

Freedom God's Heart of Mercy

St. Nicholas

9 March 2018

Thanks

As always, it is a joy to be with you again this year at “Freedom,” when the young people from the various parishes of the Archdiocese come together in Lent to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, an event in which the love and mercy of God is poured forth in such abundance.

I especially want to thank Erwin Fung of our Youth Ministry Office and all those who work together with him to organize this special evening. What talent and what contagious enthusiasm for the Gospel of Jesus Christ I see here in this gymnasium. And what hope you give to me.

Youth bring special gifts to the life of the Church: joy, exuberance, faith in Jesus, idealism not grown weary, a willingness to serve others, a readiness to live the adventure of being a Christian in today's world. “You bring us the joy of faith and you tell us that we must live the faith with a young heart.”¹

Theme

Tonight I want to share with you a few thoughts on God's heart, his heart as a heart of mercy.

¹ Francis, Homily (24 March 2013).

Of course, the invisible God does not have a human heart like ours. But, in the Old Testament the word “heart” is used to describe God: just as today, it was used to describe the very centre of who a person is and the origin of his actions.

“I give my heart to you” is still a way we speak when we want to say “I give everything of whom I am to you.” It also is a way of saying “I love you; you have my heart.”

For example: “I will give you pastors after my own heart” (Jer 3:15).

From Old Testament revelation onward, then, the whole story of humanity can be explained as motivated, directed and enfolded by God’s inexhaustible and gratuitous love for us.

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of his own heart: “Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28-29).

Here we have the heart of Jesus. And now we have a real image of the Sacred Heart, whose picture you have seen many times. It means that, as the Son of God, he could love as God; but it also means that, as fully human, he could love in a human way. As the Son of God, Jesus

was not only loved by the Father but he was also loved by Mary and Joseph. He experienced both human and divine love – and because he “knows” this love, he can love us in that way.

Heart as Symbol of Love

Familiar even in a non-Christian culture is the heart as a symbol of love. Indeed, it tunes us into our deepest aspiration: every human being wants to love and to be loved.

It is the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally by God which gives meaning to our lives.

True love is both loving and letting oneself be loved. It is harder to let ourselves be loved than it is to love.

Cross of Christ Manifests the Love of His Heart

The wonder of God’s loving us (he didn’t have to!) is shown to us concretely in the divine and human heart of Jesus. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way:

For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, “is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that. . . love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings” without exception (n. 478).

“The Cross of Christ contains all the love of God; there we find his immeasurable mercy. This is a love in which we can place all our trust,

in which we can believe. Dear young people, let us entrust ourselves to Jesus, let us give ourselves over to him (cf. *Lumen Fidei*, 16), because he never disappoints anyone!”²

“Raised up high on the Cross, he gave himself up for us with a wonderful love and poured out blood and water from his pierced side, the well-spring of the Church’s Sacraments.”³

Everything in Jesus speaks of mercy. Indeed, he himself is mercy, the Great Forgiver.

Yes, it is God’s joy to forgive!

This sums up the whole of the Gospel. “Each of us, each one of us, is that little lost lamb, the coin that was mislaid; each one of us is that son who has squandered his freedom on false idols, illusions of happiness, and has lost everything. But God does not forget us; the Father never abandons us. He is a patient Father, always waiting for us! He respects our freedom, but he remains faithful forever. And when we come back to him, he welcomes us like children into his house, for he never ceases, not for one instant, to wait for us with love. And his heart rejoices over every child who returns. He is

² Francis, Address, Way of the Cross, World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro (26 July 2013).

³ Preface of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Roman Missal*, p. 479.

celebrating because he is joy. God has this joy, when one of us sinners goes to him and asks his forgiveness” (Angelus, 15 September 2013).⁴

Response to Christ’s Heart of Mercy: Gift of Self to Others

Humanity today needs men and women, and especially young people like yourselves, who do not wish to live their lives “halfway”, young people ready to spend their lives freely in service to those of their brothers and sisters who are poorest and most vulnerable, in imitation of Christ who gave himself completely for our salvation. In the face of evil, suffering and sin, the only response possible for a disciple of Jesus is the gift of self, even of one’s own life, in imitation of Christ; it is the attitude of service. Unless those who call themselves Christians live to serve, their lives serve no good purpose. . . He wants you to be signs of his merciful love for our time!⁵

“Love God before anything else, as the response of the entire person to God’s total self-giving covenant: love him with your mind, yes, but on a deeper level, with your heart, and, incorporating both, with

⁴ Francis, Message for the 31st World Youth Day (2016).

⁵ Francis, Way of the Cross, World Youth Day, Krakow (29 July 2016).

‘all your soul’.”⁶ At the same time, love of neighbor is inseparably joined to love of God. Love of God and love of neighbor, while not the same, are “one commandment.”

Christ opens up for us a whole new horizon in which the vertical dimension, love for God, and the horizontal dimension, love of neighbor, meet at the center of the Calvary Cross. And at the center of that Cross is the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

We have a God who is “in love with us.”⁷ But we must learn to accept the gift of his love: quite simply, that he loves us first! Our job as Christians is to remove obstacles to God’s love, accepting our need for him and surrendering ourselves to the influence of his love.⁸

Example of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati

I think of the example of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati. He said, “Jesus pays me a visit every morning in Holy Communion, and I return the visit in the meagre way I know how, visiting the poor”. Pier Giorgio was a young man who understood what it means to have a merciful heart that

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Light of the Word: Brief Reflections on the Sunday Readings* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 138.

⁷ Francis, Morning Meditation (27 June 2014).

⁸ Cf. Don Talafous, *Homilies for Weekdays: Solemnities, Feasts, and Memorials* (Collegetown, Liturgical Press, 2009), 25.

responds to those most in need. He gave them far more than material goods. He gave himself by giving his time, his words and his capacity to listen. He served the poor very quietly and unassumingly. He truly did what the Gospel tells us: “When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret” (Mt 6:3-4). Imagine that, on the day before his death when he was gravely ill, he was giving directions on how his friends in need should be helped. At his funeral, his family and friends were stunned by the presence of so many poor people unknown to them. They had been befriended and helped by the young Pier Giorgio.⁹

Waiting for You in the Sacrament of Reconciliation

If we want to “put on” Christ, to be clothed in him; that is, to enter into a personal relationship with him, we must “take off” what would make this “putting on” impossible. It’s simple: we have to take off our old clothes, to put on new ones. We have to put away sin in order to be clothed in God’s love.

God wants to give us a new heart. But we need to get ready for the operation. That’s the Sacrament of Reconciliation!

⁹ Francis, Message for the 31st World Youth Day (2016), 3.

Receive the new heart of Jesus! He is waiting for you in the sacrament of Reconciliation. With his mercy he will cure all the wounds caused by your sin. Do not be afraid to ask God's forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving us, like a father who loves us. God is pure mercy!

“We are all sinners, needing to be purified by the Lord. But it is enough to take a small step towards Jesus to realize that he awaits us always with open arms, particularly in the sacrament of Reconciliation, a privileged opportunity to encounter that divine mercy which purifies us and renews our hearts.”¹⁰

God never tires of forgiving. And this is true! So great is his love, which is always near us. It is we who tire of asking for forgiveness, but He always forgives, every time we ask him to. He forgives definitively, he wipes out and forgets our sin if we turn to him with humility and trust. He helps us not to become discouraged in the face of difficulties.¹¹

Pope Francis's Experience of Confession as a Teenager

God's mercy is very real and we are all called to experience it firsthand. When I was seventeen years old, it happened one

¹⁰ Francis, Message for World Youth Day (2015), 3.

¹¹ Francis, Address to Young People (5 July 2014).

day that, as I was about to go out with friends, I decided to stop into a church first. I met a priest there who inspired great confidence, and I felt the desire to open my heart in Confession. That meeting changed my life! I discovered that when we open our hearts with humility and transparency, we can contemplate God's mercy in a very concrete way. I felt certain that, in the person of that priest, God was already waiting for me even before I took the step of entering that church. We keep looking for God, but God is there before us, always looking for us, and he finds us first. Maybe one of you feels something weighing on your heart. You are thinking: I did this, I did that.... Do not be afraid! God is waiting for you! God is a Father and he is always waiting for us! It is so wonderful to feel the merciful embrace of the Father in the sacrament of Reconciliation, to discover that the confessional is a place of mercy, and to allow ourselves to be touched by the merciful love of the Lord who always forgives us!¹²

Think about this: God's merciful love of God "comes towards us;

¹² Francis, Message for the 31st World Youth Day (2016), 2.

it is like a swelling river that engulfs us without overwhelming us.”¹³

Let us not forget this word: God never ever tires of forgiving us!
. . . . The problem is that we ourselves tire, we do not want to ask, we grow weary of asking for forgiveness. He never tires of forgiving, but at times we get tired of asking for forgiveness.”¹⁴

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB

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¹³ Francis, Homily (3 September 2016).

¹⁴ Francis, Angelus (17 March 2013).