Divine Mercy Sunday

There is a timeless quality to the Word of God. Although written thousands of years ago, The Word of God speaks to every generation. And when we need it most, we are most aware of how true this is.

In the Acts of the Apostles, they shared and divided things among all according to each one’s need (Acts 2:45). Our Native communities have always been models for sharing with a special emphasis to help elders. Although there have been shortages in some stores of various necessities because people have responded in fear, there has also been a more generous spirit of neighbor helping neighbor. Those who are usually at odds with each other, have found common ground and looked for ways to work together. The world is not perfect, but there is a sense that we are all interconnected and what one person does affects others. The more selfish one is, the greater the harm to the common good. However, where generosity prevails, the tide rises for all. Something as simple as the information shared by communities who have been hardest hit by the virus, has enabled Alaskans and many other communities to better prepare to protect life.

In the early days of the church, there were not yet church buildings as we know them today. People initially gathered in homes to break bread and to pray and worship together. The home church is especially important today to help the family to grow together spiritually.

John Paul II spoke of the Domestic Church in his teachings:

All members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of building, day by day, the communion of persons, making the family “a school of deeper humanity”: this happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows…

Family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation. There is no family that does not know how selfishness, discord, tension and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion: hence there arise the many and varied forms of division in family life. But, at the same time, every family is called by the God of peace to have the joyous and renewing experience of “reconciliation,” that is, communion reestablished, unity restored. (Familiaris Consortio 21)

Last week, I went to anoint a person in danger of death. The person did not have the virus but they had an equally serious medical issue. Despite the suffering caused by the illness, it was quite evident that the burden was lighter because the person was surrounded by love. Family members cared for the individual with great tenderness. Indeed, the family was “a school of deeper humanity” (Gaudium et Spes 52).

In our 2nd reading from the 1st Letter of Peter, the Good Shepherd to whom the Lord entrusted the care of the church, addresses Christian communities under great stress. It is a time of persecution and Peter wants everyone to stick together. Peter appeals to Christ’s resurrection as a source of hope. Through our baptism, we die to sin and rise to new life in Christ. This new birth is a sign of an imperishable inheritance. Our lives, especially amidst this pandemic, are filled with many trials. But like gold that is tested in fire, the struggles we encounter can help us to grow stronger in our faith. And with a stronger faith, we are able to give greater praise, glory and honor to God. Many have shared how they are taking more time for prayer and paying closer attention to Mass. God is with us in these perilous times and our faith is growing stronger.

In the Gospel of John, we see the Apostles isolated from the community. Amidst travel bans, social distancing, and the elimination of non-essential travel, we can relate to them staying in one place. The Apostles are afraid and they have come together to seek safety away from everyone else. Jesus meets them where they are at. He offers them peace, to dispel their fear. His words “Peace be with you” … remind us of other times when Jesus calmed them and helped them understand. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (Jn 14:27).
To strengthen them and give them courage, he asks them to receive the Holy Spirit. The breath of Jesus confers this gift. Jesus also offers the sacramental gift of forgiving sins through the ministry of the church. In the sacrament of Reconciliation, we share in Christ’s peace through the confession of our sins.

Today we celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday. Psalm 118 reminds us that “God’s mercy endures forever” (vs. 2, 3, 4). Peter teaches us that we can rise from the death of our own sins by the mercy of God (1 Pt 1:3). In the Gospel, Thomas is missing from the original encounter and so Jesus reappears a week later and challenges him to put his finger in the wounds of Jesus. Thomas sees and believes. With nearly 2,300,000 people infected, we do not need to place our fingers in open wounds to believe. But we might raise the question: How can I participate in the complete renewal of baptismal grace promised by Jesus for Divine Mercy Sunday especially if I am not able to receive Holy communion and cannot go to Confession?

First, let us listen to words of Jesus to begin to dispel our fears. Jesus tells St. Faustina: I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners. On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the Fount of My Mercy. The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment. On that day all the divine floodgates through which graces flow are opened. Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet (699).

In the circumstances we face today with closed churches, there is still a way to receive this special grace for Divine Mercy Sunday.

We begin with sorrow for our sins. When God’s mercy through the sacrament of confession is not available, we are called to repent and make an “act of perfect contrition.” This is sorrow for one’s sins based upon love for God, which includes the firm resolution not to commit them anymore. When circumstances allow later on, then we are obliged to go to confession. (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1451-1452).

When we are unable to physically receive Holy Communion, we are invited to make an act of Spiritual Communion:

My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Blessed Sacrament.
I love You above all things and I desire You in my soul.
Since I cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart.
As though You were already there, I embrace You and unite myself to You;
permit not that I should ever be separated from You. Amen.

Source: thedivinemercy.org/articles/what-do-divine-mercy-sunday; Diary of Saint Faustina