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With Love In Our Eyes: Mercy and Fraternity

Saint Josemaria insisted that charity in a Christian should never be “official, dry or soulless,” but rather full of human warmth and affection. An article on Christian life written for the Jubilee of Mercy in the Church.

01/19/2018

Little by little, in following the liturgical feasts and the various

Jubilee ceremonies and celebrations, we are trying to “gaze even more attentively on mercy”[1] during this Holy Year. In the Papal Bull convoking the Jubilee year, the Pope stressed that the mystery of God’s mercy is not only for those living far away from the Father’s house, but also for those of us who are trying to live close to God despite all our limitations. Then we too can be “a more effective sign of the Father’s action,” so that “the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective.”[2]

“Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life,”[3] and therefore embraces every aspect of Christian living. At first this might look like a mere slogan, a different way of referring to the same topics as always. But it is much more than that. Mercy is the light and strength from God to rediscover *with all the*

saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth^[4] of his Love.

Looking again at our love

Reflecting in depth on mercy, seeing it as a reality that concerns us directly, will help us pinpoint in our dialogue with our Lord where our love may be slackening. We will be helped to see whether we somehow resemble the elder son in the parable of the merciful father—the son who was unable to rejoice with the others.^[5] Or whether, perhaps, we are like the Pharisee, who went up to the Temple satisfied with all he had accomplished, but whose heart was cold.^[6] Or like the servant who, after being forgiven by his master, wasn't ready to forgive the little debts of his fellow-servant.^[7]

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance . . . I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not

grown weary. But I have this against you: that you have abandoned the love you had at first.[8] In these words from the Apocalypse, God is knocking at the door of Christians who are trying hard to practise their faith deeply. He confirms us in the good we are doing, while at the same time urging us on to a new conversion. Saint Josemaría's words below reflect the same concern, and can shine a light into the depths of our soul:

“You fulfil a demanding plan of life: you rise early, you pray, you frequent the sacraments, you work or study a lot, you are temperate and mortified... But you are aware that something is missing!

“Consider this in your conversation with God: since holiness, or the struggle to achieve it, is the fullness of charity, you must look again at your love of God and your love of

others for his sake. Then you may discover, hidden in your soul, great defects that you have not even been fighting against: not being a good son, a good brother, a good companion, a good friend, a good colleague...

You ‘sacrifice’ yourself in many small personal details, and so you are attached to yourself, to your own person. Deep down you do not live for God or for others, but only for yourself.”[9]

If we allow God’s mercy to enter into our soul, it leads us to look again at our love, to clear out the ruts our heart may have got stuck in without our realizing it. His mercy helps us to discover anew what it means to live for others; it rescues us from an excessive desire for personal security[10] that leaves little room for God and those around us. The Pope asks: does my happiness lie in

“getting out of myself to go to meet my neighbour,” or in “having everything sorted out, enclosed inside myself?”[11]

Rejoicing with other people

“God is joy,” said Saint John Paul II to young people, “and the joy in our lives reflects the original joy that God experienced on creating mankind.”[12] A joy he experiences anew whenever he forgives us: there is *more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*[13] Underlying the mystery of divine mercy is “the joy of God who wants to enter the world.”[14] Hence Saint Paul’s plea: *he who does acts of mercy, [let him do so] with cheerfulness.*[15]

Therefore mercy is not only called into action by the weakness or imperfections of those around us. It is love without reserves,

uncalculating love. It is a light that pervades everything and makes the Christian virtues into attractive aspects of a person's character.

Above all, it is the radiance of a Love that is not of this world.[16] "True virtue is not sad and disagreeable, but pleasantly cheerful," wrote Saint Josemaría in *The Way*.^[17] Years later he would return to the same idea with reference to a comment someone had made.

"You are all so cheerful, and one doesn't expect that,' I heard someone say.

"It has been happening for a long time; insistently and with diabolical determination, Christ's enemies never tire of complaining that the people who give themselves to God are all sullen and sad. And, unfortunately, some of those who wish to be 'good' have lent support to those words, with their 'sad virtues.'

“We give you thanks, Lord, because you have chosen to count on our cheerful, happy lives to erase that false caricature.

“I also ask You that we may not forget it.”[18]

Mercy, then, in order to “work,” to be genuine, has to permeate joyfully our whole life. Joy is connected with youth because a young spirit does not calculate or set limits. For our Christian life not to be a false caricature, it has to be flooded with joyful mercy.

This is no utopia. Mercy is compatible with weakness, and in fact our very weakness is what enables us to grow in mercy, since it makes us humbler and better able to understand that the people around us also have defects. Therefore, although our hard-heartedness or lack of self-giving sometimes prevents us from reflecting God’s

mercy, we can at least tell our Lord that we want to be merciful in everything. He will help us to stop calculating, to stop excluding certain people or circumstances, so that we too can experience this reality: “To give oneself sincerely to others is so effective that God rewards it with a humility filled with cheerfulness.”[19] And we will also be able to pass on to others this good atmosphere, which is not mere “physiological good spirits—the happiness of a healthy animal,”[20] but the true “supernatural happiness that comes from the abandonment of everything and the abandonment of yourself into the loving arms of our Father-God.”[21]

If we abandon ourselves in God’s arms like that, we will pass on to others, often without even realizing it, the joy that God gives us, a joy that “is born of a free encounter,” of “hearing that ‘you matter to me,’ not

necessarily in words ... And that is precisely what God makes us understand,”[22] and what we can make others understand, also without any words.

Affection

When Saint Josemaria talked about charity he would often also call it “affection,”[23] to make it clear that real charity is not “official, dry or soulless,” but full of “human warmth,”[24] understanding and openness. Practising charity is much more than observing the outward forms of good manners, or being coldly respectful—which in fact keep the other person at a distance.

Charity means opening our hearts, [25] demolishing the barriers we sometimes set up between ourselves and others when there is something about them that we don't like.

The word “respect” comes from the Latin *respectus*, meaning an attentive

look, consideration. True respect is not well-mannered resignation about other people's failings, which would be no more than a defensive wall to protect ourselves from them. Real respect means being approachable, understanding, magnanimous, and able to look people in the eyes. It is this attitude that the Pope refers to when he talks about "tenderness," which is "respectful, delicate charity."[26] As he said at one point: "Always try to have eyes that welcome, a helping, accompanying hand, consoling words, and a tender embrace."[27]

"Following our Lord's example, understand your brothers or sisters, with a very big heart that is not shocked by anything, and love them really and truly . . . By being very human you will be able to pass over small defects and always see, with motherly understanding, the good side of things."[28] Even though we

already know it, it will do us good to rediscover the keynote of mercy running through this comparison made by Saint Josemaría:

“Graphically and jokingly I have pointed out the different ways people see the same thing, depending on whether they look at it with or without affection. I said—and forgive me, because it’s very graphic—that when a child has his finger in his nose, visitors say ‘How dirty!’ But his mother says ‘He’s going to be a researcher!’ My daughters and sons, you understand me: we have to forgive. Don’t be put off by unimportant spiritual or material details. Look at your brothers or sisters with love and you will come to the charitable conclusion that we are all researchers!”[29]

People can appear very different to us, depending on whether we look at them “with or without affection.” Mercy is not just a praiseworthy

attitude of our hearts; Saint Josemaria shows us that it is a necessary condition if we are to get to know others without the distortions introduced by our self-love. Looking at people mercifully does not mean becoming sentimental, but seeing them as God sees them. Then we see them as they really are: men and women with virtues that we admire, but also with defects that probably make them suffer, even if they don't show it, and that call for our understanding and help. Without mercy, on the other hand, our view is deprived of breadth and depth, and we diminish others. Looking at them affectionately, with love, enables us to know them better and so also to love them better. "The human heart is endowed with an enormous coefficient of expansion. When it loves, it opens out in a crescendo of affection that overcomes all barriers. If you love our Lord, there will not be

a single creature that does not find a place in your heart.”[30]

Daily forms of forgiveness

Family unity is more than merely living together, just as peace is more than merely the absence of war. In a home or a business, although no major conflicts may be present, subtle walls can sometimes be raised behind which people try to protect themselves from others. These walls can even appear without our really intending them to, because daily life alongside others almost inevitably gives rise to clashes or annoyances. “There may be friction and differences, but that’s quite normal. In a certain sense it even adds flavour to our daily life. These problems are insignificant, time always takes care of them.”[31]

As long as we don’t allow our pride to magnify things disproportionately, with time we will see that something

we thought was very important was in fact not important at all. So, especially in family life, it is important to be vigilant to prevent the appearance of any walls, even very small ones, that separate us from others. If instead of passing over things we find annoying we were to harbor grudges, something that was in itself inoffensive would chill our hearts little by little, spoiling our relationship with the others and the atmosphere at home.

Resentment is a vicious circle that leads us to keep a list of grievances, feeding our own ego by contrast with other people's deficiencies, real or imagined. It is mercy that frees us from this vicious circle. God's Love impels us to seek him in our hearts, pouring out our concerns to him. "From what point do we begin to pardon the small and great wrongs that we suffer each day? First of all, beginning with prayer . . . We begin

with our own heart: with prayer we are able to face the resentment we feel, by entrusting to God's mercy those who have wronged us: 'Lord, I pray to you for him, I pray to you for her.' Then we discover that this inner struggle to forgive cleanses us of evil, and that prayer and love free us from the interior chains of bitterness. It is so awful to live in bitterness! Every day we have the opportunity to practise forgiving, to make a gesture so lofty that it brings man closer to God."[32] Saint Josemaría, for example, in the Mementos of the Mass, used to pray for those who had tried to harm him in any way.[33]

A merciful heart is a heart that is agile, quick to confront daily annoyances with a sporting spirit, not making a drama out of them.[34] We can sometimes find it difficult to forgive others when we are weighed down by tiredness, discouragement

or tension. But it is a good idea to aim to forgive right away (with God's help, which never fails us), and even to forgive in advance, generously, without keeping any account. If we make allowances for people—giving them, so to speak, a margin in which to make mistakes, be thoughtless or get irritable—we won't have to forgive them as though making concessions to them. Rather we will forgive them without giving ourselves importance, with a charity that *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*.^[35]

We may certainly find it hard to get over someone else's behavior, and it may be appropriate to point it out gently to them, at the right time, to help them improve. But whatever the case, we can forgive straight away, even though it hurts. Very often we won't even need to say so in words, so as not to dwell on the episode. Our

warmth and a friendly remark will be enough to smooth things over. When we overcome the temptation to return harm for harm, or coldness for coldness, our Lord fills our souls. Then we can say with the Psalmist, *miserericordia tua super vitas*, your mercy is better than life.^[36] And we can say with Saint Josemaria, who knew that it was our Lord who enlarged his heart, “I haven’t needed to learn how to forgive, because God has taught me how to love.”^[37]

[1] Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, no. 3.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*, no. 10.

[4] *Eph* 3:18.

[5] Cf. *Lk* 15:28-32.

[6] Cf. *Lk* 18:10-14.

[7] Cf. *Mt* 18: 23-35.

[8] *Rev* 2:2-4.

[9] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 739.

[10] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 18.

[11] Pope Francis, homily in Santa Marta, 25 February 2016.

[12] Saint John Paul II, speech, 6 April 1995.

[13] *Lk* 15:7.

[14] Benedict XVI, homily, 18 April 2010. Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmos*, 24 no. 6: “In God we recognise kindness, in other words, the passing on of his blessings to his creatures, because good is diffusive of itself. Mercy, in turn, refers to a special outpouring of his kindness to overcome wretchedness.”

[15] *Rom* 12:8.

[16] Cf. *Jn* 17:21.

[17] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 657.

[18] *Furrow*, no. 58.

[19] *The Forge*, no. 591.

[20] *The Way*, no. 659.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Pope Francis, speech, 6 July 2013.

[23] Cf. for instance *Furrow*, no. 821; *The Forge*, no. 148; *Friends of God*, nos. 125 and 229; and *Christ is Passing By*, no. 36.

[24] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 167.

[25] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 225.

[26] Pope Francis, Message, 6 December 2013.

[27] Pope Francis, speech, 9 November 2013.

[28] Saint Josemaría, Letter, 29 September 1957, no. 35; quoted in E. Burkhart and J. Lopez, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría: estudio de teología espiritual*, Madrid: Rialp 2011, vol. II, pp. 331-332.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *The Way of the Cross*, Eighth Station, no. 5.

[31] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 101.

[32] Pope Francis, Angelus, 26 December 2015.

[33] Cf. Javier Echevarría, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, Madrid: Rialp 2010, pp. 106 and 151.

[34] Cf. *Conversations*, no. 91.

[35] *I Cor* 13:7.

[36] Ps 63[62]: 3.

[37] *Furrow*, no. 804.

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(04/05/2026)