

# RECONCILIATION



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# Catholic Spirituality for Adults

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## The Mystery of God's Mercy

THE MOST RECENT doctor of the church, St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–97), used two words to describe her understanding of God: “Love” and “Mercy”! We do well to listen to the wisdom figures of our Christian tradition; we do well to listen to the mystics who have experienced God firsthand.

If words such as “love” and “mercy” sometimes fail us in our attempt to understand and appropriate the mysteries of our faith, we can turn to the artists who give us a visual representation of our more abstract theological language. When we speak of God as a God of mercy, we can do no better than to gaze prayerfully on a work of Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, one of Europe's greatest artists. His popular and powerful *The Return of the Prodigal Son* captures in exquisite detail the mercy of our gracious God. The father embraces the prodigal son with infinite tenderness. We know the rest of the story as found in Luke 15:11–32 — the father pleading with the elder, “good” son to extend to his wayward brother the same mercy that resides in the father's heart.

This portrait, indeed this graced parable, attempts to convince all of us that God's mercy is available to all. But we need to put ourselves in the way of this gift by returning home. We can decide to remain afar. Or, even worse, we can decide to be at home in God's presence with a judgmental attitude that

refuses to share with others the mercy and love the Father gives us daily. Spending several hours contemplating Rembrandt's painting can bring about a deep conversion of heart. In 1994, Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* was published. It offers a rich, prayerful analysis of Rembrandt's work. It drives home the point that all of us, in the various circumstances of our lives, are all the characters in the painting: the frail, merciful father; the sinful prodigal; the angry elder one; the bystanders observing God's mercy from afar.

Just as a doctor of the church (Thérèse of Lisieux) and a painter (Rembrandt) express their notion of a merciful God in words and art, so too does the poet Jessica Powers (1905–88). Known in religious life as Sr. Miriam of the Holy Spirit, Jessica Powers used her gift of poetic language to communicate her experiences of our Triune God. In "The Mercy of God" we are given a haunting description of how a soul moves from fear to liberation by the grace of God. This poem is worthy of serious prayer:

#### THE MERCY OF GOD

I am copying down in a book from my heart's  
 archives  
 the day that I ceased to fear God with a shadowy  
 fear.  
 Would you name it the day I measured my  
 column of virtue  
 and sighted through windows of merit a crown  
 that was near?  
 Ah, no, it was rather the day I began to see truly  
 that I came forth from nothing and ever toward  
 nothingness tend,

that the works of my hands are foolishness  
wrought in the presence  
of the worthiest king in a kingdom that never  
shall end.

I rose up from the acres of self that I tended  
with passion  
and defended with flurries of pride;  
I walked out of myself and went into the woods  
of God's mercy,  
and here I abide.

There is greenness and calmness and coolness, a  
soft leafy covering  
from the judgment of sun overhead,  
and the hush of His peace, and the moss of His  
mercy to tread.

I have naught but my will seeking God; even  
love burning in me  
is a fragment of infinite loving and never my  
own.

And I fear God no more; I go forward to wander  
forever  
in a wilderness made of His infinite mercy  
alone.<sup>1</sup>

—Jessica Powers

In this verse we witness the poet's movement from self to God. In confessional honesty, the poet tells of her fear, of an awareness of her nothingness, of her foolishness and passion and pride, of her need to transcend "the acres of self." And what is the new world and life she now enjoys? It is the experience of God's infinite mercy that brings peace and greenness and calmness and coolness. The grace given is that

of seeking but one thing: God's will. Once we make that commitment, fear vanishes and God's wilderness of mercy becomes our home.

It is in the sacrament of reconciliation that we too can experience various aspects of God's mercy. When we name and take responsibility for those attitudes and behaviors that separate us from God and our sisters and brothers, we become disposed to the influx of God's forgiveness. However, when we fudge and dally and procrastinate in dealing with the dark side of our lives, the offered grace has little effect on our spiritual well-being. We can be assured, however, of God's fidelity, and that God's forgiveness is always available to us through the sacrament of reconciliation.

### The Quality of Mercy

St. Bernard wrote: "The prophet does not exempt himself from the general wretchedness, lest he be left out of the mercy too." "Wretchedness" is a strong term. In fact, one can turn to our contemporary hymnals and find that an optional text — "That saved and set me free" — is offered to replace the traditional line ("That saved a wretch like me") in "Amazing Grace." But there is a corollary here that is frightening. If we are not in touch with our wretchedness, of that dimension of our human condition that alienates us from God's presence, then we fail to recognize our need for God's mercy. To deny that we need God's mercy is to say that we do not need Jesus because he said, "It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick; I have not come to invite virtuous people, but to call sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31–32). One of Flannery O'Connor's characters faced this dilemma:

“Mr. Head had never known before what mercy felt like because he had been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew now.”

But just the briefest reflection, both in regard to our personal lives and our collective existence, gives major evidence that we all need divine mercy. We hurt each other in many ways: sharp words, lack of affirmation, broken promises, cruelty, neglect, abuse — the list is endless. And as a community, be it nation or family or parish or organization, we have policies and behaviors that injure others. We do need grace, the grace of mercy, to deal with the general wretchedness of existence.



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Pope John Paul II wrote an encyclical letter, *Dives in Misericordia*, in November of 1980. In the last section of that letter he offers this reflection on the richness of God's mercy:

The Church proclaims the truth of God's mercy revealed in the crucified and risen Christ, and she professes it in various ways. Furthermore, she seeks to practice mercy towards people through people, and she sees in this an indispensable condition for solicitude for a better and “more human” world, today and tomorrow. However,

at no time and in no historical period — especially at a moment as critical as our own — can the Church forget the prayer that is a cry for the mercy of God amid the many forms of evil which weigh upon humanity and threaten it. Precisely this is the fundamental right and duty of the Church in Christ Jesus, her right and duty towards God and towards humanity. The more the human conscience succumbs to secularization, loses its sense of the very meaning of the word “mercy,” moves away from God and distances itself from the mystery of mercy, the more the Church has the right and the duty to appeal to the God of mercy “with loud cries.” These “loud cries” should be the mark of the Church of our times, cries uttered to God to implore His mercy, the certain manifestation of which she professes and proclaims as having already come in Jesus crucified and risen, that is, in the Paschal Mystery. It is this mystery which bears within itself the most complete revelation of mercy, that is, of that love which is more powerful than death, more powerful than sin and every evil, the love which lifts man up when he falls into the abyss and frees him from the greatest threats.<sup>2</sup>

Pope John Paul II was a realist. Having lived through World War II as a youth and having a deep grasp of the forces of good and evil in the twentieth century, he was keenly aware of our need for God's mercy as revealed in Jesus. For the pope, sin was the force that diminishes life and disrupts community. His plea that we respect human dignity became his battle cry. But just as important was the need for forgiveness, for the grace of God's mercy so needed to transform both the human heart and human society. John Paul II, a man of deep faith,

knew the price that Christ paid for our salvation — the very giving of his life on the cross.

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia cries out:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath.  
It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
(Act IV, sc. 1, ll. 182–85)

Maybe the metaphor from nature captures the essence of God's mercy: the gentle rain that falls from heaven. And that rain falls on all, without discrimination. Our task is to receive God's grace and then, once received, pass it on to others.

A story about God's mercy might help to highlight the centrality of divine forgiveness. Two people got into a theological argument about the attributes of God. One person claimed that truth was the greatest attribute; the other argued that it was beauty. A third individual, hearing the heated conversation, proposed: "In the end, all we have is the mercy of God. This is the greatest of the divine attributes." Whatever the case, we know that the God revealed in Jesus is a God of truth, goodness, and mercy. And maybe all of these qualities are simply different ways of saying that God is Love.

### God's Word

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Eph. 4:32)

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.  
(Matt. 5:7)

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” (Matt. 9:13)

Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you? (Matt. 18:33)

In reflecting upon the grace of mercy, we must begin at the proper starting point: God’s mercy given to us. Here is God’s love in the face of our guilt and shame. There are situations so horrendous that it is impossible for us to forgive others and be merciful without the power of the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus in us who extends divine mercy to others. That mercy is to flow through our words and attitudes because of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Brutal honesty is required here. All of us, without exception, have sinned; all of us need God’s forgiveness and mercy. St. Paul constantly reminded his people (as well as himself) that “God in Christ has forgiven us.” To withhold this mercy from our fellow sinners is to deny discipleship. As followers of Jesus, we are to continue his mission and ministry. As agents of reconciliation, we bring healing to the world through the power of grace.

## Conclusion

Poets have the marvelous ability to use metaphors to describe deep theological realities. In her poem “Retreat Magnificat, 1990,” Sr. Anne Higgins, D.C., speaks of God’s mercy as having the cleansing power of rain. She does this by paraphrasing

the great canticle of Mary in her visitation to Elizabeth (Luke 1:46–55).

RETREAT MAGNIFICAT, 1990

My heart shudders in God's close breath,  
and I stand silent before majesty and mercy.  
For God has fluted his care for me  
through the song of the Wood Thrush.  
God shines in the eyes of those who love me,  
startles me with unending surprises.

God's mercy rains on me.  
I lift my face to drink  
its cleansing power.

God's humor overturns my selfish plans,  
shakes out my choking impatience.  
God favors me with friends;  
graces me with poetry  
and intuition.  
And I praise God with these,  
with the gift of myself.

God upholds the promise  
lived through Jesus  
present in our world,  
and in my heart.<sup>3</sup>