

The Octave of Easter

The Second Sunday of Easter was already a solemnity as the Octave Day of Easter; nevertheless, the title “Divine Mercy Sunday” does highlight and amplify the meaning of the day. In this way, it recovers an ancient liturgical tradition, reflected in a teaching attributed to St. Augustine about the Easter Octave, which he called “the days of mercy and pardon,” and the Octave Day itself “the compendium of the days of mercy.” For a deeper understanding of the place of the Octave Day of Easter in the ancient liturgical tradition, especially in the Didache and St. Gregory Nazianzen, see the essay by Rev. S. Seraphim Michalenko, M.I.C., in *Divine Mercy, the Heart of the Gospel*, published by the John Paul II Institute of Divine Mercy in 1999. Moreover, it is well known that the title “Divine Mercy Sunday” expresses the message of the prayers and readings traditionally appointed for this Octave Day. Liturgically the day has *always* been centered on the theme of Divine mercy and forgiveness. That is why in its decree establishing Divine Mercy Sunday, the Holy See insisted that the texts already assigned for that day in the Missal and the Liturgy of the Hours of the Roman Rite “are always to be used for the liturgical celebration of this Sunday.”

The Octave Day of Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday, therefore point us to the merciful love of God that lies behind the whole Paschal Mystery – the whole mystery of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ – made present for us in the Eucharist. In this way, it also sums up the whole Easter Octave. As Pope John Paul II pointed out in his Regina Caeli address on Divine Mercy Sunday, 1995: “the whole octave of Easter is like a single day,” and the Octave Sunday is meant to be the day of “thanksgiving for the goodness God has shown to man in the whole Easter mystery.”

Given the liturgical appropriateness of the title “Divine Mercy Sunday” for the Octave Day of Easter, therefore, the Holy See did not give this title to the Second Sunday of Easter merely as an “option,” for those dioceses who happen to like that sort of thing! Rather, the decree issued on May 5, 2000, by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and The Discipline of the Sacraments clearly states: “the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II has graciously determined that in the Roman Missal, after the title Second Sunday of Easter, there shall henceforth be added the appellation ‘or [that is] Divine Mercy Sunday’ ...”. Divine Mercy Sunday, therefore, is not an *optional* title for this solemnity; rather, Divine Mercy is the second name for this Feast Day. In a similar way, the Octave Day of the Nativity of Our Lord was named by the Church “The Feast of the Mother of God.”

This means that preaching on God’s mercy is also not just an *option* for the clergy on that day — it is strongly encouraged. To fail to preach on God’s mercy on that day would mean largely to ignore the prayers, readings and psalms appointed for that day, as well as the title “Divine Mercy Sunday” now given to that day in the Roman Missal.

Clearly, the celebration of Mercy Sunday does not compete with, nor endanger the integrity of the Easter Season. After all, Mercy Sunday is the Octave Day of Easter, a day that celebrates the merciful love of God shining through the whole Easter Triduum and the whole Easter mystery.

Sometimes the fear is expressed that the recitation of St. Faustina’s Novena of Chaplets

of The Divine Mercy from Good Friday until Mercy Sunday distracts us from the focus of the liturgy. But the Chaplet of Divine Mercy is an intercessory prayer on the basis of the Passion of Christ, and the Image of the Divine Mercy (before which the Novena is usually recited) is primarily a manifestation of the Risen Christ. The Novena of Chaplets (with the Image), therefore, focuses our minds and hearts on the Paschal Mystery – the death and resurrection of Christ. Nothing could be more appropriate at this time in the liturgical year! In a similar way, reciting the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday, and the Tre Ore devotions, which often include meditations on the seven last words of Christ – while in no way required by the Missal – are good liturgical customs that amplify the meaning of this important time in the Church’s liturgical year. They do not compete with, nor distract from, the official liturgy for Good Friday.

Some times the fear is expressed that the prominence of the Easter Candle as the chief visual symbol of Christ risen and living among us might be reduced by the display and veneration of the Image of The Divine Mercy on Mercy Sunday. But no such competition exists. The Paschal Candle is a *symbol* of the risen Christ. The Image of The Divine Mercy, on the other hand, is an *icon* or holy image, a pictorial representation of the risen Christ. As such, it is helpful to us in a different way. In a sense, we direct our prayers through an icon to the person they represent (Catechism, 2132, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas: “The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is.”). We do not, however, generally use symbols, such as the Easter Candle, in quite the same way. In other words, Easter *Candle* is an ancient and abiding symbol of the *presence* of the risen Christ, living among us, while the icon manifests in particular *the personal and merciful love* of the risen Christ for us, and thereby elicits a response of trust and of prayer.

In short, what the Holy Father has done by establishing “Divine Mercy Sunday” is not create an alternate theme or celebration for the Easter Season. All he has done is recover an ancient tradition of celebrating The Octave Day of Easter as a summary of the whole Paschal Mystery, and the merciful love of God that shines through that Mystery. In so far as the revelations and devotional forms given to St. Faustina direct us to, and amplify for us, this same Paschal Mystery, and this same merciful love, then her witness is an aid and not a hindrance to the People of God in their celebration of this great solemnity.

1. The Promise and the Liturgical Tradition

Why would our Lord promise to pour out such extraordinary graces on this particular Feast Day? On the one hand, we should note the liturgical appropriateness of this promise. If the Octave Day of Easter is truly meant to be, as Pope John Paul II once said, a day of “thanksgiving for the goodness God has shown to man in the whole Easter mystery” (see Chapter I above), then we should not be surprised that He promised the most extraordinary spiritual benefits to those who come to Holy Communion on that day in a state of grace, and with the disposition of trust in His merciful love. After all, what better day could there be in the liturgical calendar for such a generous outpouring of divine grace than the day that recapitulates and completes the greatest annual celebration of the Paschal mystery? As Jesus said to St. Faustina, on this special day of the Church’s liturgical year “the very depths of my tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon these souls who approach the fount of My Mercy” (*Diary*, 699).