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Restore to Me the Joy of Your Salvation

An article on mercy and conversion, written for the Jubilee of Mercy in the Church. "The realization of the harm done by his sin – against God, others, and himself – leads David to seek refuge and healing in God."

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Miserere mei, Deus, secundum misericordiam tuam – Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love.^[1] For over three thousand

years the psalm *Miserere* has nourished the prayer of each generation of the People of God. It is recited every Friday in the Lauds, or Morning Prayer, of the Liturgy of the Hours. As Saint Josemaria did, his successors pray it every night prostrate on the floor,^[2] expressing bodily the meaning of the words of this “*Magnificat* of mercy,” as the Pope recently called it. “It is the *Magnificat* of ‘a humble and contrite heart’ capable of confessing its sin before the God who, in his fidelity, is greater than any of our sins.”^[3]

The psalm *Miserere* immerses us in “a profound meditation on guilt and grace.”^[4] Jewish tradition puts these words on the lips of David, after the prophet Nathan reproached him, at God’s bidding, for his adultery with Bathsheba and the death of Uriah.^[5] The prophet did not directly accuse David of his wrong-doing; he presented a parable^[6] in which

David recognized his sin. *Peccavi Domino – I have sinned against the Lord.*^[7] The *miserere*, the plea for mercy that springs from David's heart, also expresses his interior desolation and his awareness of the suffering he has caused. The realization of the harm done by his sin – against God, others, and himself – leads him to seek refuge and healing in God, the only one who can put things right. *By this we shall ... reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*^[8]

For they know not what they do

Sin can at first seem attractive because of the liberation it promises: freedom from God so that we can truly be ourselves. But this apparent liberation is a false mirage that soon turns into a heavy burden. The strong, autonomous man, who tries

to silence his conscience, sooner or later reaches a dead end. “He has had enough of the usual explanations. The lies of the false prophets no longer satisfy.”[9] This is the beginning of conversion, or of one of the “continuous conversions in our life that are even more important, and increasingly demanding.”[10]

The process of conversion is not always as quick as King David’s. The blindness that precedes and accompanies sin, and that grows with each sin, can be prolonged. We can easily deceive ourselves by justifying our actions; we tell ourselves that the matter is not all that important... We can also encounter this attitude around us, “in a world which all too often is merciless to the sinner and lenient with the sin.”[11] Merciless to the sinner, because the great harm done by sin is evident in the person’s

behavior; but lenient with the sin, because to recognize the sin would mean losing certain “freedoms.” We are all exposed to this risk. We see the ugliness of sin in others, but we do not condemn our own sins. Not only do we then lack mercy, but we render ourselves incapable of receiving it.

The darkness of sin and lukewarmness contains a certain element of self-deception, a deliberate blindness. We want *not to see*, and act as if we cannot see. This is what needs God’s forgiveness. Jesus sees sin like that when he says from the Cross: *Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*^[12] We would fail to grasp the depth of Christ’s words *forgive them*, if we were to view them as merely a benevolent covering-over of sin. When we separate ourselves from God we both “know” and “do not know” what we are doing. We realize

that we are doing wrong, but we forget that by doing it we will not achieve anything. Our Lord takes pity on both things, and also on the deep sadness produced in our soul. Saint Peter both knew and did not know what he was doing when he denied his Friend. Afterwards *he wept bitterly*,^[13] and his tears purified his vision and enabled him to see more clearly.

“Christ’s mercy is not a grace that comes cheap, nor does it imply the trivialization of evil. Christ carries the full weight of evil and all its destructive force in his body and in his soul. He burns and transforms evil in suffering, in the fire of his suffering love.”^[14] His words of forgiveness from the Cross, *they know not what they do*, reveal to us the aim of his merciful plans: that we return to the Father’s house. Therefore also from the Cross he

entrusts us to the protection of his Mother.

Nostalgia for the Father's house

“Human life is in some way a constant returning to our Father’s house.”[15] The first conversion, and successive ones, all stem from the realization that in some sense we are homeless. The prodigal son “longs for the fresh baked bread that the servants in his house, his father’s house, eat for breakfast.

Homesickness, nostalgia, is a powerful emotion. Like mercy, it expands the soul. It makes us think back to our first experience of goodness – the homeland from which we went forth – and it awakens in us the hope of returning there. Against this vast horizon of nostalgia, the young man – as the Gospel tells us – came to his senses and realized that he was miserable. Each one of us can come to, or be led to, the point of

feeling greater misery. Each one of us has his or her hidden misery; we need to beg for the grace to find it.”[16]

Being away from his father’s house, the prodigal son realizes, is in reality being away from his own home. And he comes to see once again that the place he thought was an obstacle for his full personal development is actually the home he should never have abandoned. But those living in the father’s house, too, may not have their hearts there. Such is the case with the older brother in the parable. He never left home, but his heart was elsewhere. The words of the prophet Isaiah, used by Jesus in his preaching, hold true for this son: *This people ... honor me with their lips while their hearts are far from me.* [17]

The older brother “never says ‘father,’ never says ‘brother,’ and

thinks only about himself. He boasts of having always remained at his father's side and of serving him; yet he never lived this closeness with joy. And now he accuses the father of never having given him so much as a kid to feast on. The poor father! One son went away, and the other was never close to him! The suffering of the father is like the suffering of God, the suffering of Jesus when we distance ourselves from him, either because we go far away or because we are nearby without being close.”[18] Sometimes in our own lives, although perhaps we do not distance ourselves from the father as the younger son did, we will realize more clearly that in some way we are like the older son. God gives us more light to see that he wants us to draw closer to his heart, through a new conversion.

In the Gospel scene narrating the conversation between the older son

and his father, we see not only the tenderness of the father but also the hard-heartedness of this son.[19] His harsh response shows that he had lost the joy that should have come from being in his father's house. And hence he had lost the ability to rejoice with his father and brother. All he could do was complain about his brother's failings. "Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others ... God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too."[20]

The father is taken aback and tries to soften the heart of his elder son. Although that son has stayed at home, he envies, perhaps without realizing it, the reckless selfishness of his younger brother. His is a more "reasonable," more subtle, and perhaps more dangerous selfishness.

His father insists: *It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.*[21] With the fortitude of a father and the tenderness of a mother, he chides him: My son, you should rejoice. What's going on in your heart? "The elder son needs mercy too."[22] He too needs to feel nostalgia for the Father's house, the gentle sorrow that leads us to return home.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation

Tibi, tibi soli peccavi et malum coram te feci – Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight.[23] The Holy Spirit, who "will convince the world concerning sin,"[24] helps us see that this nostalgia, this yearning, is not just an interior unrest. Rather, it stems from a wounded relationship. We have distanced ourselves from God and

left him alone, and we have *left ourselves alone*. Saint Augustine writes, “*in multa defluximus*”[25]: when we separate ourselves from God, our life is dispersed among many polluted streams and our house is forsaken and desolate.[26] The Holy Spirit’s prompting urges us to return to God, who alone can forgive sins.[27] As he moved over the waters at the beginning of creation,[28] he now moves over souls. He moves the sinful woman to draw close to Jesus, without words; and God’s mercy welcomes her, while the guests at the meal fail to understand the reason for her tears, the perfume, the anointing of his feet.[29] Jesus’ heart is moved, and he says she has been forgiven much because she has loved much.[30]

The longing for the Father’s house is a longing for God’s nearness, for divine mercy, for our heart to beat “in a way that is both human and

divine, with a love that is strong, self-sacrificing and generous.”[31] If we return, like the younger son, to the Father’s embrace, we will realize that the best medicine to cure our wounds is our Father God. And then a “third son” comes on the scene: Jesus, who washes the feet of sinners, Jesus, who has become a servant for us. “It is the one *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Phil 2:6-7)*. This Servant-Son is Jesus! He is the extension of the arms and heart of the Father: he welcomed the prodigal son and washed his dirty feet; he prepared the banquet for the feast of forgiveness.”[32]

Cor mundum crea in me, Deus – Create in me a clean heart, O God.[33]

Psalm 51 speaks again and again about cleansing our heart.[34] It is not a question of obsessive self-

regard or scruples, because “a Christian is not a neurotic collector of good behavior reports.”[35] Rather, it is a question of love. The repentant sinner is ready to do whatever is needed to get his heart cured, to regain the joy of living with God. *Redde mihi laetitiam salutaris tui – Restore to me the joy of your salvation.*[36] When we look at things in this light, confession is not something cold and routine, a merely bureaucratic process. “It would be good for us to ask ourselves: after going to confession, do I rejoice? Or do I move on immediately to the next thing, as we would after going to the doctor, when we hear that the test results are not so bad and put them back in their envelope?”[37]

A person who rejoices appreciates the gift received, and is thankful for being forgiven. And then penance is seen as something much more than just a dry process to reestablish

justice. Penance is a demand of the heart that feels the need to back up its words “I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned,” with deeds. Therefore Saint Josemaría advised everyone to have a “spirit of penance.”[38] *A broken and contrite heart*[39] understands the need to undertake the path of returning to God, of being reconciled with him, which does not always happen in a single day. Since it is love that has to be restored in order to acquire new maturity, love itself is the remedy: “love is repaid with love.”[40] Penance, then, is the love that leads us to accept suffering – joyfully, without giving ourselves too much importance, “without doing strange things”[41] – in reparation for all that we have caused God and others to suffer.

This is the meaning behind the words the priest says in the Rite of Penance when dismissing the penitent: “May the Passion of our

Lord Jesus Christ ... whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life.”[42] Besides, “how little a life is for making atonement!”[43] Our entire life then becomes joyful contrition, confident suffering, without anguish or scruples, because *Cor contritum et humiliatum, Deus, non despicias – a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.* [44]

[1] *Ps* 51(50), 1.

[2] Cf. Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, volume III, Scepter, New York 2005, p. 266.

[3] Pope Francis, first meditation at Jubilee for priests, June 2, 2016.

[4] Saint John Paul II, General Audience, October 24, 2001.

[5] Cf. *2 Sam* 11:2ff.

[6] Cf. *2 Sam* 12:2-4.

[7] *2 Sam* 12:13.

[8] *1 Jn* 3:19-20.

[9] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 260.

[10] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 57.

[11] Pope Francis, homily, December 24, 2015.

[12] *Lk* 23:34.

[13] *Mt* 26:75.

[14] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Homily, *Missa pro eligendo pontifice*, April 18, 2005.

[15] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64

[16] Pope Francis, first meditation at Jubilee for priests, June 2, 2016.

[17] *Is* 29:13; cf. *Mt* 15:8.

[18] Pope Francis, General Audience, May 11, 2016.

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

[20] Pope Francis, Apost Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 2.

[21] *Lk* 15:32.

[22] Pope Francis, General Audience, May 11, 2016.

[23] *Ps* 51(50):4.

[24] Cf. *Jn* 16:8. This is Saint John Paul II's translation of these words from Jesus' priestly prayer, which he meditated on deeply in his encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* (May 18, 1986), 27-48.

- [25] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 29, 40.
- [26] Cf. *Mt* 23:38.
- [27] Cf. *Lk* 7:48.
- [28] Cf. *Gen* 1:2.
- [29] Cf. *Lk* 7:36-50.
- [30] Cf. *Lk* 7:47.
- [31] *Friends of God*, no. 232.
- [32] Pope Francis, Angelus, March 6, 2016.
- [33] *Ps* 51(50):10.
- [34] Cf. *Ps* 51 (50), 2, 7, 9, 10, 17.
- [35] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 75.
- [36] *Ps* 51 (50):12.
- [37] Pope Francis, homily, March 24, 2016.

[38] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 784. In *Friends of God*, nos. 138-140, our Father explains the true meaning of the spirit of penance and illustrates it with various examples.

[39] *Ps 51(50):17*.

[40] *The Forge*, no. 442.

[41] *The Forge*, no. 60.

[42] Rite of Penance, 104.

[43] Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, 8th station.

[44] *Ps 51(50):17*.