

*Prayer*

June 6, 2024



Receiving and Living  
God's Mercy through  
Prayer

I remember the day well. I was a participant in the semi-annual diocesan Regan Institute, an in-service where Catholic school teachers attend catechetical presentations for their own religious formation. Often, I am a presenter at this institute, but this particular year, I was able to enjoy the institute as an attendee, and on this particular day, I chose to attend a session on St. Benedict's Ladder of Humility. After the pattern of a true-life confession, and regretfully here is the punch line, I must admit that I only chose to attend this session on humility because I thought I was particularly humble. I thought I'd be learning about something at which I already excelled. Looking back, I was at that session for only one reason, to pat myself on the back for my own virtue. Little did I know that would be the day which would change my life forever. That sounds dramatic, but it is true, because that was the day I learned I was proud, sinfully proud. And I've never been the same. Tonight's talk is going to focus on God's mercy and encountering it in prayer. The Blessed Virgin Mary, as the preeminent model of someone who prays, sets forth the blueprint of experiencing God's mercy by way of the interior life. She, unlike me, is a humble conduit of God's mercy, and tonight we are going to take the opportunity to explore that.

In his second chapter, St. Luke gives us the passage of Jesus' presentation in the temple. In order to fulfill Jewish law, Joseph and Mary took baby Jesus to Jerusalem to present Him to God. While there, they met Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was awaiting Israel's messiah. You can certainly read the rather lengthy passage on your own, as he beautifully announces who Jesus is and what He will do, but Simeon's words to Mary are what interest us right now. "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted, (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."<sup>1</sup> Jesus will be a sign of contradiction and Mary's heart will be pierced so the thoughts of many hearts will be laid bare, exposed. The Greek word for thoughts, *dialogismoi*, is usually used in a negative context in the bible, meaning these are the calculating, plotting thoughts of evil and sin that takes place in our minds and hearts. The word is also used in the Letter to the Hebrews, "The word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, ... able to

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:34-35

discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.”<sup>2</sup> It is God’s word that penetrates and exposes these dark thoughts within.

We have to be very forthright here, there is something taking place in all of us because of original sin: the voice of evil, the tendency to sin, the weaknesses of the world and the flesh, and all of this is wrapped up in this word translated simply as “thoughts.” St. Faustina called this place the “abyss of (her) misery.”<sup>3</sup> It’s the place where original sin has wounded us most deeply. Sugar-coating this place is not very helpful. It’s the place of distrust in God and trust in myself. It’s the place of pride, of damnable pride. Jesus told St. Faustina, “How painfully distrust of my goodness wounds me! Sins of distrust wound me most painfully.”<sup>4</sup> Each of us has these thoughts, have this abyss of misery. It’s the place where we constantly compare ourselves to others or compete with them. We hide behind masks of our own choosing and making. This is the place of our insecurities or the satan-inspired lies that I am not good enough, holy enough, smart enough. It is this place of pride that makes us think we have to constantly prove ourselves or have a better story, better opinion, or play a more important role or have a look that is holier than thou so people will think you are devout. It is so easy to say “I am proud” and “Lord, have mercy,” but it is a whole other ball game to actually mean it.<sup>5</sup> I doubt many of us would be able to handle it if we saw the truth of our own pride.

The word mercy comes from the Latin *miseri cordis* which means “opening one’s heart to wretchedness.”<sup>6</sup> According to Pope Francis, mercy is the divine attribute which embraces us in our wretchedness. This means that the prerequisite to mercy is that we be wretched...and we are. Again, easy to say, hard to believe.<sup>7</sup>

On the day I realized I was proud, for the first time, I noticed these thoughts of which Simeon spoke. Trust me, they were wretched thoughts. St. Faustina, our mercy hero, wrote in her diary, “Thank you, Jesus, for the great favor of making known to me the whole abyss of my misery. I know that I am an abyss of nothingness and that, if your holy grace did not hold me up, I would return to nothingness in a moment.”<sup>8</sup> St. Faustina is thankful that God showed her the extent of her pride. It is only then that she could see the extent of his mercy.

The first thing that is asked of us during the Mass is to call to mind our sins, and that would be a good time to examine these thoughts. Where do I think I know better? Where do I always have to be smarter, have a better idea, or a better story?

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 4:12

<sup>3</sup> Faustina, 237.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 1076.

<sup>5</sup> Acklin 2019, 198.

<sup>6</sup> Francis 2016

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Faustina, 256.

Consider regular events in your life. Say you're at the grocery store and you run into a pink-haired, tattooed, pierced all over young man with a mohawk. Maybe he's even carrying a purse...complete with buttons and pins displaying political opinions opposite of your own. What are your thoughts? Are you lurking around this prideful abyss in your own heart ready to judge him as less than you because of his political opinion or hair color? Someone cuts you off in traffic or their personality is irritating to you, what do you think? Where do your thoughts go? This is where your wretchedness lurks and this is where you need God's mercy the most.

One of Pope Francis' purposes for calling the Year of Mercy back in 2015 was to "reawaken in ourselves the capacity to see what is essential."<sup>9</sup> The most essential thing about all humanity is that we are created by a loving God in his image and likeness, but the second most essential thing is that we are fallen and broken and we cannot be oblivious to that fact. But Jesus also said to St. Faustina, "The flames of my mercy are burning me. I desire to pour them out upon human souls."<sup>10</sup> By our essence, we stand in need of God's mercy, but by God's essence, He desires to give it, to embrace us in our wretchedness. As we grow in humility and truth and poverty and trust, human frailty and misery ceases to frighten us. This is true whether the misery is our own or another's. As my heart lets God move closer to my abyss through his mercy, the more I will admit to my own wretchedness and that of the pink haired, mohawked boy, but that wretchedness will no longer frighten me, and hence, I will cease to judge both him and myself.

That sounds nice, to let God's mercy permeate my thoughts, this interior abyss, but as any of you who have tried to battle your pride knows, it runs very deep. Like bindweed, it is quite insidious and there is no getting rid of it on our own. Sometimes we muster enough courage to pray the Litany of Humility, thinking I might be strong enough to endure it if God actually gives me what I'm asking for. But if you're like me, that litany only gets a half-hearted nod when I do pray it. And it brings forth a fear that maybe God is not trustworthy. I think a much better way to grow in humility is to take Mary's hand.

The second purpose of the Year of Mercy outlined by Pope Francis is to "welcome the numerous signs of the tenderness which God offers the whole world."<sup>11</sup> He continues in his book on mercy, "This is a time for mercy. The church is showing her maternal side, her motherly face, to a humanity that is wounded."<sup>12</sup> I think some people forget that the Church is a mother. If Mary has been trying to tell us one thing through her various apparitions, it is the fact that she is our

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<sup>9</sup> Francis 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Faustina, 1074.

<sup>11</sup> Francis 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Francis 2016.

mother also. Additionally, the Church has been bringing forth this focus on motherhood, with the recent inception of the liturgical memorial of Mary, Mother of the Church and the addition of two titles in the Litany of Loretto, Mother of Mercy and Mother of Hope. Sr. Mary Francesca did a nice job pointing out how respectful and loving Mary was to those she appeared to at Lourdes and Guadalupe. Her language was that of a tender mother. She even said at Tepeyac Hill “am I not she who am you mother,” practically begging St. Juan Diego to trust her and recognize her tender love for Him.

Love, particularly a mother’s love, is shown best during times of suffering. It is only in that situation where tenderness can be displayed. As Zechariah said in Luke’s Gospel, “In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us.”<sup>13</sup> Mary’s Heart was pierced as her Son died for our sin, she met our wretchedness, our abyss of misery, and she loved tenderly in imitation of her Son.

Again, we turn to Pope Francis to learn a little about God’s tenderness. He says in a 2022 catechesis on St. Joseph that tenderness “is an unexpected way of doing justice.”<sup>14</sup> I like that, an unexpected way of doing justice. What do we think God is doing when we sin? I venture to guess that we think God is disappointed or angry or perhaps He leaves us. But the Pope continues, “God is not frightened by our sins...He is frightened by the closure of our hearts.”<sup>15</sup> Pride is what closes our hearts. Pride is the posture of anti-prayer. I, not God, am the center of my thoughts and interior. Pride is a made-up universe where I rule, and the “prayer” in this universe is every interior thought where my opinions and my judgments reign supreme.

The prayer that brings us closer to the tender merciful God is the prayer that invites God to be close to me in my wretchedness. The root word for tender, “ten,” is the same root word for tendon, and it means to stretch (I severed a tendon in my hand once, but that’s a story for another day.). Prayer should provide a space where God stretches toward us, to be near to us in these dark places. The Holy Father says “The experience of tenderness consists in seeing God’s power pass through precisely that which makes us most fragile...Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us...That is why it is so important to encounter God’s mercy, especially in the sacrament of Reconciliation (bust also) in personal prayer with God.”<sup>16</sup> This movement of opening our sinful heart to a merciful God is so important that it is protected by a Sacrament. It is a true encounter with God, and nothing

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<sup>13</sup> Luke 1:78

<sup>14</sup> Francis, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

replaces Confession. But we also need to encounter God's mercy in the intimacy of personal prayer.

How do we experience God's tenderness in prayer? Well first we have to understand that tenderness is not an emotion. God isn't trying to give us a sentimental feeling or trying to tell us that our sinfulness and pride don't matter. No, it is an experience of God's love in our "abyss of misery" which brings a transformation.

Remember please how Peter denied Jesus three times after the Agony in the Garden. This, of course, gives us some insight into Peter's own abyss of misery. His cowardly fear ruled him just a few short hours after he heroically and proudly proclaimed that he would be faithful to Jesus even if it meant his own death. After the Resurrection, though, we see this dynamic of mercy in prayer being written about in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of John's Gospel. Peter, John, and some other Apostles had been fishing, of course they caught nothing, but in the morning, they see Jesus on the shore. All of a sudden here are the fish. Jesus should have called the fish as his disciples, they at least always follow Him. Anyway, after breakfast, Jesus and Peter go on a walk for a private chat. I'll let John tell the story.

"When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread."<sup>17</sup> This charcoal fire is a rather interesting detail. Just a few chapters before this, John had set the stage with another charcoal fire. That one was the fire Peter was standing by when he betrayed Jesus three times. John is clearly setting the stage here for this ensuing conversation between Jesus and Peter.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" The word here for love is agape, the self-sacrificing kind of love – the highest form of love. Peter's reply, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." But the kind of love Peter uses is not agape, but philia, a friendly or familiar kind of love, but not agape. A second time Jesus asks Peter if he agapes Him, but again Peter cannot say yes. He admits to his philia for Jesus, his lesser love for Him. Finally, the third time, Jesus asks "Peter, do you love me" but He doesn't use agape. Jesus changes his language to meet Peter where he is "Peter, do you philia me?" Peter says, "Lord, you know everything, you know I philia you."<sup>18</sup>

What is happening here is a great act of mercy. First, Jesus takes Peter back to the charcoal fire, back to his place of sin. Jesus isn't afraid of the sin. He isn't trying to shame Peter, but He is drawing forth his guilt. He's not saying "what you did was ok." It's like when a nurse has to touch the wound to bring forth healing. She admits there is a wound, she has to inflict additional pain, but it is all necessary and for the greater good. Jesus exposes Peter's wound more by asking him about

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<sup>17</sup> John 21:9

<sup>18</sup> John 21:15-19

his love, his self-sacrificing love, or lack thereof. Jesus doesn't lower the ideal. And Peter has to make reparation by three times professing his love. But the point is that Jesus meets Peter in the sin, in the guilt and failure, He meets Peter in the prideful abyss of misery, and He transforms it little by little. In the end, Peter's heart will love Jesus to the point of self-sacrifice, to martyrdom, but it is a process. It is a process of sin and mercy that Jesus is constantly leading. But my participation is also essential, and I participate first by inviting Jesus into my wounded soul by way of prayer. My job is to open, not shut, my sinful and weak heart to the God who is always stretching out toward me.<sup>19</sup>

Practically speaking, how does this dynamic on pride and tenderness effect my prayer? Well like all things related to God, it is rather simple – not easy, but simple. It is important to take some of your prayer time and devote it to a loving conversation with God – no formulas, no litanies, and no emptying of your mind either where you're trying to achieve this inner peace. No, you need to have a conversation with God that is first and foremost real. What is really on your heart and in your mind? Try to shed the masks that you wear with Him. Try to get to the bottom of what makes you miserable and tell Him about it. Be not afraid, because He is not afraid. Jesus will help you, just like He helped Peter. But Peter had to first confess his shortcomings. He couldn't live up to his calling and so He and Jesus talked about it. This, my friends, is a very effective way of praying and opening your heart to the mercy Jesus is burning to give.

Our Lady, of course, never had to suffer from her own pride, and so we might tend to think she can't possibly help us when it comes to these matters of healing and transformation. But that is entirely false. As a good mother, Mary, more than anyone, would know the truth of our pride and misery. She knows the depths of our need for mercy. And I'm not just saying this in some sort of general way. She knows the depths of your misery. She knows your sin. She knows your pride. She knows your wretchedness. She knows where you lie and judge, where you hate yourself, and where you think you are better than others. But she is also not afraid of that space. Another word that shares the same root as tenderness is attention. Mary is attentive to us. She stretches forth to the depths of our need and brings a motherly tenderness with her. Like a good friend or spiritual director who knows how to listen, praying with Mary can bring a lot of peace. It is only through a prayerful and vulnerable opening of these dark places to the Holy Spirit and Mary his Spouse that we will be able to let go of our pride, and finally just be able to rest. Pride makes us do so many things, wear so many masks, it is so very tiring, but it is mercy, and only mercy, that leads us home to the rest that God promised us so long ago.

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<sup>19</sup> Acklin 2019, 198.

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