

This Sunday is a very rich day, with much to ponder from our readings and our liturgy. Not only is today the final day of the Octave of Easter but it is also Divine Mercy Sunday.

Easter, like Christmas, is not just a single day. The Church dedicates an entire season to both these celebrations. Indeed, we celebrate the Solemnity of Easter for an entire week. The liturgies during the week are similar to the Sunday liturgy in that we sing or recite the Gloria use the same Preface each day. If you pray the Liturgy of the Hours – the antiphons, psalms and canticles for Morning, Evening and Night prayer are taken from Easter Sunday and repeated all week. It's like a week long Easter Sunday. Indeed, that is how we should see the Octave of Easter, as one week long celebration of the Resurrection. The Easter season itself continues for an additional six weeks up to Pentecost and gives us 50 days to rejoice in Jesus' victory over death.

Today, as we conclude the Octave of Easter, we see in our Gospel two events being reported, Jesus' first appearance to the Apostles on Easter Sunday and his subsequent appearance to the Apostles eight days later when Thomas was with them. That is today, the eighth day of Easter.

When Jesus appeared on the evening of his Resurrection, something happens that we might miss because we are all so focused on his Resurrection. But imagine what the Apostles were feeling. Their leader, whom they have been following for three years, had

been arrested by the Romans. In fear they all ran away from him. That same evening, Peter, when recognized as a follower of Jesus, denied knowing him three times. When Jesus was scourged and executed by the Romans, the Apostles were afraid that they would be next. Now, while hiding in a locked room, Jesus comes among them. You can imagine their shame, guilt and fear. They all know that he is God. Would he seek justice for their denial? Would he punish them for their cowardliness? Instead he dispels all their fears with his greeting, *“Peace be with you”*. In his first encounter with them after his Passion he shows his infinite mercy. You can imagine the relief the Apostles felt when their fears were alleviated by Jesus’ greeting. Fear gives way to joy at the realization that he has been raised from the dead.

But the confirmation of Jesus’ Resurrection was not the only thing that happened that evening. We see the beginnings of the Church in that locked room. Jesus said to them, *“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”* Jesus had come to preach the Good News to the nations and now he is commissioning his Apostles to continue that work. This is the mission of the Church, to go out and bring the Good News of Jesus to the entire world. He breathes the Holy Spirit into them and establishes the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Sacrament of Confession. John records here one of the most important statements for the Catholic Church, *“Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained”*.

He is giving his Apostles the power to forgive sins, something only God could do previously. He gives them the commission to spread not only the Good News but to forgive sins as he has forgiven them. The Church was born in that locked room on Easter Sunday evening, when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into his Apostles. We have the opportunity to watch beginnings of the Church as we read the Acts of the Apostles at every Mass for the entire Easter Season.

But what about Thomas, who was unfortunately absent that first Sunday evening. He did not believe the other Apostles' reports that Jesus was indeed alive in the flesh, he needed proof.

I never have a problem identifying with Thomas. If I were one of the disciples at that time, I would have wanted to verify their claims myself. All my life I have been immersed in science and technology. That has given me the heart of a detective, always seeking to understand the how and why. If someone tells me about a problem, I want to examine the situation first hand so I can personally evaluate the evidence and draw my own conclusions. So, I completely understand Thomas' doubt and his need to see and touch the wounds of Jesus before accepting that he was indeed alive in the flesh.

On that eighth day of Easter, today, when Jesus came to the Apostles again, he invites Thomas to verify for himself that this flesh and bones person before him was indeed Jesus risen. When Thomas touches Jesus he makes his confession of faith, "*My Lord and my God!*". Jesus, in his usual manner, makes this a teaching moment.

When Jesus says “*Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed*”, he is talking about you and me.

Although we might wish that we could have been present at Jesus’ Resurrection so we could see, touch and hear him, he gives a blessing, in the form of a beatitude, to all those who still believe without seeing, touching or hearing him in person. We are blessed because we have not seen and yet we believe. Our evidence is based on the testimony of the Apostles, including Thomas. It is not only their testimony that leads to our faith but the promises of Jesus himself to guide this young Church, “*I am with you always, until the end of the age*”.

This Sunday is indeed a profound and rich day, filled with messages of hope. We hear the Good News of the Resurrection, we see mercy poured out on the Apostles, we see the birth of the Church, the gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the blessing for those who have not seen yet believe. But there are even more gifts on this eighth day of Easter.

Today is also Divine Mercy Sunday. The origins of this feast are quite interesting. It was our Lord himself who requested, through St. Faustina a Polish nun, that the eighth day of Easter be designated as Divine Mercy Sunday. It was St. John Paul II, in the year 2000, who established, for the universal Church, the feast of Divine Mercy on this day. It’s unusual that such an honored and venerable solemnity as the Octave Day of Easter share the liturgical calendar

with another major feast. But the fit between these two celebrations is remarkable.

For instance, the Divine Mercy image, commissioned by St. Faustina, shows our Lord coming into the upper room on the evening of his Resurrection, offering his greeting, *“Peace be with you”*. The Gospel for the eighth day of Easter describes this very event. The rays of red and white flowing from his heart symbolize the blood and water that flowed from his pierced side, the same wound into which Thomas put his hand. It is through the Sacrament of Reconciliation established on during the Octave of Easter that Divine Mercy is made accessible to us all.

It’s a perfect fit with today’s liturgy about Jesus’ first appearances to Apostles. The Church didn’t have to change any of the liturgical texts to accommodate Divine Mercy Sunday on this day. She kept things exactly as they always were. For example, the Collect of the Mass for today prays *“that all may grasp and rightly understand in what font they have been washed, by whose Spirit they have been reborn, by whose Blood they have been redeemed”*. St. John Paul II said that Divine Mercy *“is the Easter gift that the Church receives from the risen Christ and offers to humanity”*.

Jesus told St. Faustina *“Humanity will never find peace until it turns with trust to Divine Mercy”*. May we all turn in trust to Divine Mercy in these difficult times.

May God bless and protect us all.