

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
 VIGIL OF DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY, SATURDAY, APRIL 27, 2019
 NATIONAL MEETING OF THE INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE
 CHAPEL OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, MUNDELEIN, ILLINOIS**

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's personal representative to the United States, I greet you in his name on this Vigil of Divine Mercy. I am happy to be here along with Bishop Vasa and my brother priests. I wish to thank Jeffrey Karls, Executive Director of the Institute for Religious Life, for his kind invitation. In a special way, I wish to recognize the Little Sisters of the Poor who will be honored this evening. Finally, I greet the young people present, especially the Saint John Cantius Young Adults Choir.

Each year when the Church celebrates the Feast of Divine Mercy, she hears this Gospel. It recounts not only Saint Thomas' remarkable proclamation of faith – Jesus is Lord and God –but also the institution of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, the Sacrament of God's Mercy. It is the task of the whole Church to reconcile men and women to God. This special sacrament, carried out through the ministry of priests, helps reconcile sinners to God through the Church, so that they may know the joy of His Mercy.

At the conclusion of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis exhorted the whole Church "to unleash the creativity of mercy to bring about new undertakings, the fruit of grace. The Church today needs to tell of those 'many other signs' that Jesus worked, which are 'not written' so that they too may be an eloquent expression of the fruitfulness of the love of Christ and of the community that draws its life from him." (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC LETTER *MISERICORDIA ET MISERA*, 20 NOVEMBER 2016, 18)

Mercy, the Holy Father says, *renews and redeems* because it is the meeting of two hearts: the heart of God who comes to meet the human heart. (cf. *MM*, 16) This encounter is exactly what the Apostles needed, having abandoned Jesus in His darkest hour. The choice of this Gospel for the first Sunday after Easter has deep theological significance, which points to the intimacy of the Mystery of Redemption and Divine Mercy. Let us now look at these verses from the beginning of today's Gospel.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." This verse joins the Apostles' entire situation to the resurrection of Jesus. This encounter happens the same day as the resurrection.

The disciples were in a situation of the "old man" – the man trapped in sin and fear. How can we say this? The door was closed, symbolizing a lack of relationship. Sin cuts us off from God, our neighbor, and the Church. Why is the door closed? The door is closed for fear. The apostles are filled with fear and anxiety; they don't have peace. They are not in relationship with those outside. In Luke's Gospel (Luke 24:36-43) when the Risen Lord appears, they were terrified, thinking He was a ghost. Why were they terrified? They were afraid because of their unbelief. What had been their last contact with Jesus? Their last contact included abandoning him, falling asleep in the Garden, and denying him three times. What would Jesus say?

Rather than condemn them, Jesus offers them the gift of Peace – Divine Mercy. He is the New Man. He wants to make new men out of the Apostles. He is Risen. There is a new reality with the Crucified

and Risen Jesus who conquers sin and passes through the closed door. He conquers the situation of non-relationship, sin, and fear. He changes their fear into joy.

The notion of fear is important. Whenever Saint Faustina was afraid of how she was going to carry out her mission as an Apostle of Mercy, the Lord would assure her: “Be not afraid” or He would promise her that he would grant her the necessary grace. The Divine Mercy Image, for this reason, bears the signature: “Jesus, I trust in you.” In a state of anxiety or fear, the remedy is trust. Jesus radically overturns the situation as it had existed by offering the disciples the Divine Mercy.

His salutation is “*Peace be with you.*” Saint John then says, “*He showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.*” This gesture has a Christological meaning: Jesus reveals His identity. Jesus is not a ghost. He is the Crucified and Risen One, appearing in glorified flesh, while bearing the wounds. This gesture also has a soteriological meaning: The Resurrection re-establishes His relationship with the disciples who betrayed him and who had collaborated in giving him those wounds. This demonstrates that Jesus pardons sins.

Jesus showed his disciples his wounds. The Resurrection isn’t just a return to a previous state. The resurrection is qualitatively different. Paul writes in Romans 6: *Christ dies no more. Death no longer has power over him.* The Resurrection means a new reality: freedom from the sins of the old man. The wounds demonstrate that the remission of sins is an immediate fruit or effect of the cross.

The Church Fathers reflect on the wounds through the prophet Isaiah (49:16): “*Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.*” This verse implies great intimacy. God writes the name of each person on the palm of His hand. God has created and called each person by name to friendship through the covenant. If we resist or break the covenant by doing evil, then God, remaining faithful, seeks us out. He re-initiates dialogue with us.

The destructive power of sin is seen in the wounds of the Risen Christ. Yet it is precisely by these wounds that the disciples recognize the Risen Lord. Effectively, Jesus says to them and to us: “See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name. You have done this to me, and still I come to you. You are mine.” It is from the woundedness of the cross that God initiates the new and everlasting covenant.

In the Book of Revelation, only the Lamb who was slain is worthy to break open the seals on the Book of Life. Jesus is that wounded Lamb. After showing his disciples his wounds, Jesus offers them the gift of peace. God’s mercy is without limit. The stigmata are transformed from signs of death and sin into signs of love and reconciliation.

Again, Jesus says to them, “*Peace be with you.*” Jesus wishes his disciples peace twice. This is the spiritual gift that accompanies his disciples, even after the Ascension. This peace is the fulfillment of the cross and resurrection. The apostles become witnesses to this peace, which accompanies and strengthens them for their mission.

Jesus then says, “*As the Father sends me, so I send you.*” He gives them a mandate for their mission. Jesus’ life on earth demonstrated his mission: to be in relationship with the Father and to draw others into this relationship. Jesus came to save sinners. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. St. Augustine says that Christ is God’s Mercy. The Risen Christ make the grace of the cross concrete by the sending out of the disciples to continue his work.

“As the Father sends me” has a double meaning. Jesus has carried out His mission, and this becomes the source of the Apostles’ mission. The whole work of the Apostles and the Church is rooted in the work of Christ. As a Church, we don’t do anything that contradicts the work and mission of Christ.

At the ethical level, Jesus commands us to continue his mission in the same spirit following his example. We must say: *“Father, forgive them they do not know what they are doing.”* The Church must say: *“Neither do I condemn you but go and commit this sin no more.”* We are called to be the ones, having received the gift, carry out the task of saying to the world, even to our enemies: *“Peace be with you.”* Even the strongest faith is of no avail without works. This is the reason the Holy Father encourages us to perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

Finally, the Lord breathes on the Apostles, saying: *“Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”* The gift of the Spirit evokes a long, biblical tradition. God breathed into man’s nostrils (Gen 2:7), and he became a living being. In the First Book of Kings, Elijah breathed on the widow’s son, and he came back to life (1 Kgs 17:17-24). In Ezekiel, the prophet prophesied to the Spirit, and the Spirit came upon the dry bones to revive them (Ez 37:9). Now, Jesus breathes the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, on the Apostles to bring them back to life.

We see the gift of the Spirit in John as the recreation of life in Christ himself by the Holy Spirit that will follow him. New life means living without sin in the Spirit. Sin takes life from man who becomes dead like the boy or dry like the bones. Life in Christ through the Spirit brings new life, which is relationship with God and others.

The Apostles are then sent forth with the power of the Spirit – with authority – to bind and loose sins – to forgive. They are given a special power, and we all assist in their mission, to reconcile sinners to the Father. It is our task to share the Gift of Divine Mercy, the Gift of Peace, with our brothers and sisters. This Sacrament of Divine Mercy flows directly from Christ’s Cross and Resurrection. What the Paschal Mystery reveals is that God never places limits on His Mercy. In the Risen Lord, Mercy, not Death, has the last word.

Let us go forth, with Mary, the Mother of Mercy, to make known to the whole world the joyful message: He is Risen, and His Mercy endures forever!