

[Readings: Acts 4:32-35; Ps. 118; I John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31]

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a public service announcement commercial playing on the family TV set when I was a high school student back in the early 1970's. By the way, my high school graduation was 46 years ago! And the people of God said, "OY!" On the screen was a high school senior female, looking right into the camera and speaking to her parents. She said, "I hated it when you told me on school day mornings to go back upstairs and change my clothes into something more respectful and appropriate.

"I hated it when you said I had a curfew of 11 PM when my class mates could stay out all night. I hated it when you told me to respect my body and not let boys use me as a plaything. I hated it when you had to check out my friends to see if they met with your approval. I hated it when you checked me for drugs. I hated it when you made me go to church every week." At the end of the commercial, she simply says, "Thank you." She learned that respect for authority comes with authentic parenting.

St. John tells us in today's Second Reading: "We love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments... And his commandments are not burdensome." The young lady in the commercial came to the awareness that rules and regulations are not meant to enslave but to free. When you know what is right and what is wrong; when you know the boundaries that should not be crossed over; when you start your relationships with respect for yourself and others, you are truly free.

It is the one who has no boundaries, who respects no truths, who is a slave to what Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI called "the slavery of relativism." Relativism says: you have your truth and I have mine. There are no absolute truths, only your own truth. Do your own thing. What this way of living does NOT tell you is that the consequences of this way of thinking and living leads to what we have now in the world: moral confusion, religious indifference, rampant sin and despairing chaos.

Our First Reading describes a newly-born, newly-founded Church that is seemingly without any problems at all. Let's all go back in time and live in the early Church! What a delightful community that was: the apostles as teachers, continual fervent prayer, and the meaningful breaking of bread. Awe came upon everyone, we are told; signs and wonders were commonplace.

No one had more than they needed, and no one had less. Praise leapt from every sincere heart. And the community multiplied like hot cakes, as more people wanted whatever it is those folks were having.

It would be ecstatic to live in such a place and time – except for one thing. It's an ideal community, which means you and I are ill suited for it. In fact, most people were. From what we can tell from the letters of Paul, which were written to “real” communities, the early Church had tons of conflicts and arguments, power plays, and sinners causing trouble. In fact, the “real” communities Paul dealt with don't resemble Luke's “ideal” community much at all. Paul's communities sound more like the Church we know and love and occasionally suffer today. So I suspect we're stuck with it.

Shortly after recovering from my heart attack in June of 2010, I met up with Archbishop Allen Vigneron at a gathering at the seminary. I informed him that my cardiologist said that I needed to be transferred to a parish that was stress-free. He didn't miss a beat when he told me, “Nick I have the perfect parish for you. There is only one problem. There are no people in it!”

Lots of people disagree about how stuck we are; you are welcome to join them. They are mostly known as Protestants, who left the imperfect Church we know in order to found a better one, which they are convinced is possible. It has to be possible because Luke says so. History relates that the perfect congregations of the Reformation were later abandoned by some who found them inadequate and started their own, and so on through several thousand branches so far. In our country alone, there are over 30,000 different Christian denominations. The perfect Church, it seems, may not be a matter of the right pastor, the right doctrine, the right ritual, or the right interpretation. Unless you get perfect people to join it, I suspect, sooner or later, the institution ends up looking suspiciously like Paul's communities instead of Luke's.

So where do we go looking for the Church, the real Church, and nothing but the Church? Ask Jesus. After the Resurrection, He had one place to go, and that was back to the disciples. These were the people who denied and betrayed and abandoned Him not so long ago. These were the people who never fully understood what He said or did, no matter how simple it was.

These were the folks with no special talents or skills, short on theological brains, long on personal insecurities. Jesus came back to those old sinners and said, “Peace

be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” Was He kidding? Jesus sent the apostles out to be apostles, the ones sent. He sent sinners out to forgive sins. He sent doubters out to spread the faith. Either Jesus didn’t have other options, or he did it deliberately. Or both. And He does the same with us.

The story of Thomas is standard during the Easter season, the time dedicated to remembering the early Church. We kick off the post-Resurrection narrative with Thomas because he’s the “twin.” Whose twin? Ours, most likely.

Thomas is like us, ready to believe, but only if you pull out all the stops and give him a dramatic example of why he should. If he can touch Jesus with his bare hands, he’ll show you all the faith you want!

And when Jesus takes him up on the dare, Thomas is all proclamation: “My Lord and my God!” We call him The Doubter, rather unfairly, because he is also The Proclaimer. It’s just that Thomas requires certain circumstances under which he is prepared to render his faith. The truth is, so do we. So did the ideal early Church, which vacuumed up new members in droves because of what people saw happening all around them. If they hadn’t seen the changes in their neighbors, heard the singing, felt the excitement, no one would have signed up for Baptism. And if you and I didn’t know people whose lives were transformed by the Gospel -- the officially recognized saints, perhaps our own unofficial saints in our own lives: grandparents, parents, siblings or friends most hopefully -- we wouldn’t be here celebrating the Easter mysteries, either.

No one comes to faith in isolation. No one plucks Christianity off the shelf of potential world religions and decides intellectually that it’s right for them. Christianity is an incarnate religion, all about what happens when God gets flesh and blood and dwells in our midst. People come to the Church because they see something they haven’t seen outside of it. We all say “My Lord and my God!” because somewhere, in a place we can touch, the glory of God was concretely proven to us. The Divine Mercy is given to us.

We must ask ourselves: what is new about this message of Divine Mercy? Why did Pope John Paul II insist so much on this aspect of God’s love in our time? Is this not the same devotion as that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus?

Mercy is an important Christian virtue, much different from justice and retribution. While recognizing the real pain of injury and the rationale for the justification of punishment, mercy takes a different approach in redressing the injury. Mercy strives to

radically change the condition and the soul of the perpetrator to resist doing evil, often by revealing love and one's true beauty. If any punishment is enforced, it must be for salvation, not for vengeance or retribution.

This is very messy business in our day and a very complex message... but it is the only way if we wish to go forward and be leaven for the world today; if we truly wish to be salt and light in a culture that has lost the flavor of the Gospel and the light of Christ.

Where hatred and the thirst for revenge dominate, where war brings suffering and death to the innocent, where abuse has destroyed countless innocent lives, the grace of mercy is needed in order to settle human minds and hearts and to bring about healing and peace. Wherever respect for human life and dignity are lacking, there is need of God's merciful love, in whose light we see the inexpressible value of every human being. Mercy is needed to insure that every injustice in the world will come to an end. The message of mercy is that God loves us – all of us – no matter how great our sins. God's mercy is greater than our sins, so that we will call upon Him with trust, receive His mercy, and let it flow through us to others. Essentially, mercy means the understanding of weakness, the capacity to forgive.

Remember the words of Pope St. John Paul II spoke at the concluding mass of World Youth Day at Downsview Park in Toronto on July 28, 2002. These words keep us focused on the importance and necessity of mercy in the Church today.

***“...At difficult moments in the Church's life, the pursuit of holiness becomes even more urgent. And holiness is not a question of age; it is a matter of living in the Holy Spirit...”***

***“...Do not let that hope die! Stake your lives on it! We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son.”***

On this Divine Mercy Sunday, let us take time to be with the devotions given to St. Faustina Kowalska by Jesus Christ Himself. How do you testify to the presence of the risen Christ in your life? How do you love as God wants you to love? How do you spread God's justice, peace and merciful forgiveness to others? Come join us at St. Faustina parish this afternoon. Let us give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His Divine Mercy endures forever! ALLELUIA and AMEN!