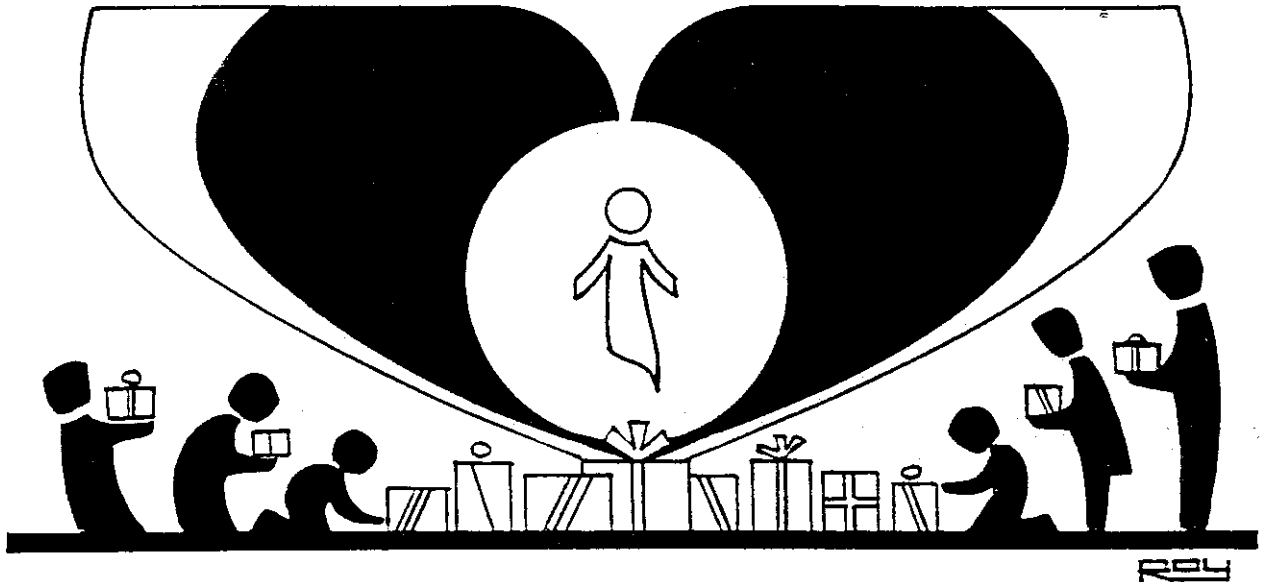


THE COMPASSIONATE, MERCIFUL HEART OF THE ETERNAL FATHER

COMPILED BY
REVEREND WILLIAM J. MCCARTHY, M.Ss. A

MY FATHER'S HOUSE
P. O. BOX 22
MOODUS, CT 06469



The Compassionate, Merciful Heart of the Eternal Father
according to Pope John Paul II

Charles Péguy in his famous work, "A Vision of Prayer," writes:

"GOD SPEAKS:

"I am their father, says God. *Our Father who art in Heaven*. My son told them often enough that I was their father.
I am their judge. My son told them so. I am also their father.
I am especially their father.
Well, I am their father. He who is a father is above all a father.
Our Father who art in Heaven. He who has once been a father can be nothing else but a father.
They are my son's brothers; they are my children; I am their father.
Our Father who art in Heaven, my son taught them that prayer.
Sic ergo vos orabitis. After this manner therefore pray ye.
Our Father who art in Heaven, he knew well what he was doing that day, my son who loved them so.
Who lived among them, who was like one of them.
Who went as they did, who spoke as they did, who lived as they did.
Who suffered.
Who suffered as they did, who died as they did.
And who loved them so, having known them.
Who brought back to heaven a certain taste for man, a certain taste for the earth.
My son who loved them so, who loves them eternally in heaven.
He knew very well what he was doing that day, my son who loved them so.
When he put that barrier between them and me, *Our Father who art in Heaven*, those three or four words.
That barrier which my anger and perhaps my justice will never pass.
Our Father who art in Heaven, my son knew exactly what to do
In order to tie the arms of my justice and untie the arms of my mercy.
(I do not mention my anger, which has never been anything but my justice.
And sometimes my charity.)
And now I must judge them like a father. As if a father was any good as a judge. *A certain man had two sons*.
As if he was capable of judging. *A certain man had two sons*. We know well enough how a father judges. There is a famous example of that.
We know well enough how the father judged the son who had gone away and came back.
The father wept even more than the son."

The overwhelming mercy of the Father who is so merciful that even when we rejected Him by our sins, He sent His only Begotten and most beloved son to die for us. Thus, as Pope John Paul II stated in His Encyclical Letter, "Father, Rich in Mercy":

"Christ, then, reveals God who is Father, who is 'love,' as St. John will express it in his first letter; Christ reveals God as 'rich in mercy,' as we read in St. Paul. This truth is not just the subject of a teaching; It is a reality made present to us by Christ. *Making the Father present as love and mercy* is, in Christ's own consciousness, the fundamental touchstone of His mission as the Messiah; this is confirmed by the words that He uttered first in the synagogue at Nazareth and later in the presence of His disciples and of John the Baptist's messengers."

"It is significant that, when the messengers sent by John the Baptist came to Jesus to ask Him: 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?', He answered by referring to the same testimony with which He had begun His teaching at Nazareth: 'Go and tell John what it is that you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.' He then ended with the words: 'And blessed is he who takes no offense at me!'

"Especially through His lifestyle and through His actions, Jesus revealed that *love is present in the world* in which we live--an effective love, a love that addresses itself to man and embraces everything that makes up his humanity. This love makes itself particularly noticed in contact with suffering, injustice and poverty--in contact with the whole historical 'human condition,' which in various ways manifests man's limitation and frailty, both physical and moral. It is precisely the mode and sphere in which love manifests itself that in biblical language is called 'mercy.'"

When Pope John Paul II recently beatified Sister Faustina, it was largely to underscore this message of Divine Mercy. For no one in modern times has been the messenger of Divine Mercy as much as this saintly Polish nun.

Pope John Paul II knows the merciful heart of God toward us sinners. He traces out in his letter to the world the overwhelming faithful love of the Father (His "hesed") and his gracious mercy (His "emeth") (Footnote 52) his treatment or 'mercy.'

Pope John Paul II begins in the Old Testament. He states:

"The concept of "mercy" in the Old Testament has a long and rich history. We have to refer back to it in order that the mercy revealed by Christ may shine forth more clearly. By revealing that mercy both through His actions and through His teaching, Christ addressed Himself to people who not only knew the concept of mercy, but who also, as *the People of God of the Old Covenant*, had drawn from their age--long history *a special experience of the mercy of God*. This experience was social and communal, as well as individual and interior.

"Israel was, in fact, the people of the covenant with God, a covenant that it broke many times. Whenever it became aware of its infidelity—and in the history of Israel there was no lack of prophets and others who awakened this awareness—it appealed to mercy. In this regard, the books of the Old Testament give us very many examples. Among the events and texts of greater importance one may recall: the beginning of the history of the Judges, the prayer of Solomon at the inauguration of the Temple, part of the prophetic work of Micah, the consoling assurances given by Isaiah, the cry of the Jews in exile, and the renewal of the covenant after the return from exile.

"It is significant that in their preaching the prophets link mercy, which they often refer to because of the people's sins, with the incisive image of love on God's part. The Lord loves Israel with the love of a special choosing, much like the love of a spouse, and for this reason He pardons its sins and even its infidelities and betrayals. When He finds repentance and true conversion, He brings His people back to grace. In the preaching of the prophets, *mercy* signifies *a special power of love, which prevails over the sin and infidelity* of the chosen people."

The story of Hosea:

"Hosea, an unusually loving prophet is asked to love and marry Gomer, a young girl, sold into temple prostitution by her own pagan parents, and now is filled with shame, self-loathing and guilt. But Hosea loves her and marries her. But because of her self-hatred, she cannot really respond to his love. You see, a shriveled humanity has a shrunken capacity to receive the rays of human or Divine love. She returns to her old haunts where she conceives a child whom she named "God does NOT sow."

"She returns to Hosea just knowing that he will reject her. To her utter amazement he does not reject her but showers her with more love and acceptance. Little by little the hard-core of her self-hatred begins to melt. But NOT ENOUGH. She returns to her old friends and there conceives another child whom she promptly names "unbeloved." For she realizes that this child is the fruit of her non-love. Once again she returns to Hosea who as always accepts, affirms and loves her. And just as surely more of her self-hatred begins to melt. But a third time she returns to her friends and there conceives still another child whom she names "You are not my people." Still another time she returns to Hosea who there upon says to her the words of the now famous song:

"Come back to me with all your heart. Don't let fear keep us apart. Trees do bend though straight and tall. So must we to others' call. Long have I waited for your coming home to me and living deeply our new love. The wilderness has led you to your heart where I shall speak. Integrity and justice with tenderness you shall know. For long have I waited your coming home to me and living deeply our new love."

"Gomer overwhelmed with Hosea's love, tenderness and forgiveness returns -- forgives herself. They then name their children:

"God does sow"
"My beloved"
"You are my people"

"You can readily see the allegorical implication here. Hosea is but a faint symbol of God's overwhelming love and mercy-His Hese and His Emeth, for the most powerful line of that book of Scripture is not spoken by Hosea nor by Gomer, but rather by Almighty God to each of us...

"Remember -- I am God, not man."

"That is, don't ever be so foolish as to compare Hosea's love for Gomer to the love I have for you, my people. For I am God, not man. I love you beyond worthiness or unworthiness. I love you without regret, caution or breaking point. I love you as God, not man. Return to me, I beg you. Let me hold you with my tenderness and fondle you with my mercy."

Fr. John Lynch in his masterful work -- "A Woman Wrapped in Silence" tries to describe that Old Testament time before the coming of Jesus. He wrote: "Long had the sullen sons of Adam lain in utter dark and loneliness, with hearts alien to joy yearning fiercely for some vast bestowal that might annul the grief and guilt they bore. From time to time across these alien and sick ages, prophets arose to catch, to renew, and fling again across this total night -- songs that mingled laments with daring promises of a Redeemer." "O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel."

A vivid image, indeed of a people:

locked in
shut in
bound hand and foot
by darkness
despair
guilt
alienation
and sin.

MERCY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Then comes the dawn. Christ comes with His new day. We are forgiven, set free. Free at last. Thank God Almighty -- we are free at last. Free. Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty-we are free at last.

The song "Amazing Grace" has an echo in every human heart.

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." (Ps 32:1)

"Bless the Lord, O my soul...he forgives all your iniquities." (Ps. 103:2-3)

Pope John Paul II states further:

"At the very beginning of the New Testament, two voices resound in St. Luke's Gospel in unique harmony concerning the mercy of God, a harmony which forcefully echoes the whole Old Testament tradition. They express the semantic elements linked to the differentiated terminology of the ancient books. *Mary*, entering the house of Zechariah, *magnifies* the Lord with all her soul for "his *mercy*," which *from generation to generation*" is bestowed on those who fear Him. A little later, as she recalls the election of Israel, she proclaims the mercy which He who has chosen her holds "in remembrance" from all time. Afterwards, in the same house, when John the Baptist is born, his father *Zechariah* blesses the God of Israel and glorifies Him for performing the mercy promised to our fathers and for *remembering His holy covenant*."

"In the teaching of Christ Himself, this image inherited from the Old Testament becomes at the same time *simpler and more profound*. This is perhaps most evident in the parable of the prodigal son. Although the word "mercy" does not appear, it nevertheless expresses the essence of the divine mercy in a particular clear way. This is due not so much to the terminology, as in the Old Testament books, as to the analogy that enables us to understand more fully the very mystery of mercy, as a profound drama played out between the father's love and the prodigality and sin of the son."

"That son, who receives from the father the portion of the inheritance that is due to him and leaves home to squander it in a far country "in loose living," in a certain sense is the man of every period, beginning with the one who was the first to lose the inheritance of grace and original justice. The analogy at this point is very wide-ranging. The parable indirectly touches upon every breach of the covenant of love, every loss of grace, every sin. In this analogy there is less emphasis than in the prophetic tradition on the unfaithfulness of the whole people of Israel, although *the analogy of the prodigal son* may extend to this also. "When he had spent everything," the son "began to be in need," especially as "a great famine arose in that country" to which he had gone after leaving his father's house. And in this situation "he would gladly have fed on" anything, even "the pods that the swine ate," the swine that he herded for "one of the citizens of that country." But even this was refused him."

"The analogy turns clearly towards man's interior. The inheritance that the son had received from his father was a quantity of material goods, but more important than these goods was *his dignity as a son in his father's house*. The situation in which he found himself when he lost the material goods should have made him aware of the loss of that dignity. He had not thought about it previously, when he had asked his father to give him the part of his inheritance that was due to him, in order to go away. He seems not to be conscious of it even now, when he says to himself: "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger." He measures himself by the standard of the goods that he has lost, that he no longer "possesses," while the hired servants of his father's house "possess" them. These words express above all his attitude to material goods; nevertheless, under their surface is concealed the tragedy of lost dignity, the awareness of squandered sonship."

"It is at this point that he makes the decision: *I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'* These are words that reveal more deeply the essential problem. Through the complex material situation in which the prodigal son found himself because of his folly, because of his sin, the sense of lost dignity had matured. When he decides to return to his father's house, to ask his father to be received - no longer by virtue of his right as a son, but as an employee -- at first sight he seems to be acting by reason of the hunger and poverty that he had fallen into; this motive, however, is permeated by an awareness of a deeper loss: to be *a hired servant in his own father's house* is certainly a great humiliation and source of shame. Nevertheless, the prodigal son is ready to undergo the humiliation and shame. He realizes that he no longer has any right except to be an employee in his father's house. His decision is taken in full consciousness of what he has deserved and of what he can still have a right to in accordance with the norms of justice. Precisely this reasoning demonstrates that, at the center of the prodigal son's consciousness, the sense of lost dignity is emerging, the sense of that dignity that springs from the relationship of the son with the father. And it is with this decision that he sets out."

"In the parable of the prodigal son, the term "justice" is not used even once; just as in the original text the term "mercy" is not used either. *Nevertheless, the relationship between justice and love, that is manifested as mercy*, is inscribed with great exactness in the content of the Gospel parable. It becomes more evident that love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice -- precise and often too narrow. The prodigal son, having wasted the property he received from his father, deserves -- after his return -- to earn his living by working in his father's house as a hired servant and possibly, little by little, to build up a certain provision of material goods, though perhaps never as much as the amount he had squandered. This would be demanded by the order of justice, especially as the son had not only squandered the part of the inheritance belonging to him but *had also hurt and offended his father* by his whole conduct. Since this conduct had in his own eyes deprived him of his dignity as a son, it could not be a matter of indifference to his father. It was bound to make him suffer. It was also bound to implicate him in some way. And yet, after all, it was his own son who was involved and such a relationship could never be altered or destroyed by any sort of behavior. The prodigal son is aware of this and it is precisely this awareness that shows him clearly the dignity which he has

lost and which makes him honestly evaluate the position that he could still expect in his father's house."

The forgiveness of God heals guilt on the one hand, and bitterness, hatred and unforgiveness on the other. To a world shackled in sin and guilt the merciful Father offers the redeeming blood of His Son, if only we confess our sins and turn away from them.

God's overwhelming mercy is distributed through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That is why right after the Resurrection, the first thing that Jesus did, was to come through closed doors (symbolic of alienation and sin) and breathed on the Apostles, stating, "Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven."

In this apocalyptic age, all that we have to do to be recipients of God's overwhelming mercy is to confess our sins, to turn from them, and be forgiven and forgive others.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Just think, you and I are the only ones on this planet Earth that can live without guilt -- by being forgiven and forgiving -- thanks to the steadfast love and mercy of Jesus and His Father.

God is, indeed, rich in mercy.