

“Living Our Mission of Love”
Presentation of Fr. William E. Young, Jr.
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“Living Our Mission of Love” is saturated with meaning and depth even when we just consider the words themselves. In the context of the revelation to St. Faustina as love manifested in Divine Mercy, we will spend the time of this reflection meditating on the meaning of the mystery of God and his love for us, what that blesses us with, and obliges us to. We will look primarily at Sacred Scripture, the encyclical of John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia (The Mercy of God)*, and the *Diary* of St. Faustina, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, to feed our reflection.

It is tempting to dive right into the topic, and start lining up ways we can or should be loving, and reflecting on those as ideas, examples, recommendations and exhortations. Don't we all know and agree on what “love” is? Or what a “mission” is? Don't we all assume that we understand the words and have no need of reflection on any more of it? After all, haven't we been living out this mission just fine up to now? Have we? Perhaps. It's not my intention to bring anyone's sincerity into question or point fingers at anyone failing to grasp or live fully the Christian life. We all recognize our constant need for growth, wisdom, repentance and renewal; conversion, in other words. But I think it will serve us to take a breath and not charge into the topic without some examination of the fundamentals of our existence, who we are and to whom we belong. This is the ultimate source of everything else, including our mission, our love and what it means to be living.

What does it mean to be “living” something? In the first place we have to be given life. We do not give it to ourselves. That life which we have been given has profound and varied aspects. In very large categories we may observe that we are complex creatures of body, mind, and spirit with all their marvelous contents such as emotions, mental and psychological make up, etc.

Then, we have a “mission” and that mission is “to live love.” Where does that mission come from? How did it become personally “ours”? And why and how should it be “love”? What does that word really mean? It is not so easy to assume we know what it means because of the environment of the secular society we live in. We have all been influenced by the world around us which is not bashful to tell us that it is all we need, what life means, and what is important and worthy of our time and attention. But as we all know, it collapses in stupefied silence or cynical dismissal when it encounters disinterested, self-sacrificial love, or when it slams into the mystery of death. Then, it turns its back and walks away from the reality of life and the questions it claims to be able to answer.

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. ... Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image and after our own likeness.’ ... God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gn 1:1-2,26,27). “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.

What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (Jn 1:1-5).

We human beings, we sons and daughters of God, are blessed with gifts which come from God, beginning with the gift of life. In the Book of Genesis, God reveals to us that he creates us very deliberately. We are endowed with some share in the attributes or qualities of God. We reflect in our existence and nature his goodness, holiness and love. God doesn't do anything without deliberate intention. He gives us gifts and abilities and attributes for a purpose. They all are intended to serve him, his Kingdom, and others for whom he also has planned an eternal destiny. But we get ahead of our discussion. Let's not hurry on just yet or we will pass over more of the fundamentals on which we have to base our understanding.

There is darkness. The darkness is the enemy of the light, and wants to defeat it, destroy and obliterate it, or at the least, make it its prisoner. We know this darkness as the word is used here in the Scripture is not the darkness of nature, but the darkness of evil and sin. It is a terrible darkness so often disguised as alluring light. It is the darkness of the “god” of death, the destroyer, the liar.

But we also know that God has pity and compassion on his rebellious, fallen and miserable Adam and Eve, and all their descendants, upon you and me. This is the God of life, light, love and saving mercy. Throughout salvation history as traced in Sacred Scripture, we see manifest his power, love and involvement with humanity. Over and over again, God liberates his people and rescues them from their enemies. These are certainly the enemies who wish to annihilate their physical existence, but more these are the enemies of the soul, and the life eternal God wants to give all people.

God would not leave his people without a Redeemer. Like the vineyard owner who leased his vineyard to evil men who would not give him his due at harvest time, and even killed his son, our heavenly Father sends his Son to be the only sacrifice, the only expiation sufficiently worthy to make reparation for the offense against the infinite, All-Good God. With this offering and the triumph over sin and death which it accomplished, life, true life, living becomes possible. But not without it. Not without it.

So, in humility we begin to grasp our utter dependence on God. Without him we would have no life. We are alive, not just in the body, but in the life of God himself only because that living is made possible by the greatest act of love and mercy of all, the Gift of the Son. We can only live love and mercy in the first place because of this. God shows us first what it means to live the mission of love and mercy. Only he *is* love and mercy itself.

St. Paul writes in the Second Letter to the Corinthians about this primal, redemptive act in which divine love was shown and demonstrated. “For you know the gracious act of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that for your sake, he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Cor 8:9).

This is exactly what it says. It should nearly take our breath away when it grasps us. We could be caught up in an unending meditation simply on the words of this one verse. It is a *gracious act*,

an act filled with grace, filled with mercy. Is the act of supreme love and mercy. In this *gracious act* of Jesus is all our hope, the motive for *our* love and mercy.

Let us consider how we have been blessed and could have been blessed *only* through the *gracious act* of Jesus. In the first chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul praises the love of the Father as expressed in his blessing us through his Son. How does he say that we are blessed? The Father blesses us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, with his choice of us in his Son from before the foundation of the world, he destines us for adoption to himself through his Son, through the favor (or grace) of his will. In Christ we have redemption by his blood, forgiveness of our sins. He *lavishes* grace upon us. He grants us his own wisdom and insight. He reveals the mystery of his plans to us. He creates us for his praise. As we render to him what he truly deserves, praise and glory, we are blessed through our praising him! He gives us the foundation of faith, the truth of the Gospel. He seals us with the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out upon us. (Eph 1:3-14).

If any gratitude, any appreciation of this *gracious act* of Jesus exists in us we must conclude that we must offer him *our own gracious act* of love and mercy in return. This is itself an act of our love back to Christ, and to the Father through him. We should ask ourselves, “If God has done this for me, what should be my personal gracious act back to him?” He emptied himself and became poor for our sakes, so that by his poverty we should become rich. Our gracious act in return is emptying ourselves of the poverty of our sins, our pride and selfishness, and putting on Christ who is the new man, so that by his richness in us we can live love and mercy as he intends.

This, then, is “living”. As St. John writes, all depends on the reality that he has loved us and chosen us *first!* The word “first” means and shows that God expects a follow on, a response, an investment of our selves to fulfill our side of the new and everlasting Covenant sealed in the Precious Blood of Jesus; the *gracious act* of our holy Lord.

This choosing is communal, because from it will be formed the Body of Christ, the Church. This is the marriage of the Lamb and his spouse. It is also intensely personal and particular to each one of us, because each of us is known, loved and saved by God individually and specially. All at the same time. God has his plan and part for each of us in the building of his Kingdom. Each of us has a personal mission in that great enterprise which no one else can do, because no one else is us. By his *gracious act*, Jesus has made it possible for us to know the mystery, to believe and to take our place in both the work of the Kingdom and its blessings.

The mission of the Church in God’s plan of salvation is to continue the mission of Jesus to bring all men and women to the truth and the truth to them. The Gospel, the Good News, is not just the written words on the pages of a Bible. The Good News *is* Jesus Christ. How is he to be made known to the world? How will it all be communicated to each person, each situation and environment, each need and hunger? How will it be brought to every corner of the world in flesh and blood reality?

This is how we comprehend the reality of true *living*. It is not living on the terms of society, or even on our own terms. It is living on God’s terms, once we have put the “old man” to death, and

striven to live the “new man” as our own. This is how we understand the mission, and how it becomes *our mission*. This is why we have come to realize that we must respond with *our own gracious act* in return for Christ’s, to obey the new command of *love* that he gives us, the command to “love one another as he has loved us.”

So it is that we come to understand the words “Living Our Mission of Love” and the mission of living our mission of mercy that is essential to it. The whole of the work of God’s love and mercy in our lives is part of our living. Giving in our living is always preceded by and prepared for, by receiving. It is one side of the same coin as giving.

Keeping in mind that our formation, our growth in the Spirit, and our reception of and response to the *gracious act* of Jesus is never complete in this life, we turn our attention to how we go about living our mission of love and mercy.

Of course, the plan of God for us is remarkably unique, because we are unique and individual. But it is also remarkably consistent with others because we are all human, and endowed with the same characteristics. Therefore, we learn from one another, our families, the Church, the saints.

Being made in God’s image and likeness, then being conformed to Christ as new creations in our spiritual rebirth at Baptism, puts us into relationship with God, ourselves and others. We can never live love or mercy in isolation, by ourselves. Love and mercy is always in the context of relationships.

What situations evoke love and mercy? Sacred Scripture shows us Christ with others such as the Samaritan woman at the well who heard the Good News from Jesus’ own lips. There was the encounter of the woman taken in adultery, and the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father. Jesus took pity on the crowds that came to him because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he sat down and taught them at length about the Kingdom of God. Jesus healed and forgave sins, loosed bonds of oppression and cast out demons. He poured out his blood upon the cross in the final act of self sacrifice for love, and told his apostles at the Last Supper, after he washed their feet, to do as he had done in order to be his faithful disciples.

In *Dives in Misericordia*, John Paul reminds us that all good comes from God. In the *gracious act* of Jesus, we see love divine which is unconditional, unreserved, unselfish, flowing from the purest of motives completely without self-interest. Who of us would dare claim that we love this way? Yet that is the standard Christ sets, that we should love as he has loved.

Jesus sets the standard in that his love is never left in the empty realm of mere words or wishes. It is shown in concrete, real life, expressed in real action. John Paul writes that the Church follows Christ who prayed for unity among his people. He reminds us that God’s love is made visible, hearable and touchable in Jesus, and so it must be with us.

We cannot separate love and suffering. We see that in Jesus’ own life and the rejection he endured. St. Faustina made of her suffering an offering to God for the good of souls and their salvation. In Notebook VI, paragraphs 1645-46, St. Faustina writes again of her suffering and willingness to suffer with Christ for the sake of the salvation of souls.

“1645. March 25, 1938. Today, I saw the suffering Lord Jesus. He leaned down toward me and whispered softly, **My daughter, help me to save sinners.** Suddenly, a burning desire to save souls entered my soul. When I recovered my senses, I knew just how I was to help souls, and I prepared myself for greater sufferings.

“1646. Today, [probably March 25, 1938] my suffering increased; in addition, I felt wounds in my hands, feet and side. I endured this with patience. I sensed the hostility of the enemy of souls, but he did not touch me.”

In Notebook V, paragraph 1487, Faustina records the words Jesus spoke to her concerning how indispensable the cross is to salvation: **“...Poor soul, I see that you suffer much and that you do not even have the strength to converse with me. So I will speak to you... Even though your sufferings were very great, do not lose heart, or give in to despondency....”** (Faustina spoke throughout the *Diary* to Christ about her sufferings resulting from the lack of love of others, her spiritual suffering from seeing God offended by sin and the punishment that comes justly to souls as a result of sin, and of her physical suffering from tuberculosis.) **“...True, My child, all that is painful. But there is no way to heaven except the way of the cross. I followed it first. You must learn that it is the shortest and surest way.”**

Of ourselves we can do nothing and our suffering is futile without it being united with that of the sacrifice of Jesus. No one can live life in this world without encountering suffering in our own lives and in those of others. Some of them will be known to us, close to us, and loved greatly by us. Others will be strangers, perhaps completely unknown to us personally. Others may even be our enemy. Jesus died for the salvation of all, without exception. What I would say is arguably the most difficult of all the difficult commandments of the Lord we have from the Gospels of Matthew (Chapter 5), and this from St. Luke, “But to you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.... For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?... But rather, love your enemies and do good to them;...and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (6:28,32,35-36) What wonder of the mystery of Jesus’ sacrifice of love, that his offering is for all, and even the greatest sinners have the greatest right to his mercy! Might we fear that Christ expects the same unconditional and unreserved mercy from us for all, without exception? We should tremble when we contemplate the infinite depth and utter totality of Jesus words, “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn 15:12).

How easy it is for us who are trying to love and please Jesus, to consider and even have desire to participate in his salvific suffering by offering him our own. Yet, how hard it is to actually suffer! What do we do with our suffering? Archbishop Fulton Sheen once remarked that that the greatest tragedy is to waste suffering. He said this because all suffering offered to God is powerful prayer. In the mystery of the passion and death of Jesus which brought the grace of redemption to all, our suffering is transformed and becomes meritorious for ourselves and others. What a great consolation to us and others who bear suffering of the mind, soul and body, to know that Jesus takes it to himself and from it produces the fruit of grace in our lives and those of others.

Sometimes, simply trying to love our neighbor by showing God's love and mercy toward them is itself a great sacrifice. But Jesus exempts not a single one of his disciples from this duty. We draw our own lesson in this from his words to Faustina recorded in Notebook II, paragraph 742, **“My daughter, if I demand through you that people revere My mercy, you should be the first to distinguish yourself by this confidence in My mercy. I demand from you deeds of mercy, which are to arise out of love for Me. You are to show mercy to your neighbors always and everywhere. You must not shrink from this or try to excuse or absolve yourself from it. I am giving you three ways of exercising mercy toward your neighbor: the first—by deed, the second—by word, the third—by prayer. In these three degrees is contained the fullness of mercy and it is an unquestionable proof of love for Me. By this means a soul glorifies and pays reverence to My mercy. The first Sunday after Easter is the Feast of Mercy, but there must also be acts of mercy,...because even the strongest faith is of no avail without works.”**

So, as always we are brought back to the truth that love is in the heart, mind, soul and will of the person. It is known by its fruits and the fruits are products of action. If we desire to live love and mercy and be holy as our Father in heaven is holy, we remember as John Paul II wrote in *Dives in Misericordia* and as we read in the Sacred Scripture, that the Merciful One is not merciful out of any expectation of return. He certainly didn't receive mercy from his persecutors. The paradox of this truth is reflected in Faustina's *Diary*, Notebook II, paragraph 746. She writes, “I have understood that at certain and most difficult moments I shall be alone, deserted by everyone, and that I must face all the storms and fight with all the strength of my soul, even with those from whom I expected to get help.” Who of us would go on in such circumstances? Rather than give in to the temptation to lose courage and hope, and give up (the most understandable human reaction), Faustina recommitted herself to deeper levels of abandonment to God and trust in Jesus, to living her mission.

There is really no understanding of God's love and mercy unless and until we have experienced it, been shown it in real life by others who are striving to live that love and mercy faithfully in their own lives. A fundamental truth, even in the development of the human nature of a child, is that love and the actions of caring and nurturing are essential to every infant and child. In fact, these need to be sustained in adulthood for mental, emotional and spiritual health. The prodigal son only fully realized the truth of love, and we might say how to live love and mercy, only after his father loved him, and lavished his forgiveness and restorative mercy upon him. There is no understanding of the mystery of love and mercy without encountering it and living the mystery, both as a receiver and a giver.

To live our mission of love and mercy we must develop an *attitude* of mercy and love. Our attitude is not automatically or immediately acquired. Essential is the recognition of what is true and required if we are to be authentic Christians, a conversion to that truth which impels us to decide and act on it, especially when it requires acting against our own natural impulses or desires, and a renewal of commitment over and over to be “in the fight”, and not surrender, even in the face of our own weakness and sins. This requires the teaching and example of others, especially the teaching of Christ himself in our Church in which we are given an abundance of aides to love and mercy, especially in our encounters with Jesus in the holy sacraments.

All of the sacraments are given to the Church by the Incarnate Son of God himself who continues to touch this world and his people with his presence and power in both the mystery of his divine nature and the mystery of love in his human nature. For this, he has given us his Church which is essential to carrying out his mission of love and mercy. In the Holy Eucharist, the source of all other sacraments because it is Jesus himself, we have the center and summit of our Faith. In the Sacrament of Penance, we have the gem of mercy *par excellence*. Some of the words of Jesus to Faustina concerning this sacrament are found in Notebook V, paragraph 1448, **“...Tell souls where they are to look for solace; that is in the Tribunal of Mercy [the Sacrament of Reconciliation]. There the greatest miracles take place [and] are incessantly repeated....come with faith to the feet of My representative and to reveal to him one’s misery, and the miracle of Divine Mercy will be fully demonstrated.....”** And further, in Notebook VI, paragraph 1602, **“...when you go to confession, to this fountain of My mercy, the Blood and Water which came forth from my heart always flows down on your soul and ennoble it....When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I myself act in your soul. Here the misery of the soul meets the God of mercy....The torrents of grace inundate humble souls. The proud remain always in poverty and misery, because My grace turns away from them to humble souls.”** What a great living out of our mission of love and mercy when we encourage others to these sacraments, and especially when we, as mothers and fathers lead by example the little flocks entrusted to us to the sacraments of the True Presence of Christ and his Tribunal of Mercy!

This attitude of love and mercy by which we strive to live our lives and all aspects of them, the great and small, has to be both cosmic and particular. That is, it must be concerned with and focused on the great realities of situations far beyond my personal environment, and very particularly in the situations and circumstances which are closest to us. For example, the suffering of people dying in famines and wars far away, and the need of a family member who knows no peace, or is unhealthy, or the kid at school of whom other children make fun and ostracize, should all be our concern in love and mercy. We can live our mission of love and mercy for all in one effective way or another. In the Holy Spirit, there is no place, person or time which is beyond the reach of any of us when we pray and act for the good in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

We also live our mission of love and mercy when we grasp and live our communal and familial life of faith. We and other Christians have been baptized into the Body of Christ. Particularly when it comes to our Catholic brothers and sisters, we have the role Christ gives us to not only draw life from the Church, especially the Sacred Liturgy, but to fulfill God’s plan for our part in building up his Kingdom, and by supporting and sustaining others in the Faith. God does not intend us to be isolated. We cannot be Christian or human without the relationships we have with God, ourselves and each other. It is true that to love is to give, and an essential aspect of our giving must be to share our faith by offering it to others. In us, they must have the encounter with Christ faithfully followed in the life of his disciples and expressed in the actions of faith, hope and love. Living our mission of love and mercy means doing what we can to help others know the truth of Jesus. That is accomplished most effectively and convincingly by the example of a life lived in faithfulness and charity.

Our Church has beautifully and simply stated for us practical and physical or material ways of living our mission of love and mercy. They are insightful statements from the lessons of Sacred Scripture and the wisdom of the ages. They are first “The Spiritual Works of Mercy”: admonish sinners, instruct the uninformed, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, be patient with those in error, forgive offenses, pray for the living and the dead. And they are second “The Corporal Works of Mercy”: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, comfort the imprisoned, visit the sick, bury the dead.

Our Lord has told us that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. This is no accident. He intends it so. He also tells us what a terrible failure it is when that light, his light, is hidden, or that salt loses its power. In such times of our failure or giving up, the encroachment of the darkness increases and seems to triumph. But that is a false triumph, at best a temporary, short lived and illusory triumph. Through God’s presence, power, love and mercy, again and again, the light has victory and the darkness will not overcome it.

The all inclusive, non-exclusionary mission of love and mercy we might also say tends *outward from us* to others in our world, no matter what the relationship we have with them, and *inward toward us*, to our interior and deep life in the Spirit. In answer to the question of which commandment of the Law is the greatest, Jesus responded with one answer that had two parts. The second part is to “love our neighbor as we love ourselves.” (Mt 22:39). “As we love ourselves.” We might do well to reflect upon whether and how we love ourselves, and whether this self-love is conformed to Christ and is a worthy way to love our neighbor who is each and every fellow human being.

Every aspect and dimension of our existence and faith and eternal destination is a free gift of God who is the Author of Life and Love. Every one of those aspects and dimensions are interrelated, interconnected, and mutually dependent. All come from God and have to do with “living,” “our mission” and “love and mercy.” We could go on forever.

But let our late Holy Father, John Paul II, help us close this consideration and reflection as he did each one of his writings and addresses, turning our thoughts, prayers and lives to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and our Mother.

In his book, *John Paul II: The Great Mercy Pope*, Fr. George W. Kosicki, refers to John Paul’s “Victory Strategy” written of by John Paul in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor (The Splendor of Truth)*. Material used here can be found in Fr. Kosicki’s book on pages 111-115. The Pope’s “Victory Strategy” is a good “Love and Mercy Strategy”, too.

According to Fr. Kosicki, John Paul considered this “Victory Strategy” as a strategy for overcoming the greatest moral problems of our times. John Paul attributed the victories referred to to Mary. He entrusted all to Mary, the Mother of God, with complete trust. The motto of his pontificate was two words which expressed that complete dedication and surrender of all to her, *Totus Tuus*. John Paul entrusted and consecrated everything, everyone, the whole Church, the whole world, the whole universe, to Mary. He always encouraged others to entrust and consecrate their own lives and all their concerns and endeavors to her.

Fr. Kosicki writes that John Paul pointed out that "...Mary is Mother of Mercy because she is the mother of her Son, Jesus, who revealed the mercy of the Father....Mary is also Mother of Mercy because Jesus entrusted his Church and all humanity to her. In her perfect docility to the Holy Spirit, she 'obtains for us Divine Mercy.'...Mary is the model of the moral life, John Paul continues. 'She lived and exercised her freedom precisely by giving herself to God ... and entered fully into the plan of God ...who gave Himself to the world.'...Mary is compassionate and loves sinful man as a mother. She is on the side of truth and shares the burden of the Church in calling all to the demands of morality and to the power of the Cross."

"(At Fatima, in 1982,) John Paul described consecration of the world as returning to the Cross of Christ...to the source of all mercy."

At the end of *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul writes, "No human sin can erase the mercy of God, or prevent Him from unleashing all His triumphant power, if we only call upon Him. Indeed, sin itself makes even more radiant the love of the Father who, in order to ransom a slave, sacrificed His Son."

"Living Our Mission of Love and Mercy" is as deep, powerful, unlimited and mysterious as our whole life in Christ and with one another. It begins with our creation and re-creation in Baptism. It continues all along each moment and relationship in life, and ends...where? Or, *does* it end?

Fr. Kosicki closes his brief treatment of John Paul II's "Victory Strategy" with the Pope's prayer to Mary, who is Mother of Victory. It is fitting for us to close our brief reflection with the same prayer to Mary, Mother of God, Mother of Mercy:

O Mary,
Mother of Mercy,
watch over all people,
that the Cross of Christ
may not be emptied of its power,
that man may not stray
from the path of good
or become blind to sin,
but may put his hope ever more fully in God
who is "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4).
May he carry out the good works
prepared by God beforehand (cf Eph 2:10)
and so live completely
"for the praise of His glory" (Eph 1:2).

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