

*Nothing is greater than His Mercy*

*Divine Mercy Sunday*

*April 11, 2021*

Though the infamous commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, Rudolf Höess, oversaw the murder of millions of innocent people during World War II, in the end, even his horrific sins weren't bigger than the mercy of God.

In the early 1920s, after hearing Adolf Hitler speak in Munich, Germany, Höess renounced his Catholic faith and became one of the earliest members of the Nazi Party. First, he served a few years at the Dachau concentration camp. Having proved himself, in 1940 he was named the first commandant of Auschwitz. Though Höess denied ever killing anyone by his own hand, he was responsible for streamlining the execution process by introducing the lethal poison Zyklon B, which enabled the murder of as many as 2,000 people per hour.

Also under Höess' watch, in the basement of block 11, prisoner number 16770 was committed to a starvation cell before dying by lethal injection. That prisoner was the priest and martyr St. Maximilian Kolbe.

During these same years Höess met a priest who would prove to have an impact on him. The Gestapo had arrested Jesuits living in Krakow and sent them to Auschwitz. The community's superior, Fr. Władysław Lohn, SJ, happened to be absent at the time of the arrest. When he found out what happened to his religious brothers, he snuck into Auschwitz to find them. When the guards noticed Fr. Lohn, they took him to Höess to decide his fate. Impressed by the bravery of Fr. Lohn, Höess released the priest unharmed.

After the war came to an end and Höess was captured, he was arraigned at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg and sentenced to death. Following his sentencing, Höess accepted the verdict for the evil he had coordinated. Prior to his execution he spent time in a Polish prison in Wadowice, the birthplace of Pope St. John Paul II. In one of history's ironies, the birthplace the Pope of Divine Mercy would become the setting for the brief but dramatic final chapter in the life of the builder and commandant of "the largest killing center in all of history. A place where Hoess would experience Divine Mercy."

On Good Friday, April 4, 1947, awaiting execution, Höess asked to see a Catholic priest. The authorities had trouble finding a priest who spoke German, but Höess happened to remember the name of one: Fr. Władysław Lohn, the Jesuit he had once spared, who spoke fluent German.

Though it took a few days, Höess' captors finally found Fr. Lohn located in nearby Krakow. He happened to be praying at the Shrine of Divine Mercy, where St. Faustina, the Polish religious sister and mystic responsible for spreading devotion to the Divine Mercy, was laid to rest just shy of eight years earlier, on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1938.

On April 10, 1947, the Thursday of Easter Weel, three days before Divine Mercy Sunday, Fr. Lohn heard Höess' Confession. The next day, Friday, April 11<sup>th</sup> Höess received Holy Communion. Afterward, he knelt in his cell and wept.

The guard who was present said it was one of the most beautiful moments in his life seeing this 'animal' kneeling, with tears in his eyes, looking like a little boy and receiving Holy Communion, receiving Jesus with his heart,"

On April 16, Höess was hanged on a one-person gallows right outside of the gas chambers he had built in Auschwitz.

On this Sunday of Divine Mercy I wanted to share the expression of mercy extended to Rudolf Hoess by the guards at the prison and Fr Lohn, because his story embodied one aspect of Divine Mercy. It is a phrase coined by St. John Paul II – the Polish Pope from Wadowice.

*The Law of the Gift.*

***“We are at our best, we are most fully alive and human, when we give away freely and sacrificially our very selves in love for another.”***

Jesus stated the Law of the Gift when he said:

***“Greater love than this no one has, than to give one's life for one's friends”***

To restate this law in another way:

***The more you give your being away, the more your being increases; the more you cling to your being, the more your being decreases.***

The Law of the Gift was the grace extended to Rudolf Hoess days before he died. During the war twenty-seven of Fr Lohn's Jesuit brethren were imprisoned in Auschwitz. Twelve of them perished there – and yet he heard to Confession of the man directly responsible for all of this. Fr Lohn embodied the Law of the Gift.

Today's Gospel reading informs us that to live with this kind of merciful sacrificial love involves our seeing that the wounds inflicted in Jesus' body are the clearest expression of the Law of the Gift ever known to humankind. Those are most blessed in this world who inspired by these wounds are learning to live mercifully like Jesus and so practice the Law of the Gift.

Let's think now about how these wounds inspire us to live mercifully like Jesus.

Recall with me what our Lord instructs Thomas to do. After extending the Resurrection greeting of “Peace” a clear expression of the mercy of Jesus, he then invites the skeptical apostle to touch the place where the wounds of the crucifixion nails had pierced Jesus' flesh. He wants Thomas to experience in a tactile way how Jesus offered his merciful body for the salvation of the world.

Notice what Jesus says next. “Do not be faithless but believing”. Of course, at the most fundamental level he means, believe in the fact that I have been raised from the dead. But at an even deeper level he is inviting Thomas to see and feel that he is the merciful Saviour. It is at this point Thomas then says:

***“My Lord and my God”.***

Now let’s sit with this picture for a minute. It is as Thomas touches the place of Jesus’ wounds that he can then call him “my Lord and my God”. It is the suffering of Jesus now manifested in his Resurrected body that inspires Thomas’ declaration.

Here is what I hope you to take away from this homily. The mercy of Jesus manifested in his crucifixion is now vindicated by his Resurrection. St Thomas Aquinas in reflecting on the Mercy of Jesus writes:

***Mercy is the supreme virtue through which God’s omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree.”***

Now think with me about the word omnipotence. It is a compound word made up of two parts. “Omni” means “all” and “potens” means “powerful”. Omnipotence means “all powerful” Here is the fundamental paradox of the Christian faith. The God of the universe is most powerful when he is seemingly at his weakest and most vulnerable. It is thus the mercy of Jesus whereby God’s greatest power is made known.

When visiting the Shrine of Divine Mercy on June 7, 1997 Pope St John Paul II stated:

*There is nothing more men and women need than Divine Mercy – that love which is benevolent, which is compassionate, which raises people above their weakness to the infinite heights to the holiness of God.*

Mercy is the most important attribute flowing from the love of God and is therefore the virtue most important in the lives of those who with Thomas declare “Jesus you are my Lord and my God”. Those are most blessed in this world who are embodying mercy in how they relate to others. Why? Because then the Law of the Gift allows us to not only appropriate the mercy of Jesus in our own lives but in turn allows us to then live mercifully in relation to others. There is, says St. Thomas, no power greater than this. For it is the power of love.

A power that brought the animal of Auschwitz to his knees so that these words sent to the State Prosecutor were some of the last Rudolf Hoess penned:

*My conscience compels me to make the following declaration. In the solitude of my prison cell I have come to the bitter recognition that I have sinned gravely against humanity. As Commandant of Auschwitz I was responsible for carrying out part of the cruel plans of the "Third Reich" for human destruction. In so doing I have inflicted terrible wounds on humanity. I caused unspeakable suffering for the Polish people in particular. I am to pay for this with my life. May the Lord God forgive one day what I have done. I ask the Polish people for forgiveness. In Polish*

*prisons I experienced for the first time what human kindness is. Despite all that has happened I have experienced humane treatment which I could never have expected, and which has deeply shamed me. May the facts which are now coming out about the horrible crimes against humanity make the repetition of such cruel acts impossible for all time.*

The story of Rudolf Hoess invites us to ponder today that indeed nothing is greater than Jesus' mercy.