

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Accepting Divine Mercy** Second Sunday (Octave) of Easter/A **Divine Mercy Sunday**  
April 27, 2014 12:15 PM Acts 2:42-47; 1 Pt 1:3-9; **Jn 20:19-31** (We should hope that every single person is eventually saved, and we should pray for that outcome.)

**“Whose sins you forgive are forgiven; whose sins you retain are retained.”**

The recently canonized St. John Paul II established this Sunday as **Divine Mercy Sunday**. The first thing Jesus did when addressing his disciples, at least according to John’s Gospel, was to **empower them to forgive sins**.

John’s Gospel is based on the testimony of the beloved disciple. The beloved disciple has an unusual awareness of the inner life, what we might call the mystical life, that he shared with his beloved Jesus and, therefore, brings to the fore the issue that is very important for any community founded on love, which is exactly his understanding of the Church. So John knew that **a community whose very life is founded on love must extend forgiveness to all of its members**. And this forgiveness has to be something that can be experienced. To forgive people means to **accept them in spite of their failings**, just as Jesus accepted his disciples, most of whom failed him. He did not return to them to get even or to upbraid them, but to bring them forgiveness and to empower them to forgive others. When we do not accept people, we are retaining their sins, and they feel it; and they will probably not believe that God forgives them, even though God does. But if we don’t, they won’t believe it. That is the **very important connection between the way we act and the way people experience God**.

We need to get over two very inaccurate ways of thinking about forgiveness. The first is to treat it like acquittal in court; an acquittal is a “not guilty” verdict. That’s not forgiveness. **Forgiveness is not acquitting or exonerating someone**, declaring that they are not legally guilty for some reason or another. **Nor is forgiveness a legal pardon**, which simply cancels a sentence. The governor has pardoned you; now you don’t have to go to jail. That’s not forgiveness either. **Forgiveness is the restoration of communion** to someone who has violated the well-being of the community or who has been the cause of some kind of injury to the community or to someone in the community. **Forgiveness does not excuse a person from making restitution, but it does offer welcome and healing to the one who expresses sorrow for harm done, intended or not intended**.

Christian thought has acknowledged that anyone who harms others also harms herself or himself. This is a very important thing to keep in mind. Becoming a thief, a murderer, an adulterer, or any other kind of malefactor does **great harm to oneself. So forgiveness includes the healing of the self-inflicted wounds.** And it is the responsibility of the community to deliver this healing, to minister this healing, to mediate this healing. The gospel and this Sunday's observance of Divine Mercy stresses the **mission of the Church, which it has received from Christ, to spread the good news of God's mercy.**

St. John Paul II's teaching was that we—and this was unusual and a first of its kind in the history of the Catholic Church—but his teaching was that **we should hope that every single person is eventually saved.** No pope ever taught that before. But he said that we should hope that every single person is eventually saved, **and we should pray for that outcome.** That is the whole motivation behind devotion to Divine Mercy.

Now that would be quite a remarkable outcome of world history. **It implies that some powerful experience occurs at the moment of death or around there that would enable even the most ruthless and craven people to repent.** Apparently various mystics have received messages in this vein. Of course the pope stressed that we must not assume this is the case, nor that it must be the case; but merely that **it may be the case** and, therefore, we should pray that it becomes the case. This is the message we can take home: We have a right to hope everyone can be saved. We have a right to pray for the worst people we know, but we have to keep in mind finally that **the decision of who accepts God's grace lies with each individual.**