables are presented as part of the Year of Mercy. Three stories in Luke 15:1-32: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son are commonly identified as the "parables of mercy." Other parables that expand the concept of mercy are the two debtors and their creditor (Lk 7:41-43), the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), the rich man and the beggar Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31), the unjust judge and the persistent widow (Lk 18: 1-8) and the Pharisee and the publican in the temple (Lk 18:9-14). In each of these parables we become part of the story by shown a disarming truth. This in turn causes us to rethink our everyday relationships. The three-way relationship: "he, I and other" structure of these parables links God's mercy to the mercy displayed by human beings. "Be merciful, even as [and because] your Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36) is the central architectural beam of mercy in parable form." Common to all the parables of mercy is a reversal that catches the hearer off guard. The parables of mercy involve two categories of people; those who are in the parable and those who hear them and include a range of sinners who Jesus uses to implicate all listeners. By implicating all listeners Jesus dispels the concept that mercy is based on merit not grace. "The parables of mercy do not leave people untouched." We encourage you to read and prayerfully reflect on the parables of mercy and how they might challenge you in your own life.

Reflection Questions:

1. Any kind of sin is a debt. What do we learn from the two debtors and the creditors (Lk 7:36-50) about Jesus' merciful relationship with sinners and the implications for our community?
2. Does love for God "automatically guarantee" love for neighbor? What role does true compassion play in helping to identify "Who is my neighbor?"

3. How does Jesus see conversion? What is most thought-provoking about his view?
4. “The parable of the merciful father is an intricate knot that can be untied by choosing one of the various threads in the story.” Which of the threads, the father, the son who returns, the older son, or the servants were you most surprised by and why?
5. How does the contrast between the parables of mercy and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus illustrate both what mercy is and what it is not?
6. What is the characteristic that both the judge and God share that brings out the inestimable value of prayer? How is your prayer life impacted by this?

Process Activity:

Having read the parables of Jesus, share with the group which parable taught you the most about God’s mercy. Which one taught you the most about the justice of God? Do you think that is it necessary to sin in order to obtain justification and reconciliation with God? Finally, reflecting on the idea that “It is easy to talk about mercy, but difficult to live it!” what are some of the takeaways from these parables of mercy that will inform your thoughts and actions during this Year of Mercy?

Prayer:

My God. I ask that you have mercy on me. I know I am a sinner, but I cast myself before you, confident of your never-ending love. Help me to be a witness of your mercy—especially to those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. May I never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to me. Help me to always live in your mercy. Amen.

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Study Guide

Mercy in the Fathers of the Church

Introduction

The “true common thread” in the history of the Church is the reference to mercy. While historical events like wars and episodes of violence, like terror attacks, have “pushed God’s tenderness off into a corner,” nothing has succeeded in eliminating God’s mercy in the life of the Church. *Mercy in the Fathers of the Church* looks at how the theme of mercy has been central to the teachings of the Fathers of the Church. The reflections in this book, one of the official catechetical resources for the Jubilee Year of Mercy, are divided into three parts: an overview of mercy in the early Church; the role mercy played in the life and teaching of St. Augustine, sometimes called “the true poet of mercy”; and finally a collection of passages from the great Fathers of the Eastern and Western Churches. We encourage you to read and prayerfully reflect on these texts so that your faith might grow and develop, but most importantly, so that you might realize how very central God’s mercy is our love for us.

Reflection Questions:

1. The biblical God is often defined as “being patient and merciful.” What do you see as the relationship between patience and mercy? How does that relationship play out in your life?
2. One way we express mercy, “in terms of communal life” is by “freeing one another from the evil encountered daily.” What does this mean to you? What evil do you encounter daily? How can you free others from this?
3. “In the Christian conscience, man’s mercy toward his fellow human beings is born from the experience of the gift of mercy received from

God.” What are some examples of God’s mercy that you have experienced in your own life?

4. St. Gregory Nazianzen, in speaking about doing acts of mercy, writes, “Do not let anything come between your impulse to do good and its execution.” Do you ever let something stop you from acting on your impulses or desire to do good? What draws you away? How can you change that?
5. St. Augustine says that breaking bread for the hungry, clothing the naked, taking in the stranger, visiting the sick, uniting the contentious, and burying the dead are all works of mercy. What other acts of mercy can you think of that are relevant to our modern lives?
6. What one quote from a Father of the Church offered a description of mercy that you had not considered before?

Process Activity:

After having read the quotes from the Church Fathers on pages 63-79, ask members of the group to select one quote that was particularly meaningful or insightful. Note some of the ideas that are generated by the discussion and write a short piece in the parish/school/diocesan newsletter or website that points out how this ancient teaching relates to us today.

Prayer:

Merciful God, the Fathers of the Church relied on the tender mercy of your heart. Help us to learn to experience the “heart soreness” of your genuine mercy so that we might better extend your mercy to all those around us. May our hearts always be soft toward those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. And may we also never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to us. Amen

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Study Guide

The Saints in Mercy

Introduction

The Saints in Mercy provides a cross section of Catholic Saints and holy people who embraced the mercy of God. Spanning almost 1000 years of Church history, they represent many cultures and parts of the world, but are united by their openness to the mercy of God and their willingness to share it with others. As Archbishop Rino Fisichella states in the preface, these heroes of our faith “did not limit themselves to witnessing their faith through *works* of mercy; rather, they lived, first of all, *within* mercy, and as a result they expressed the beauty of it in the holiness of their lives.” Through their lives, we learn of the transformative power of the mercy of God. They give us a picture of how God’s mercy can be shared with those who are suffering marginalized or in need, those who are vulnerable, those in distant lands and those who are closest to us. We encourage you to use the saints as examples of mercy for your own life.

Reflection Questions:

1. Some people see God’s mercy and his justice almost as opposite qualities. However, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and more recently Pope Francis, have expressed the inherent connectedness between God’s mercy and his justice. What relationship do you see between the mercy and justice of God in your own faith and life?
2. Many saints cared for those in need of physical and spiritual healing. When have you received healing from God? How do these saints inspire you to reach out to those who are suffering?
3. Throughout history, the saints have reached out to populations of people who were poor or marginalized. Who is at the margins of our society today? How might we more effectively share God’s mercy with them?
4. St. Peter Claver and Venerable Marcello Candia journeyed to distant and dangerous lands to share God’s mercy with others. Who around the world

- are in desperate need of God's mercy today? How might we assist in the Church's missionary and relief activity to help meet these needs?
5. Chapter ten contrasts the charity of St. Albert Chmielowski with the revolutionary thinking of Vladimir Lenin. How might the world be transformed by a merciful approach to social problems, rather than an approach that addresses these issues through political conflict and war?
 6. Saints were often called on to show great mercy to those within their own families. From whom in your family have you experienced mercy?

Process Activity:

Having reflected on the many saints discussed in the book, share with the group which one of the saints you most identify with. How have you shown (or will you show) mercy in a similar way? God also sometimes calls us out of our comfort zones. Which saint in this book would be most difficult for you to imitate, and why? What is one thing you could do to imitate this saint in a small way?

Prayer:

Merciful God, your mercy is inexhaustible. Thank you for choosing us, both to receive your mercy and to share it with others. Help us to imitate these saints who lived in your mercy. Help us, like them, to be witnesses of your mercy—especially to those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. May we also never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to us. Help us to always live in your mercy. Amen.

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Study Guide

Mercy in the Teachings of the Popes

Introduction

Pope Francis has mentioned three popes from modern times who had a special interest in the theme of mercy: Pope St. John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, and Pope St. John Paul II. For the past two centuries, these popes have exercised a strong influence on the spirituality of Catholics, especially around the topic of mercy. Pope St. John Paul II sensed that this was the “time for mercy” when he shared his devotion to the divine mercy message of St. Faustina with the world. And both of the popes who presided over the Second Vatican Council (Pope St. John XXIII and Pope Paul VI) called for the “civilization of love” through patience and dialogue. In their own way, each of these popes, while still continuing the teachings of the Church in the unbroken apostolic line, opened the modern world to the loving salvation and mercy of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to use *Mercy in the Teachings of the Popes* as a springboard for deepening your own understanding of mercy.

Reflection Questions:

1. In the introduction of the text, the author cites the frequency of receiving the Eucharist as a significant way in which we deepen our friendship with Christ. What does receiving the Eucharist mean to you? How does this relate to the idea of mercy?
2. “The goal of the papal magisterium is to be an echo of the Incarnate Word, preaching that is centered on love.” (p. 19) What does this mean to you?
3. What are some of your favorite Gospel stories that talk about mercy? What new insights have you gained about this stories from the writings of the popes?
4. The popes have had said that their special devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to Divine Mercy have deepened their faith lives and relationship with God. Is the same true for you? If you haven’t considered one of these devotions might you do so now?
5. Pope Paul VI talks about mercy within the family (p. 79). How does your family show mercy to one another in Christ? How can you do more?

6. What are some ways you might live out the teachings of the popes on the merciful mission of Jesus Christ in your daily life?

Process Activity:

After having read the teachings of the pope, discuss which one(s) made the greatest impression on you. Talk about why this aspect of mercy is important to your personal faith life. Share this quote with a friend or family member who is in need of mercy. If possible, turn the quote into a prayer for the increase of mercy in your own life.

Prayer:

Loving and gracious God, I know that your mercy is inexhaustible. You have given us these popes as a reflection of your Son, Jesus Christ, the light of the world, so that we might better understand what it means to be merciful. Grant that through their intercession we might always have a merciful heart toward those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. And may we also never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to us. Amen

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Study Guide

The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

Introduction

The “great river of mercy,” as Pope Francis calls it in *Misericordia Vultus*, his introduction to the Jubilee Year of Mercy, “never runs dry” because there are always those who are willing to perform acts of mercy in their everyday lives. In *The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy*, one of the official catechetical texts for the Year of Mercy, the concept of mercy as revealed in both the Old and New Testament is explored. The development of theology behind works of mercy, as expressed by the early Church fathers, is also examined as a base for in-depth reflections on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, their role in the life of the Church and in the lives of individual believers. We encourage you to use this text as a way of living out Pope Francis’s call to “become strong in the faith in Jesus Christ.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Which of the works of mercy is the easiest for you to do? Which is the hardest?
2. Jesus said that the way we treat others will be the standard by which we ourselves will be judged (Mt 25: 31-45). If you were to be judged today, what would Jesus find in your life? What can you do to change?
3. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that “giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity.” How much do you give to the poor? Could you give more, perhaps even consider tithing?
4. The word for mercy in Latin is *misericordia*, from the words for misery and heart. It might be defined as “compassion with the pity that it entails and fidelity with love as a requirement.” How does this definition of mercy fit with your own experiences of both giving and receiving mercy?

5. Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." How merciful are you? Could you be more merciful?
6. Look at some of the Psalms that plea for mercy. (Ps 4:2; 6:3; 9:14; 25:16; 51:1). Use these as the basis for creating your own prayer for mercy.

Process Activity:

Read aloud the twenty "good works" that Hermas lists (p. 29). Discuss in your group how these relate to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. How are they similar? How do they differ? One of the biggest issues facing the world today is the migrant crisis. One of the works of mercy is to "welcome the stranger." How can we balance welcoming strangers (refugees) and protecting our country from invasion and harm?

Prayer:

Merciful God, your mercy is inexhaustible. Help us to extend your mercy to those around us through the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy. May we always be willing to do the good that is before us. Help us always to be witnesses of your mercy in our words and in our deeds. May we pay special attention to those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. And may we also never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to us. Amen

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Study Guide

Confession: The Sacrament of Mercy

Introduction

The sacrament of confession is “the sacrament of those who, in Christ, experience the merciful love of God.” In *Confession: the Sacrament of Mercy from the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization*, the central messages of Jesus’ teaching—those of mercy, forgiveness of sins and conversion—are looked at from both a biblical and a practical perspective. Central to the reflections is the idea that the Jubilee Year of Mercy is a “privileged moment” to look at the Sacrament of Reconciliation in “a way that captures its beauty and effectiveness.” We encourage you to read and prayerfully reflect on the role the sacrament plays in your life and that of your parish.

Reflection Questions:

1. What do words like “sin,” “forgiveness,” “mercy,” and “reconciliation” mean to you?
2. How is the forgiveness of sins an “experience of light” in your life?
3. Sin, according to Luke’s parable of the Prodigal Son, is “whatever does not let us live a full life.” What is preventing you from living a full life?
4. What do the father’s responses to the Prodigal son and to the eldest son tell you about God’s mercy? Which son do you identify with the most closely?
5. “The Christian knows how important it is to believe in (God’s) mercy....” Do you believe in God’s mercy?
6. How have you experienced peace as the “fruit of forgiveness and reconciliation with God obtained through the confession of our sins”?

Process Activity:

“We no longer believe in God’s mercy because we are no longer aware of sin and we no longer have a sense of sin because within us there is the underlying conviction that there is no objective notion of good or evil.” Take some time in your group to discuss this statement. Do you agree with it? Why or why not? Forgiveness is intrinsically linked to the mission of the Church. How can you live out the mission of forgiveness in your parish?

Prayer:

Merciful God, your mercy is inexhaustible. Thank you for giving us the gift of the Sacrament of Confession, so that we might renew our friendship with you. May we always be willing to come before you to receive your mercy that we might share it with others. Help us always to be witnesses of your mercy—especially to those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. May we also never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to us. Help us to always live in your mercy. Amen