

## **CELEBRATING GOD'S MERCY**

**by Fr. Harry Allagree, ObjN**

**Proper 19 - 9/12/10**

The “hot topic” of the week, which preoccupied sensationalism-hungry Americans, was the proposed burning of copies of the *Koran* at a fundamentalist church in Gainesville, FL. The statements and actions of the Dove World Outreach Center, especially of its so-called “Pastor”, Terry Jones, over the past few weeks, and actually going back over the past 10 years, are directly related to what the Scriptures hold out for us to think about today. By his own admission, Jones has never read the *Koran* and has never personally met a Muslim, yet has been irrationally defiant and unbending in his determination to burn the Islamic faith’s most sacred book: the very book which begins by proclaiming: “*Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation, **The Compassionate, the Merciful**... You alone we worship, and to You alone we pray for help. Guide us to the straight path...*” As the Christian Scriptures proclaim today, in refusing to celebrate God’s mercy to **all** others, regardless of religious belief, race or color, gender or sexual orientation, we run the risk of committing the ultimate sin, the ultimate betrayal of God, which, as the late Dominican Fr. Gerald Vann says, “*can harden into hell.*”

Sin is a very real part of all of our lives. The Exodus writer (32:7-14) cites examples of Israel’s acting “perversely”, of “turning aside”, of casting an idol for themselves and worshipping it, of being “stiff-necked”. Then, along with St. Paul in the Epistle (1 Timothy 1:12-17), there’s not a one of us who couldn’t say, and mean it: “*I am the foremost of sinners.*” Finally, in Luke’s Gospel (15:1-10) Jesus takes a lot of flak for associating with “sinners”, and yet he speaks openly and boldly in their behalf. Oftentimes it may seem to us that “the sinner” is the other person, but the only “sinner” *you and I* really know firsthand is our self. St. John reminds us: “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*”

In 1983 M. Scott Peck wrote a book which was most perceptive, but at the same time terribly chilling, entitled *The People of the Lie*. In it Peck distinguishes between folks who *sin*, and people who perpetrate *evil* things. Please notice that I don’t call the latter “evil people”, even though their evil actions are clearly a reality. Those who perpetrate evildoing are no less in need of prayer than sinners. Peck says that we need to make a distinction between “ordinary” sin and evil. It’s his belief that “*the poor in spirit*”, as he thinks of “ordinary” people like us, people who feel uncertain about our righteousness, who question our own motives, who worry about betraying ourselves, generally don’t commit *evil* per se. Unpleasant as it may be, a sense of personal sin is exactly what keeps our selfishness from getting too far out of hand. Though quite painful at times, it’s an enormous blessing because it’s our one and only effective safeguard against the capacity which every human being has for doing evil.

“People of the lie”, on the other hand, aren’t characterized by their human sins per se. What characterizes their actions as “evil” is the intentional refusal to acknowledge it. People whose actions are evil aren’t defined only by how illegal their deeds are, nor by how great their sins are, but rather by the *consistency* of their sins. Their destructiveness, though usually quite subtle, is terribly consistent. They have, indeed, “crossed over the line” by their *absolute refusal* to tolerate a sense of their own sinfulness. People who do evil hate the light: they hate being shown up by good people, or by any kind of scrutiny which blows their cover and exposes them, or by people who speak the truth and penetrate

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their deception. Rather than blissfully lacking a sense of morality, like the sociopath, people who commit evil are continually engaged in sweeping the evidence of their evil under the rug of their own consciousness.

What the Scriptures bid us to reflect on today, however, is more of the “garden variety” of sin! I’ve found few descriptions of sin better than that given in our own *Book of Common Prayer*, on p. 848: “*Sin is the seeking of **our** will instead of the will of God, thus **distorting our relationship** with God, with other people, and with all creation.*”

The Bible uses several terms for sin. The Hebrew Scriptures see it as *missing, deviating, failing, or affronting* the Covenant partner, *setting oneself up as God's rival*. It can also mean to *make crooked*, or to *stride*, in the sense of *breaking away running, rebelling*.

In the Christian Scriptures there are two major understandings of sin: 1) *missing the mark*, so as not to obtain a reward or prize; and 2) *living lawlessly*, without guidelines, and, by implication, *living irresponsibly, as a fool*. Hardly a better description of such behavior could be found than God's, in the Exodus reading. Ultimately, sin is selfishness: the attempt to make oneself #1. It's a selfishness which misuses and distorts relationships: with God, with others, and with God's creation.

All of this would be terribly depressing, were it not for the incredible Good News expressed in today's readings from 1 Timothy and Luke. Of all people, St. Paul knew what it feels like to be weak, to fail, to be a sinner: “*...I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence... Christ Jesus came... to save sinners -- of whom I am the foremost...*” Each of us, in the innersanctum of our hearts, can add other words to Paul's descriptive list, as they apply to our own sinfulness. “*But,*” says Paul, “*I received mercy... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus... so that in me, as the foremost [sinner], Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life...*”

It's important for you and me to recognize that Paul is talking there about you and me! God worked in Paul's life, and in the lives of so many others since then through the centuries, precisely in order that you and I might come to realize, even in the midst of our most horrible personal selfishness, God still holds out to us the gift of *eternal life*, simply because the patient, loving Jesus wants that for us.

God's giving of that gift is based on two assumptions: 1) that I humbly *acknowledge/admit/confess* my sin; and 2) that I willingly *open* myself to God's strength, God's favor, God's grace in Jesus to change me. The object of God's mercy has to be a *sinner*: a person who *needs* to be saved and who acknowledges it. Otherwise, God is powerless. The writer of Exodus, in fact, depicts God, confronted with Moses' fervent intercessions, as having a change of heart about bringing disaster upon the upstart Israelites, because God has created human beings with free will, and God will always respect that. Our release from human weakness and selfishness, and from all that results from them, is possible only because of God in Christ, because of Divine Grace and Mercy overflowing on our behalf. That was

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Jesus' whole mission in his short life. That's the Church's mission in every age. And that's *our* mission: to make visible and real to others genuine compassion, mercy, and love.

How can it be that this mercy of Jesus is so accessible, with no strings attached? Jesus' perfect patience is the model for all who believe in him for eternal life. If you believe in Jesus, if you believe that his mercy works this way, then you and I will follow suit and incorporate such mercifulness into our own actions. That's exactly the point of Luke's Gospel passage. The professional holy people murmured and grumbled: "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" They couldn't accept Jesus' standard of mercy, and therefore they were unable to *be* merciful themselves.

Luke's whole Chapter 15 consists of stories of God's overwhelming mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost prodigal son. God is so overjoyed whenever what is "lost", especially people, is "found". It's as if God can't help it, so that God's mercy and forgiveness must find expression in pure unbounded celebration and sharing. Today's parables of the lost sheep and the woman's lost coin aim not so much at calling sinners to repentance, as at calling the "righteous" to celebrate and join in praise of God's unlimited patience, mercy, caring and love. If you and I, so often the objects of God's bounty, are resistant and unwilling to join in the joy and celebration of God's extending that same mercy to others in our lives, and of being merciful ourselves, then we exclude ourselves from God's grace, every bit as much as the grumblers among the Pharisees and scribes. God's nature doesn't allow any agenda of *mercy* only for us, but *strict justice* for others.

Marilyn Von Waldener and M. Scott Peck, in their 1985 book *What Return Can I Make?* observe that: "*...There can be a state of soul against which Love itself is powerless because it has hardened itself against Love. Hell is essentially a state of being which we fashion for ourselves: a state of final separateness from God which is the result not of God's repudiation of man, but of man's repudiation of God, and a repudiation which is eternal precisely because it has become, in itself, immovable...*" Parenthetically, Jesus himself says in Mark's Gospel: "*...whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit [i.e., thereby intentionally resisting and rejecting God's mercy] can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin...*"

Von Waldener and Peck continue: "*...So with the soul and God; pride can become hardened into hell, hatred can become hardened into hell, any of the seven root forms of wrongdoing can harden into hell, and not least that sloth which is boredom with divine things, the inertia that cannot be troubled to repent, even though it sees the abyss into which the soul is falling, because for so long, in little ways perhaps, it has accustomed itself to refuse whatever might cost it an effort. May God in his mercy save us from that.*"

For myself, I'll continue to speak out and oppose the statements and actions of the Terry Joneses of the world. At the same time, I'll surely pray that God's Spirit of loving mercy may somehow get past the barriers which such people seem to have thrown up. Corita Kent puts it this way: "*Evil may be not seeing well enough, So perhaps to become less evil we need only to see more, see what we didn't see before...*" Because of this, it's important that we be cautious about stamping out evil or hating anything

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because, as Kent says, “*we know that in the past and in the present many people and things have been tragically destroyed in the name of good...*” In saying this, she echoes Rainer Maria Rilke who wrote: “*...perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something that wants help from me...*”