

Mary, Who Is Merciful, Helps Us Be Merciful

Not only must we ask God for mercy, but we, in turn, must be merciful to others. There was a rather famous story that circulated years ago about a big sign at the entrance of the property of a motherhouse of sisters. The sign read, “Private Property. Absolutely no trespassing. Violators will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.” And it was signed “The Sisters of Mercy”! Sometimes we contradict ourselves in ways that can appear quite obvious to others.

In all seriousness, how can we as individuals be merciful? To be merciful to someone, we must be able to feel compassion for them. Compassion comes from two Latin words: *passi*, which means “to suffer, to endure,” and *com*, which means “with.” Compassion means to endure with, to feel what another person is experiencing, especially that person’s pain, sorrow, or need. Mary is able to be such a perfect advocate for us because she feels compassion for our daily needs. The perfect mother, she can sense the needs of her children. And she gives us an example that we can follow to show mercy to others.

MARY RESPONDS WITH COMPASSION TO OUR NEEDS

Our Lady showed compassion in her life and teaches us to do the same. She went to assist her aged cousin, Elizabeth, who was already in her sixth month of pregnancy, because she knew that Elizabeth would need help. She didn't hesitate. Rather, she went "in haste" (Luke 1:39, NAB) and remained for three months, which indicates the depth of her compassionate love.

Mary showed compassion again at the wedding feast of Cana, when she noticed the need of the young bride and groom and then turned to her Son and said, "They have no more wine" (see John 2:3). These words may have sounded like a simple statement of fact, but they were really a special request. Maybe, as a good mother, she was just concerned about the needs of that young couple. I don't think they went to Mary and said, "Look, can you do something about this problem?" They didn't know the power of her Son, but she did. I'm not sure they even knew that they had a problem. In ancient times, wedding feasts went on for about a week, with family and friends dancing and singing and eating and drinking. They were having a good time. So it was more likely Mary who noticed their need. And when she saw that need, what did she do? She simply presented it with great confidence to Jesus: "They have no more wine."

Our Lady's incredible compassion makes her especially concerned for the needs of people who are poor, distressed, or suffering. Our Lady wants everyone to know that she understands

their needs and that they can bring their troubles to her. This was the beautiful message of Our Lady of Guadalupe when she appeared to St. Juan Diego, the Indian who was to take her message to Bishop Zumaraga, the bishop of Mexico City. Mary told him that she wanted a shrine built in her honor. "I want a place where my people can come and tell me their needs and their concerns," she said to Juan Diego. "I am truly your merciful mother; yours and all the people . . . who love me, those who seek me, those who trust in me."¹³ The poor especially have responded to the beautiful compassion of Mary at Guadalupe, coming to her and asking for her help.

If Mary is compassionate to the poor, she is even more compassionate to those who suffer. Remember: Our Lady of Mercy is also Our Lady of Sorrows. The sword of sorrow pierced her heart, not once, but seven times. It began with the message given to her by an old man named Simeon, when she and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the Temple to be presented before the Lord. Simeon blessed the Holy Family and then said to Mary, "A sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35). In that prophetic message, Mary received the first piercing.

The second sorrow was when the cruel King Herod tried to kill her infant Son. With Joseph, Mary had to flee with the Christ Child to save his life. She was in exile in Egypt, displaced from her land as a refugee, like so many today who are forced to flee their homes due to war or persecution. This particular sorrow came to her because the world would not receive her Son.

Pope John Paul II and the
Mystery of Mercy

Mary, then, is the one who has the deepest knowledge of the mystery of God's mercy. She knows its price, she knows how great it is. In this sense, we call her the Mother of mercy: Our Lady of mercy, or Mother of divine mercy. . . .

This revelation [of merciful love] . . . is especially fruitful because in the Mother of God it is based upon the unique tact of her maternal heart, on her particular sensitivity, on her particular fitness to reach all those who most easily accept the merciful love of a mother. This is one of the great life-giving mysteries of Christianity, a mystery intimately connected with the mystery of the Incarnation.

—*Dives in misericordia*, 9

Mary experienced another sorrow when she lost the twelve-year-old Jesus in Jerusalem for three days. Remember what she said to Jesus when she and Joseph found him in the Temple? “Son, why have you treated us like this? Did you not know that your father and I would be searching for you in great sorrow?” (see Luke 2:48). No doubt Mary's sorrow during those three days foreshadowed her sorrow when Jesus would die the terrible death of the cross and be entombed for three days.

Mary experienced the last four of her seven sor-

rows on Good Friday. The fourth sorrow occurred when she met Jesus on the way of the cross. Who can describe the anguish there must have been in their two hearts at that moment? Then came the fifth sword of sorrow: standing below the cross and seeing Jesus dying in such utter pain and degradation. Imagine a mother

seeing her own child suffer such extreme torture but feeling no bitterness, no hatred, no revenge toward those who were taking his life. Mary accepted the death of her Son as Jesus himself had accepted it—as the will of the Father for the salvation of the world! She accepted it because she loved you and me with Christ, her Son. For this she is called the Mother of Sorrows.

The sixth of Mary's sorrows came when Jesus was taken down from the cross and placed in her arms, a scene beautifully rendered in the *Pietà* by Michelangelo. And finally, Mary experienced her seventh sorrow when Jesus' body was placed in the tomb.

These sorrows are a reminder that Mary, the Mother of Mercy, was not spared sorrow in her own life. She knows how to be compassionate to her children. She is with us, especially in our sorrows. Don't we sometimes think that when we are experiencing sorrow, that is when she is furthest away? But those are exactly the times when she is actually closest to us, because she knows what we are going through. We should never doubt her compassion and powerful intercession in our time of need.

No doubt Mary is now constantly before her Son in heaven, taking to him all the needs of her children on earth. Even in the splendor of heaven's glory, she has not forgotten or abandoned her children in this "valley of tears" (from the *Salve Regina*). Her words to St. Juan Diego in her final apparition to him on December 12, 1531, sum up her sentiments perfectly: "Listen, put it into your heart, my youngest and dearest son, . . . do not let your heart be disturbed. Do not fear this . . . sickness, nor

anything that is sharp or hurtful. Am I not here, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything more?"¹⁴

MARY SHOWS US HOW TO BE COMPASSIONATE

So how can we follow Mary's example of compassion? First, we can forgive the injuries done to us. The Lord's Prayer includes the very important petition "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Our trespasses are our sins and our daily shortcomings. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us very clearly, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you . . . ; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:37-38).

We have to make a distinction between the sin and the sinner. We can condemn a sin. Jesus himself told the woman who had been caught in adultery not to commit this sin again, but he did not condemn the sinner. He said to her, "I will not condemn you—go in peace" (see John 8:11). So we can condemn the wrong, but we can't condemn the person who does the wrong, because only God knows each person's heart—even the heart of the sinner. Let God judge the person. If we do not condemn the person (though we may have to condemn his actions), God will not condemn us. God will be as merciful to us as we are merciful to others.

Rather than condemn others, we should help those who are trapped in sin. When the Pharisees looked at people who didn't observe the law, they condemned them with a harshness indicating that they couldn't see them as anything but sinners. When Jesus looked at these same people, he saw the potential of great saints. He didn't have a condemning spirit. Rather, with great compassion in his heart, he reached out to sinners, calling them to salvation: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Like Jesus, we must help those who are trapped in sin. We can encourage them to live good lives by our good example. Sometimes that's all it takes! Seeing someone act with kindness can motivate another person to imitate that kindness and do good deeds to others. Encourage people to get back to church, to the sacraments. If they seem nervous, afraid, or fainthearted, encourage them. If they are doubtful or don't know their faith, instruct them. Give them a few pointers on what to do, and above all, pray for them.

MARY REMINDS US TO PRAY
FOR THE CONVERSION OF SINNERS

Our Lady, who is always praying for sinners, asks us to pray for their conversion too. Since my childhood I've been very dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima. Her message to little Lucia, Francesco, and Jacinta has left its imprint on my life. During one

of her apparitions, the three children were given a vision of hell. It was absolutely frightening! Afterward, Our Lady said with great sadness in her voice, “You have seen hell, where the souls of poor sinners go! To save them, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart.” In another apparition, Our Lady said, “Many souls go to hell because there are none to sacrifice themselves and pray for them.”¹⁵ If you study the apparitions of Our Lady, you’ll see that every one includes a message to pray for sinners.

For whatever his reasons, our Lord has asked for our cooperation with him for the salvation of souls. He needs our prayers, our good works, and our sacrifices so that people who are far from him, who are hardened in sin—even enemies of the Church or people who may hate God and his Blessed Mother—may someday become great saints.

Do you want a perfect example? A man named Saul of Tarsus was in charge of the stoning of the first martyr of the Church, St. Stephen, and yet he became the great apostle St. Paul. St. Augustine said it was the dying words of that martyr that won the grace of conversion for St. Paul. What did St. Stephen pray? “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

How about an example closer to our own time? About a hundred years ago, a twelve-year-old girl, Maria Goretti, resisted the sexual advances of a young man named Alexander Serenelli. When she did so, he stabbed her fourteen times. As she lay dying in the hospital, moments before she received Holy Communion, she

looked up at a crucifix and prayed, “Lord, I forgive Alexander,” and ask God to have mercy on him. Alexander was sentenced to many years in prison. For the first few years, he was very bitter and angry. But then Maria appeared to him in a dream, handing him a bouquet of lilies. In the dream, she told Alexander that she had forgiven him and that she prayed to God that he would be near her in heaven.

Subsequently Alexander had a dramatic conversion. When he was released from prison, a few years early because of his transformation, he went to the home of Maria’s mother and asked for her forgiveness. For several years after that, he lived at a Capuchin monastery in Italy doing penance for his sins.

A third example is found in the life of someone who was very devoted to Our Lady—St. Thérèse of Lisieux. When she was fourteen years old, she started to feel the desire to pray for sinners. At the same time, she heard about a man named Henri Pranzini, who was condemned to death and did not want to see a priest. He would not go to confession, even though he was going to die in just a few days. Thérèse began to pray. She offered little sacrifices to God. She even had Mass offered for Pranzini’s conversion. She was confident that the Lord would convert him, and she prayed that God would give her some sign for her “own simple consolation.”

The day after the execution, she read in a newspaper that the condemned man had resisted almost to the very end but, at the last moment, he grabbed the priest’s crucifix and kissed it three times. St. Thérèse took that as a sign that Pranzini had been given

the grace of conversion at the last moment and that God had heard her prayers and accepted her sacrifices. “I had obtained the ‘sign’ I had requested,” she wrote, “and this sign was a perfect replica of the grace Jesus had given me when he attracted me to pray for sinners.”¹⁶

Our Lady always reminds us to pray that the grace of conversion might be given to all so that no one will be lost. At Fatima she said that if enough people heeded her message of prayer, penance, and faithful Christian living, then many souls would be saved, atheistic Russia would be converted, and an era of peace would be given to the world. It was the Mother of Mercy who came to remind us so powerfully of this need to pray for God’s mercy on sinners.

So let us always pray for the conversion of sinners, remembering the plural “us” in the words we offer daily to Our Lady: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for *us* sinners now and at the hour of our death.” God will then open the floodgates of his mercy to all of us through the hands of the Mother of Mercy.