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Meditations: Sunday of the Twenty-Fourth Week of Ordinary Time (Year C)

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the 24th week of Ordinary Time.

- Forgiving is God's joy
 - God has loved us first
 - A Father who comes out to meet us
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THE GOSPEL of Saint Luke is known as the “gospel of mercy”^[1] – especially since it contains three parables in which Jesus graphically describes God’s infinite mercy towards mankind.

The three stories follow a common pattern. At the beginning, a person loses something they consider to be of great value: the shepherd, one of his sheep; the woman, one of her coins; and a father, his young son who voluntarily runs away from home. The three parables also have in common the reaction of the protagonist, who does not stop searching until he manages to recover what he or she so dearly loves. And when they do find it, they experience an overflowing joy. Jesus reveals to us that God is “always full of joy, especially when he forgives.”^[2] “Forgiving is God’s joy, before it is a human joy. God rejoices in welcoming the repentant sinner. He

is the Father of infinite mercy, *dives in misericordia*, and inspires in the human heart the hope of forgiveness and the joy of reconciliation.”^[3] —

In these parables, Jesus reveals to us “the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy.”^[4] — The Church never tires of proclaiming this truth: God loves each of us with an infinite love, because we are his children. It is a proclamation that never ceases to amaze us. Saint Paul VI said: “Our sin or estrangement from God kindles in him a flame of more intense love, a desire to bring us back and make us part again of our salvific plan. God is (and let us say this with tears in our eyes) so good to us. He loves us, he seeks us out, he thinks about us, he knows us, he inspires and encourages us and hopes for our return. He will be happy (we could

say) on the day when we decide to return and tell him: ‘Lord, in your goodness, forgive me.’ We should never tire of realizing that our repentance is God’s joy.”^[5] —

“WE HAVE come to know and to believe in the love God has for us” (1 Jn 4:16). Our entire Christian life is summed up in trusting that God loves us, and in gratefully accepting the compassionate love that is freely offered to us – so often in the form of forgiveness. Although at times our own effort or suffering is more evident to us, in reality God’s love precedes everything. As Saint John writes in one of his letters: “He first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19).

The Second Vatican Council states: “Man would not exist were he not created by God’s love and constantly

preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to the truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his Creator.”^[6]

The initiative, silent and discreet, is always God’s. “We are not the random and senseless product of evolution. Each of us is the fruit of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”^[7] His love creates us, and enables us to love with his own love.

“God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16): this is the heart of Christ’s revelation. And this love renews our relationships with others. When we love truly, as God loves, we love simply for the sake of loving, without seeking anything in return. St. Bernard expressed it with these words: “Love is sufficient in itself; it pleases by itself and for its own sake. It is its own merit and its own reward. Love excludes every other

motive and every fruit other than itself. Its fruit is its experience. I love because I love; I love in order to love.”^[8]
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GOD IS MUCH MORE than a kind-hearted father who forgives a sinner when he returns home. God is a father who, moved by a personal and gratuitous love, seeks those who are lost until he finds them, as happens with the sheep and the lost drachma. The father of the prodigal son doesn't just wait quietly at home, but runs out to meet him and covers him with kisses. God goes out in search of us; his mercy is much stronger than our weakness. Therefore the entire revelation in Sacred Scripture is, in some way, the story of a God who wants to convince us of his love. When we know we are loved in this unconditional way, that conviction

becomes a source of joy and happiness; it is a springboard that spurs us to transform our daily life into opportunities to love God and those around us in return. “*Amati, amamus,*” as Saint Bernard said: because we are loved we love in return.

But God does not impose his merciful love on us. Love is always a gift that is offered and that can only be accepted freely. Thus love is, at the same time, both the strongest and the weakest force. The prodigal son must freely decide to retrace the path that had taken him away from his father’s house and accept his father’s embrace. “The mercy that God shows us should spur us to always return to him. My children,” Saint Josemaría said, “it is better not to leave his side, not to abandon him; but if at any time, due to human weakness, you do leave, go running back. He always receives us, like the father of the

prodigal son, with a more intense love.”^[9] We ask Mary, Mother of Mercy, that she never tire of turning her merciful eyes towards us, so that she may help us to return again and again to our Father God.

^[1] St. John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*, no. 3.

^[2] Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, no. 9.

^[3] Saint John Paul II, Homily, 16 September 2001.

^[4] Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, no. 9.

^[5] Saint Paul VI, Homily 23 June 1968.

^[6] *Gaudium et spes*, no. 19.

^[7] Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 April 2005.

^[8] St. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Sermon 83.

^[9] St. Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, 27 March 1972.

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