**Faith & Reason Honors Program**



**SENIOR THESIS**

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| *Thesis Title* | **Divine Mercy** |
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| *Thesis Sub-Title* | **God’s Greatest Gift** |
|  |  |
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|  |  |
| *Year* | **2017** |



## *Abbreviations*

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| *DCE*  *DM*  *DV*  *FR*  *GS*  *RH*  *TOB*  *OGB*  *CCC*  Gen  Mt  Lk  Jn  Isa  Phil  Rom  Ezek  Eph  Col  1 Cor  *ST*  *Diary* | *Deus caritas est*  *Dives in misericordia*  *Dominum et vivificantem*  *Fides et ratio*  *Gaudium et spes*  *Redemptor hominis*  *Theology of the Body* Audiences  *Our God’s Brother*  *Catechism of the Catholic Church*  Genesis  Matthew  Luke  John  Isaiah  Philippians  Romans  Ezekiel  Ephesians  Colossians  1 Corinthians  *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas  *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul* |

# Abstract

Sin distorts man’s[[1]](#endnote-1) vision of reality. Through seeing reality in a distorted manner, he[[2]](#endnote-2) lives in a distorted manner. He lacks the capacity to properly relate to God, himself, and his neighbor; concepts such as justice and mercy appear contradictory. St. John Paul II’s thought explains how sin entered the world, and how Christ redeems man from sin, bringing him back to “the beginning” (Gen 1:1),[[3]](#endnote-3) the state of “original innocence,” and granting him participation in God’s divine vision of reality. John Paul does this through articulating two themes that turn out to be one and the same: the “hermeneutic of gift” and Divine Mercy. The “hermeneutic of gift,” rooted in the Triune God, governs God’s relationship to the world. It expresses the “logic” of love and the “logic” of mercy, as mercy “is love’s second name” (*DM* 7).[[4]](#endnote-4) Through understanding the “hermeneutic of gift,” man can understand God and himself, made in God’s image; he can understand the relationship between justice and mercy, and the essence of Divine Mercy; and he can understand his creation and his redemption, although undeserved, require a response on his part—described strikingly by the pope as mercy toward God Himself.[[5]](#endnote-5)

# Introduction

St. John Paul the Great stands as a pivotal figure in the course of modern history. “What would the world be like without him?” asked Vytautas Landsbergis, the first president of independent Lithuania.[[6]](#endnote-6) Canonized less than ten years after his death and earning the title “the Great,” this saint truly serves as a model for our times. A theological and philosophical giant, his works express the truths of Catholicism in beautiful and novel ways. Throughout his thought run two major themes: Divine Mercy, and the “hermeneutic of the gift,”[[7]](#endnote-7) also called the “logic of the gift,” expressed most clearly in his collection of papal audiences known as the *Theology of the Body*. Although on the surface these themes may seem as though they have nothing to do with one another, by understanding them in their depths, we realize that they are in fact two ways of expressing the same reality. To see reality through the hermeneutic of the gift is to see it through the lens of Divine Mercy; both behold the world as essentially good, affirming that “love is greater than sin, than weakness, than the ‘futility of creation,’ it is stronger than death…” (*RH* 9).[[8]](#endnote-8) Viewing the world through the logic of the gift, we see it with the merciful eyes of the Creator who “In the beginning” (Gen 1: 1) summoned it out of “the abyss” (Gen 1:2) and called it “very good” (Gen 1:31). Seeing through the divine lens—participating in the divine vision of the world—transforms the typical understanding of reality. It brings us back to “the beginning” (Gen 1:1) where we stood in total trust and total surrender to God in all things. Through man’s fall into sin, he lost “the sense of his right *to participate in the perception of the world*, which he enjoyed in the mystery of creation.”[[9]](#endnote-9) But through Christ, the Son of God become man, man is restored to his original relationship with the Creator. Through Christ, we too can participate in the divine vision of reality, which makes clear our being as creatures, God’s Being as Creator, and the relationship between these two. Properly understanding the relationship between God and man, man and God, is made possible by understanding the logic of the gift. This logic of the gift also illuminates the true meaning of mercy, and as St. John Paul II’s words in his April 3, 2005 *Regina caeli* message express, “How much the world needs to understand and accept Divine Mercy!”[[10]](#endnote-10)

For clarity, an outline of the paper is as follows: Section One discusses St. John Paul II’s devotion to Divine Mercy, illustrating how this devotion shaped much of his thought. Section Two explains the “logic of the gift,” defining the two characteristics of gift, and illustrating how the logic of gift is rooted in God and made manifest in creation, specifically in man. Section Three describes the fall of man as a rejection of the gift in what is known as “original sin.” It gives St. John Paul II’s account of man’s situation before sin and how it changed when sin entered his experience. Section Four turns to Christ Who redeems man from sin and reveals the Father’s mercy. It considers how John Paul's theology of creation and his theology of mercy can both be understood only in light of his hermeneutic of gift, while at the same time, the hermeneutic of gift likewise highlights the very way in which creation and mercy are distinct. It uses the Parable of the Prodigal Son to illustrate this point. Section Five provides a response to a possible objection to the idea of mercy as a gift. Finally, Section Six illuminates how one is to receive the gift of mercy in an act of humility and loving trust.

# I. St. John Paul II’s Devotion to Divine Mercy

When St. John Paul II assumed the seat of Peter in 1978, the world was still healing from the evils of World War I and World War II. During this time, another modern saint, Sister Faustina Kowalska, received mystical visions from the Lord that instructed her to write about God’s mercy and to proclaim it to the world. The Lord granted her this message of Divine Mercy, telling her to spread an image of Christ and a new prayer called the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, to as many souls as possible, teaching them to invoke the Lord’s mercy on the world.

As Cardinal Archbishop in Poland, the future St. John Paul II became acquainted with this Divine Mercy devotion. As the devotion spread among the Polish public, St. John Paul II obtained numerous requests to begin Sister Faustina’s cause for canonization, the process of declaring someone a saint. On October 21, 1965, St. John Paul II began this process, securing Sister Faustina the title “Servant of God.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Throughout the canonization process, St. John Paul II continued to work for her cause.

When St. John Paul II assumed the papacy, the second encyclical that he wrote was entitled *Dives in misericordia*, which translates *Rich in Mercy*. According to St. John Paul II’s biographer, George Weigel, this encyclical on Divine Mercy “is the clearest expression of [John Paul’s] pastoral soul.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Furthermore, St. Faustina played an influential role in St. John Paul II’s composing the encyclical; he said she was “very near” to him and he had been “thinking about her for a long time” before writing.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Throughout his papacy, St. John Paul II spoke about mercy and even may have considered it one of his particular missions to proclaim to the world. In a homily given at the Shrine of Merciful Love, St. John Paul II stated:

Right from the beginning of my ministry in St. Peter’s See of Rome, I considered this message [of Divine Mercy] my special task. Providence has assigned it to me in the present situation of man, the Church and the world. It could be said that precisely this situation assigned that message to me as my task before God.[[14]](#endnote-14)

He went on to say, “Where, if not in the Divine Mercy, can the world find refuge and the light of hope?”[[15]](#endnote-15) These statements echo Jesus’ words to St. Faustina in her *Diary*: “**Humanity will not find peace until it turns trustfully to Divine Mercy.**”[[16]](#endnote-16),[[17]](#endnote-17) Thus, Divine Mercy remains something that the Church must discover anew each and every day. St. John Paul II alludes to this as he says in the first paragraph of his first encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, that the time is coming to “reawaken in us… the key truth of faith…‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life’” (*RH* 1). This love is nothing other than mercy, as mercy is “love’s second name” (*DM* 7). Only this love “is able to fill hearts with hope and to become the spark of a new civilization of love.”[[18]](#endnote-18) St. John Paul II died on the Vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday, leaving this world firmly convinced of God’s mercy. He desired that the whole world encounter this Divine Mercy, stating:

Modern man often anxiously wonders about the solution to the terrible tensions which have built up in the world and which entangle humanity. And if at times he lacks the courage to utter the word "mercy," or if in his conscience empty of religious content he does not find the equivalent, so much greater is the need for the Church to utter his word, not only in her own name but also in the name of all the men and women of our time (*DM* 15).

Thus, this great saint, truly a pope of mercy, saw the need for God’s mercy on the whole world, and he allowed this vision of Divine Mercy to shape the entirety of his thought.

# II. Mercy and Gift

Following St. John Paul II’s lead, how can we properly understand mercy so that we can receive it and participate once more in the divine vision of reality? If St. John Paul II is correct in his teachings on mercy, it is clearly important and even essential in order for the world to find hope, peace, and refuge. Both of the popes succeeding St. John Paul II have stressed mercy as well, Pope Francis even declaring it the theme for the Church’s 2016 Jubilee Year.[[19]](#endnote-19) But what is this mercy that the popes keep emphasizing? How do we properly understand it? And how does it become manifest in our relationships with God and neighbor in the manner we live our lives?

## The Logic of the Gift

Turning to St. John Paul II’s teachings, he makes understanding mercy possible through articulating the “hermeneutic of the gift.”[[20]](#endnote-20) To understand this hermeneutic, one must understand the nature of a gift, which will shed light on the meaning of mercy.

What is a gift? A gift is a giving that has no expectation of return. It is an act of generosity that seeks to bestow something upon someone purely out of one’s generosity in order to express the love one has for the other. The person upon whom one seeks to bestow the gift has done nothing to earn it, characterizing a gift as something unmerited and undeserved. The giver gives wholly out of gratuity. Thus, to give a genuine gift, the giver expects nothing in return.

Yet, the giving of a gift does not stop in the offer. For what if the one to whom the giver seeks to give the gift ignored it? What if he did not acknowledge the gesture of love? The giver would feel as though something went wrong. In a certain sense, he expected that the one to whom he extended the gift would respond to it. In other words, when he extended the gift, he *did* in fact expect something in return, namely, a response to the gift. More precisely, he expected a certain kind of response.

What kind of response? If the person to whom the gift was given paid the giver the precise amount of money the gift cost, it would cease to be a gift, and instead, it would become a transaction. Similarly, if the person to whom the gift was given bought the giver the same thing and proceeded to give it back to the giver, again, the gift would cease to be a gift and would become nothing but a fair exchange. Thus, the response to a gift is not a “getting even” through a repayment of proportional value. Instead, a different, yet fitting response is necessary.

The response to a gift is not simple repayment, it is not a response of the same kind as the gift, and it therefore goes beyond the laws of strict commensurate justice and beyond the laws of equality and mathematics. For if a gift is truly a generous gesture that seeks to express love and desires nothing in return, the thing that it simultaneously does desire in return is simply the reception of the gift. It seeks to express love, and thus the response too must be a response of love. “Where there is love, there is no calculation… there must be no mathematical exactness in love…Love is outside of law.”[[21]](#endnote-21) Thus, the correct response to a gift is simply reception of the gift. It is a humble recognition that although the gift was unmerited, the gesture of love that the giver wishes to express must be accepted or else this would hurt the giver. As Pope John Paul II expressed, “giving and accepting the gift interpenetrate in such a way that the very act of giving becomes acceptance, and acceptance transforms itself into giving.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Thus, the response to the gift is an act of humble reception. Although it seems as though there is nothing given on the part of the receiver, through simply accepting the gift, he is in fact giving a gift to the original giver.

Thus, the hermeneutic of the gift simultaneously contains two characteristics: first, the gratuitous offer, and second, the receptive response. Although the giver expects nothing in return, he expects something in return, namely, the reception of the gift. Both the giving and the receiving are rooted in love, and thus, the inner logic that the gift contains extends beyond the strict laws of commensurate justice and mathematics.

From where does this logic of gift stem? And why does St. John Paul II continuously stress it in his teachings? This logic of gift stems from the very nature of God Himself. For, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). As such, love cannot exist as something in itself; love implies a relationship between the lover and the thing loved. Thus, written in the statement, “God is love,” is the underlying belief and revelation of the faith understanding God as a Trinity.[[23]](#endnote-23) According to John Paul II and the generations of Church teaching that have gone before him, the Trinity exists from all eternity as an infinite exchange of Love (*DV* 10).[[24]](#endnote-24) God the Father, “Creator of heaven and earth,” pours Himself fully out to the Son in an eternal gift. The Son, receiving His very Self through this outpouring of Love from the Father, gives Himself entirely back to His Father in response. This exchange of Love between Father and Son endures so powerfully that it “creates”[[25]](#endnote-25) Another Person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit. In St. John Paul II’s words, “It can be said that in the Holy Spirit the intimate life of the Triune God becomes totally gift, an exchange of mutual love between the divine Persons” (*DV* 10). Through this understanding of the Trinity, we see that the Persons of the Godhead relate to one another as an eternal exchange of Love. The Father finds His role as Father by giving His Self to the Son; the Son finds His role as Son by receiving His Self from the Father; the Holy Spirit finds His role as Spirit by receiving His Self from both the Father and the Son (*DV* 10). From all of eternity, the Three Persons each make a gift of Self to the Others in total trust and total surrender. No One Person holds anything back; rather, each of the Persons finds His Self by giving His Self.

The Christian faith believes that the second Person of the Trinity—the Son of God, Jesus Christ—becomes incarnate, taking on human nature and becoming one of us. Through His becoming incarnate, the Person of Christ is simultaneously *fully* God and *fully* man. As such, Christ reveals the “the mystery of the Father and His love” (*GS* 22).[[26]](#endnote-26) In other words, Christ comes in the flesh to reveal Who He has always been as the Eternal Son within the inner life of the Trinity; through living as a man on earth, Christ reveals to us the fullness of God.

Furthermore, in Christ’s becoming flesh, He not only reveals the fullness of God, but He simultaneously reveals the fullness of man. For Genesis 1:26-27 states, “Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness…God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them…” Yes. Man is made in the image and likeness of God. Thus, in order to know man, we must know God.

Turning to Christ Who reveals this God, as already mentioned, we come to know God as the Triune God, a communion of Persons Who exist in a mutual exchange of self-gift, rooted in love. Revealing God in this way, Christ reveals Him as the source of the logic of the gift. This logic of the gift—this giving and receiving of Persons within the Trinity—is also made manifest in the relationship between creation and the Creator. For this relationship is also rooted in gift and in love, specifically the love described as mercy,[[27]](#endnote-27) as we will explore later. To understand this relationship of gift and love between creation and the Creator, we must first discuss the ontology of the creature.

## Ontology of the Creature

What does it mean to be created? To be created is to have one’s entire being, one’s entire existence, from God. It is to receive one’s existence as a gift from the Creator. Yet creation is not a single moment when God brought the creature into being and then stepped back and let the creature go off on its own, apart from Him. Rather, the creature depends wholly upon God for its entire existence at every moment. God is Creator, even now. He continuously creates, and creatures continuously receive their being. Yet, this is also not to say that creation is not distinct from God, and God micro-manages creatures, thereby eliminating their freedom. Rather, the world is impregnated with the Creator, so to speak; “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The world is sustained by Him, yet is simultaneously distinct from Him.

Such an understanding of creation as continuous rather than a single event, an anomaly that took place years ago, is understood more clearly through reflecting on what it means to be a human, made in God’s image and likeness. Man has a lack, or rather, he *is* a lack (noun, not verb); in himself, he is incomplete.[[28]](#endnote-28) Man’s experience as a bodily creature reveals to him that he is a limited being. Indicated simply by his bodily hunger, he knows he must find food and eat in order to fill this hunger. His metabolism illustrates the fact that he must bring things into himself in order to remain himself. Beyond this bodily hunger, man lacks other necessities for survival; he needs air to breathe, water to drink, a shelter to protect him from unsafe weather, clothing to wear, a community in which to socialize and work, and many other necessities. Throughout each and every day, man desires these provisions. He desires, seeks, searches, and decides what corresponds to his desires and fulfills them. He brings these things into himself, and in doing so he remains himself.

Yet reflected even in these bodily desires and necessities is an even greater spiritual desire and need: the desire and need to know the truth (*FR*).[[29]](#endnote-29) As a rational being, man seeks not only to live but also to know why he lives. He is a questioning being, and even when he has all the material necessities to sustain his life, man still searches; as St. John Paul II states, “Man’s poverty is deeper than the resources of all those goods” (*OGB* 242).[[30]](#endnote-30)

But what does this poverty indicate? What is this lack, and what corresponds to this lack and fulfills it? What gives man’s life meaning, quenching his desires that seem to weigh so heavily upon him? According to St. John Paul II, “Man cannot live without love…he remains a being that is incomprehensible to himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him” (*RH* 10). Thus, St. John Paul II believes that man’s poverty is a yearning for love, a thirst for love that cannot help but well up inside of him. Only through experiencing love does man experience wonder and find meaning and purpose in life; for St. John Paul II, “Where love is missing, the question of meaning lacks the air it needs to catch fire.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

Thus, man needs more than just the necessities that guarantee his material survival. “What matters to us beyond mere existence, is the explicit confirmation: it is *good* that you exist; how wonderful that you are! In other words, what we need over and above sheer existence is: to be loved by another person.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Man is built for relationship and relationships are essential to his life. Man enters this world as a child, therefore standing in relationship to a mother and a father, and without the previous relationship between the mother and the father, the child would not have been conceived and born in the first place. Because relationships are essential to human life, it is through living in these relationships that man receives confirmation in his existence. These relationships allow him to experience love, thus, giving his life meaning.

Again and again this theme reveals itself in St. John Paul II’s writings. Man cannot live without love. Love gives his life meaning, purpose, fulfillment. Such teachings from St. John Paul II find their origin in the wisdom of the Second Vatican Council and one of John Paul II’s favorite documents from that council, *Gaudium et spes*. It states:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light… Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear (*GS* 22).

Christ, by revealing the love of God, reveals to man his deepest yearning. Christ, by revealing the God who “is love” (1 Jn 4:8), reveals to man that which fulfills this yearning, quenching it, and bringing it to rest in none other than Love itself—in God Who “is Love” (1 Jn 4:8). In other words, of all the relationships in which man finds himself, it is only in his relationship with his Creator, it is only in his relationship with Love Itself, that his heart will find rest. As St. Augustine writes, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

For St. John Paul II, human life is oriented to love, and faith is a revelation of love. Because “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), man encounters and understands love through living in a relationship with God. Man’s faith reveals Love, and Love gives his life meaning and purpose. Therefore, “there is no opposition between human experience and the experience of faith. Rather, there is a continuity between them, and each illuminates the other.”[[34]](#endnote-34) As St. John Paul II stated at the fifteenth World Youth Day, “It is Jesus in fact that you seek when you dream of happiness; …he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise…”[[35]](#endnote-35)

As creature, man is a lack yearning for love; man is incomplete in his self, and he must enter into a relationship with Another—with God—to receive this love. Thus, man’s fundamental attitude as a creature is receptivity. For as Pieper states, “One would have to be God in order to be capable of loving without being dependent on being loved in return.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Only through receiving his existence from his Creator, only through receiving love from Love Himself, can man then extend this gift to others. In the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI:

[Man] cannot always give, he must also receive. …Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. Jn 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. Jn 19:34) (*DCE* 7).[[37]](#endnote-37)

As creature, man “love[s] because He first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). Only through accepting the love of God, can man extend this love to others.

All of this being said, what does being a creature have to do with St. John Paul II’s hermeneutic of the gift? According to St. John Paul II, “creation thus means not only calling from nothing to existence… it also signifies gift; a fundamental and ‘radical’ gift, that is, an act of giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothing.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Therefore, understanding the gift means understanding what it means to be creature.

As a part of creation, as a “fundamental” and “radical” gift,[[39]](#endnote-39) the creature contains the two characteristics of gift. First, his creation is wholly unearned and therefore wholly gratuitous. The creature does not earn his existence because he would need to exist prior to himself in order to merit his subsequent existence, which would clearly be a logical contradiction. Yet at the same time, the second characteristic of the gift must also be present, namely, the receptive response. To call creation a gift, there must be a capacity for the gift to be received. Thus, St. John Paul II states, “In the account of the creation of the visible world, giving has meaning only in relation to man… creation is a gift, because man appears in it, who, as an ‘image of God,’ is able to understand the very meaning of the gift in the call from nothing to existence.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Made in the image of God, man possesses the capacity to receive his existence from the Creator as a gift. Clearly man is not the same as God. He is not self-created, he has not given rise to the rest of the universe, and he depends completely upon God for his existence at every moment; Christ indeed says, “Without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Yet despite the infinite difference between man and God, there still exists a complementarity that allows for relationship.

# III. The Fall of Man and the loss of original innocence

Made in God’s image, man is given a share in God’s vision. He can see the world as a gift, because he “*participate[s] in the perception of the world*,” that is “the divine vision of the world and of his own humanity.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Participating in this divine vision, seeing the world through the eyes of the Creator, man understands the world as gift. He understands that he is a creature, and he actively receives his being as a gift. Unlike the other creatures that cannot understand the world as gift, man is called to be an active agent in receiving his being. He participates in his creation, becoming a co-creator with the Father.

Such an understanding of the relationship between the creature and the Creator may remain foreign to us. Our difficulty in conceiving of such an understanding is testimony to the fact of original sin, a theme that we will explore in more depth shortly. However, insofar as original sin is a distortion of a given reality, we must first understand this given reality—our original created order—of which original sin is a distortion. In so doing, we will then be able to understand the distortion itself. Let us first direct our attention therefore, to what in the *Theology of the Body* audiences St. John Paul II calls “original innocence”—our understanding of the world as a “fundamental” gift.[[42]](#endnote-42)

## Original Innocence: Trusting Receptivity

Following Christ’s lead, St. John Paul II asks us to return to “the beginning” (Gen 1:1) in order to properly understand our experience of love. When the Pharisees asked Jesus “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (Mt 19:3), Jesus saw through their question into a more fundamental and essential question which permeated the Pharisees’ understanding of the whole of their lives: “Is it really possible to love another person forever?”[[43]](#endnote-43) The Pharisees assumed that the answer was “no,” illustrating their hardness of heart and alienation from the experience of love. But “Christ came to retrieve and fulfill this root of love.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Thus, Christ directs the Pharisees to the creation accounts in Genesis in order to answer their question because the Genesis accounts reveal God’s original intention for love. Through understanding this original intention, man can then understand the depth of *all* of his experiences, since it is love that gives them each their meaning and fullness.

St. John Paul II turns to these creation accounts, unpacking God’s original intention for love. “Original innocence” refers to man’s understanding of the world as gift. In other words, “the first man…‘lived’ the world truly as a gift, with an attitude that conforms to the actual condition of someone who has received a gift.”[[45]](#endnote-45) As Genesis 2:25 states, the first man and woman were “naked, yet they felt no shame.” They had no inner experience of shame because they understood “the integral truth about man,”[[46]](#endnote-46) that man “is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself” (*GS* 24). Man who “cannot live without love…[who] remains a being that is incomprehensible to himself…if love is not revealed to him” (*RH* 10), experienced no shame because he understood that his life was a gift “created by Love.”[[47]](#endnote-47) Love was “revealed to him,” allowing him to make sense of himself and the rest of creation. Through his experience of love, he understood that his life as well as the rest of creation was created by Love for no other reason than to participate in this love through relationships with the Creator and with fellow man.

As St. John Paul II affirms, this innocence “is a mystery of man’s existence before the knowledge of good and evil…”[[48]](#endnote-48) Although man had no knowledge of good and evil in his state of original innocence, he was not living in a blissful state of naivety. Rather, his innocence indicated the receptive love that allowed him to view the Lover—the Creator—without any trace of suspicion, which is, in fact, the only way that love can be given and received.

## Original Sin: Doubting the Gift

It is this original state of grateful receptivity of the gift that is distorted by original sin. As St. John Paul II states, “With this concept [original innocence]… theology defines the state of man before original sin.”[[49]](#endnote-49) Once original sin enters the human experience, “original innocence” no longer governs the way by which we view God, our selves, or the world. Even between lovers, we view traces of suspicion at times. Genesis Chapter 3 provides us with an explanation as to why this is the case. It recounts the story of how the knowledge of good and evil entered the human consciousness, introducing sin into the human experience.

Let us clarify and discuss original sin, the distortion of original innocence, by defining sin. Sin is defined as “an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor…it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become ‘like gods,’ (Gen 3:5) knowing and determining good and evil.”[[50]](#endnote-50) The reality of sin derives from an original act of disobedience to God, known as “original sin,” described in Genesis Chapter 3. This chapter depicts the creation story of man and woman in the Garden of Eden. At first, the man and woman relate to one another and to God in relationships of “original innocence,” receiving one another as gifts of love. However, upon walking in the garden, the man and woman were tempted by a serpent, urging them to disobey God’s command that prohibited them from eating the fruit of a certain tree in the garden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The first five verses of Genesis Chapter 3 read:

Now the snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He asked the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden?’” The woman answered the snake: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die.’” But the snake said to the woman: “You certainly will not die! God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil” (Gen 3:1-5).

Immediately after this conversation, the woman grasps the fruit from the tree and eats it, offering it to her husband as well. As soon as they eat, “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Gen 3:7), thus beginning their experience of shame.

Commenting on these verses in the *Theology of the Body*, St. John Paul II believes that they highlight the exact moment in which “in man’s heart, doubt is cast on the Gift.”[[51]](#endnote-51) By picking the fruit from the tree that God had forbidden man to eat, man “makes… a fundamental choice and carries it through against the will of the Creator, God-Yahweh, by accepting the motivation suggested by the tempter, ‘You will not die at all. Rather, …you will become like God, knowing good and evil.’”[[52]](#endnote-52) Accepting the tempter’s motivation to act, “*clearly implies casting doubt on the Gift and on Love, from which creation takes its origin as gift.*”[[53]](#endnote-53) Man no longer receives the world as gift. Instead, “By casting doubt in his heart on the deepest meaning of the gift, that is, *on love as the specific motive of creation and of the original covenant* (see Gen 3:5), man turns his back on God-Love, on the ‘Father.’”[[54]](#endnote-54)

Thus, the sin of the first man is to doubt God’s goodness; it is to doubt that all of creation is a gift from Love. “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

As a creature, man is limited and dependent upon his Creator for his very existence. In the state of original innocence, man accepted his creaturely nature, trusting the Lord to provide for him whatever he needed. However, through his temptation in the garden, man doubted the Gift and Love. No longer trusting in God’s goodness, man saw his dependency and his limited creaturely nature as restrictive. Pride-fully grasping for equality with God, he no longer wanted to be creature but wanted to be Creator, seeing himself in competition with God.

Thus, the lens through which man views reality becomes limited. He no longer lives in his “original innocence,” he no longer understands the meaning of love, and therefore he no longer views reality through the logic of the gift. He “loses in a certain way the sense of his right *to participate in the perception of the world*, which he enjoyed in the mystery of creation.”[[56]](#endnote-56) Because of sin, because of man’s rejection of his creaturely nature and distrust of God’s goodness, he no longer participates in “the divine vision of the world and of his own humanity, which gave him a deep peace and joy…”[[57]](#endnote-57) Instead, he sees the world through the lens distorted by the tempter’s words. He is now convinced that God has withheld something from him that he rightly deserves. He no longer knows in his heart the truth of the Creator’s words “everything I have is yours” (Lk 15:31), and he no longer sees his creatureliness as “very good” (Gen 1:31). Misunderstanding the order and place he holds in the universe, misunderstanding God’s motivation to create as an act of pure Love, man grasps for equality with God rather than receiving his nature as man.

As a result of this first sin, man “is wounded… subject to ignorance, suffering and the dominion of death, and inclined to sin - an inclination to evil that is called ‘concupiscence.’”[[58]](#endnote-58) Man is not totally corrupted, however; he is still “very good” (Gen 1:31) despite that fact that he must now struggle to live his nature as man rather than grasp for equality with God. According to St. John Paul II, this first, original sin began a new state of human nature marked by concupiscence. This original sin also marked the birth of shame in man’s experience. Genesis 3:7, which reads “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked,” indicates that a “boundary” now “runs between man’s state of original innocence…and his state of sinfulness at the very ‘beginning.’”[[59]](#endnote-59) Shame arises as a symptom of sin, and man’s fall from his participation in the life and vision of God. Seeing through the eyes of concupiscence, viewing reality through a distorted lens absent of God’s divine vision, man now experiences shame, which impacts his understanding of God, other men, and even his own self.

Once the first man realizes he is naked, he covers himself with fig leaves. Upon hearing the Lord in the garden, he hides out of fear. His shame touches the very core of his being, “the very foundation of…[his] existence,” and it germinates “*a sense of fear before God… a fear previously unknown.*”[[60]](#endnote-60) When the Lord asks the man where he is, he says “I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid” (Gen 3:10). This “nakedness,” according to St. John Paul II, “does not have only a literal meaning;” rather, what it shows is “man deprived of participation in the Gift, man alienated from the Love that was the source of the original gift, the source of the fullness of good intended for the creature.”[[61]](#endnote-61) Man now no longer understands the Love that brought him into existence and continues to sustain his existence. Man who “cannot live without love…” finds himself in a state where “his life is senseless;” he can no longer understand the love that gives his life meaning (*RH* 10).

Thus, in sin a radical change occurred in man. As St. John Paul II states, “the ‘man of concupiscence’ took the place of the ‘man of original innocence.’”[[62]](#endnote-62) Yet even though man now views reality through a distorted lens—a lens which no longer participates in God’s divine vision—man’s heart still desires love; man is still made for love and craves love to give his life meaning and purpose. Thus, the man of concupiscence “holds within itself at one and the same time desire and shame.”[[63]](#endnote-63) Man yearns for love, but through shame he feels as though he does not deserve it, and must reject it because it is too good for someone like him. In man’s consciousness it is as though “an insurmountable threshold appeared… that limited the original ‘self-donation’ to the other with full trust.”[[64]](#endnote-64) Man can no longer trust God’s goodness and love, and although he longs for this love, he resists receiving it, instead, running and hiding in his shame. Grasping for love rather than receiving love—by trying to earn love rather than receiving it as a gift—paradoxically, the man of concupiscence loses that which he seeks. He finds himself in a constant cycle desiring love, yet never managing to taste its inestimable sweetness.

# IV. Divine Mercy

Because man no longer participates in the divine vision of the world, because of the limited lens through which the man of concupiscence views reality, he can no longer make sense of the world in its true order and fullness. The world, having been made by the *Logos* (see Jn 1:1),[[65]](#endnote-65) contains an inner intelligibility. But without participation in the divine vision of the world, without participation in the *Logos*, man cannot comprehend this intelligibility, and he therefore lives differently. In other words, his seeing truly is connected with his living truly.

Without participation in the divine vision, man now sees himself in competition with God, his fellow men, and even the animals. He fears being dominated by this world that constantly threatens him in his frail, bodily nature. As a result, he himself seeks to dominate, as he sees this as his only option for keeping himself safe from harm. In addition to these visible conflicts, man finds conflict in his rational ideas as well. He no longer knows what is good, true, or beautiful. He finds it difficult to understand what is truly right and just. Such concepts as justice and mercy appear in opposition to one another. Justice is understood as getting what one deserves. Mercy is understood as one’s being excused from what he rightfully deserves. Thus, justice and mercy, are just two of many concepts that appear to the man of concupiscence as incompatible and incommensurable, and that he can no longer accept both at the same time.

## Christ the Redeemer of Man and the Revelation of the Father’s Mercy

If this man of concupiscence can no longer make sense of reality, if the lens through which he views the world remains limited and distorted due to sin, what is he to do? How can he relate to the world properly? Is he doomed to live in competition with the world around him? What about this love that he so desperately desires yet cannot seem to accept? Is he doomed to crave love—to yearn for love with the whole of his being—yet never actually find rest in it? Fortunately the God who “is Love” (1 Jn 4:8) does not allow for this. This God cannot help but continue to love His creatures even when they do not love Him. Thus, although man has abandoned God in sin, God does not abandon man. He is a God who keeps His promises and remains faithful despite what it might cost Him. This God who “is Love” (1 Jn 4:8) sends His only Son to bring us back into a relationship with Him and teach us once again Who He is and who we are.

Christ brings us back to the “beginning” (Gen 1:1), to the original relationship man held with God, and in so doing, Christ heals us of our shame. As St. John Paul II states:

‘Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling.’… ‘He who is the 'image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15), is himself the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin” (*RH* 8).

Christ is God, so He knows that God is Love; He participates in the divine vision of the world and therefore sees God through the hermeneutic of gift, the lens of “original innocence.” Simultaneously, Christ is man, so He can go before the Father bringing all of sinful humanity, bringing the new “man of concupiscence” along with Him. In doing this, Christ restores to man his “right *to participate in the perception of the world*, which he enjoyed in the mystery of creation,” a perception that was none other than a participation in “the divine vision of the world and of his own humanity.”[[66]](#endnote-66) Thus, Christ restores man to his original relationship with the Creator, the relationship of “original innocence,” which allows man to participate once again in the divine vision of reality, that of the hermeneutic of Gift and Love.

How did Christ do this? How did Christ restore man to his original relationship with the Creator and enable him to participate once again in the divine vision of reality? We must discuss these answers here. For the manner that Christ restored man to his participation in the divine vision of reality, the way by which He healed us of our limited distorted views of reality, was on the cross. There, Christ took humanity’s sins upon Himself. In a certain sense, He became the worst sinner possible: “But the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all” (Isa 53:6). Unlike Adam in the garden of Genesis 3, Christ bears not just the first sin, but all of the sins of each and every man in the history of mankind, past, present, and future. Yet with these sins upon His shoulders, Christ does not run and hide in fear as Adam does in the garden: “I heard the sound of your step in the garden, and I was afraid, because I am naked, and I hid myself” (Gen 3:9-10). Instead, Christ, who is also “stripped… [of] his clothes” (Mt 27:28) goes before the Father. Still seeing the Father for Who He is—“Love” (1 Jn 4:8)—Christ lacks sin’s blinding limitation to his understanding of God. He still participates in the divine vision of the world, and He sees the Father through the hermeneutic of the gift and the vision that Adam had possessed in his state of original innocence. Thus, Christ goes before the Father, trusting entirely in His Goodness. Even with the sins of the world upon his shoulders, even though he experienced “the guilt of us all” (Isa 53:6), He goes before the Father. Despite the fact that He is facing death, Christ possesses a radical trust in the Lord’s Goodness. He trusts that the Lord knows Him and loves Him better than He can know or love Himself, and He throws Himself wholly into the arms of the Lord of Love. He trusts that whatever the Father wishes to give Him is in fact a gift, and He desires to receive it as a gift with the whole of His being. Unlike the first man, who grasped for the fruit which promised to make him “like god” (Gen 1:5), “…Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant... he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8). Rather than grasping for equality with God, rather than grasping for the love that He so deeply desired, Christ humbly received this love from the Creator, even though it might not have seemed like love. As Christ reveals on the cross, true receptivity to God’s gift of love is a humble obedience to God. On the cross Christ hangs, arms outstretched. He cannot grasp for equality with God, but rather, wrists nailed to the cross, He receives all. He receives all of the love given by the Giver of the gift. He does not refuse anything, for his humility leads to obedience. It is a radical trust that cries out, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor” (Rom 11:33-34)? Trusting in this love, having faith that this love is true, Christ opens himself entirely, totally surrendering himself to a love that—as man—He cannot comprehend.

Through Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection, He redeems man. He goes before the Father bringing Him our sin and death, and “by means of his own death” He is able “to inflict death upon death” (*DM* 8). So what does this mean now for us? This means that there is no longer any reason for us to run and hide from the Lord, despite our sin and shame. From the cross, Christ saves us, bringing us back to the “beginning” (Gen 1:1) and the original relationship man had with the Father “in the beginning” (Gen 1:1); from the cross, Christ “sends His Spirit of Love to re-create us as children of the Father;”[[67]](#endnote-67) from the cross, Christ allows us to participate once again in the divine vision of the world, bringing us back to the state of original innocence, and thereby allowing us to see who God really is—“Love” (1 Jn 4:8). Thus, “all that remains now is to accept the Spirit’s invitation to transform our love into the image of Christ’s love.”[[68]](#endnote-68) All that remains is for us to allow the Spirit of God to replace our “hearts of stone” with “hearts of flesh” (Ezek 36: 26), thereby healing our distorted vision of reality by giving us a share in the divine vision. The man who craves love but simultaneously experiences a shame so deep that he refuses to accept this love, through the grace of God won by the Cross of Christ, can once again see and receive the love which fulfills the deepest recesses of his heart, giving his life the direction, meaning, and fullness that had once been lost through sin. His life is restored and his vision cleared and broadened through participation in the divine vision, which makes sense of the fullness of reality.

Through participating in the divine vision, man again views the world through the logic of the gift. He once more glimpses the harmony of all of creation in God’s original plan. Receiving the wisdom of the Lord, he can make sense of what was previously senseless. Even the concepts—which previously stood before him as incompatible and incommensurable—reveal themselves as harmonious unities expressing an inner logic. Such is the case with justice and mercy. The previous tension and incommensurability that they possessed as seen through the lens of concupiscence washes away in the light of God’s clear vision of gift and love. As such, we can now discuss and properly define justice and mercy.

## Mercy and Justice Defined

How are justice and mercy to be properly defined so as to reveal this harmony and inner logic? Clarifying the true definitions for these terms offers us a starting point. Properly defined, Justice consists in giving someone what he is due, this “someone” including both God and neighbor. Defining mercy remains a bit more difficult. Etiologically, mercy derives from *misericordis*, which means “opening ones heart to wretchedness.”[[69]](#endnote-69) Mercy is understood as a kind of sorrow; it is “being affected with sorrow at the misery of another as though it were his own,”[[70]](#endnote-70) and seeking to dispel this misery. St. John Paul II understands mercy as a specific dimension of love, stating mercy is the “…love [that] is greater than sin, than weakness, than the ‘futility of creation’, it is stronger than death…” (*RH* 9); “…mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man” (*DM* 6). In sum, mercy is the love that, when seeing another in misery, feels compassion for him, and then reaches out to him in order to heal his misery; in its broadest sense, mercy is “love’s second name” (*DM* 7). Thus, already by defining the terms justice and mercy correctly, we see that they do not need to be understood as opposed to one another. If justice is giving another what is his due, than if someone is in a state of misery, reaching out to him in an act of mercy would in fact be doing him justice; in other words, by helping him out of his misery, one would be giving him his due.

St. John Paul II’s teachings on mercy in his encyclicals *Redemptor hominis* and *Dives in misericordia* help us to deepen this insight, understanding mercy and justice as complementary. It would benefit us to explore these encyclicals and their teachings here. In both of these encyclicals, St. John Paul II contemplates the mystery of the cross. By examining the cross, St. John Paul II states it shows us that, “The God of creation is revealed as the God of redemption, as the God who is ‘faithful to himself,’ and faithful to his love for man and the world, which he revealed on the day of creation. His is a love that does not draw back before anything that justice requires in him” (*RH* 10). As noted by St. John Paul II, God remains faithful to His promises. He remains faithful to Himself and to us. In the beginning, by creating the world and establishing an order to the whole of creation, in a certain sense, God “promised” Himself and us that He would give us the means to live in harmony with the rest of creation and one another. This promise of God reveals what is our “due” from Him and His “due” to Himself. In justice, God owes it to Himself to keep His promises. In justice, God is required to give us the means to our salvation, even when that means He must do so through the surrendering of His Only Begotten Son’s life. Although this sounds harsh and perhaps unmerciful, through remaining faithful to Himself and to us, God is expressing the fullness of mercy. To contradict Himself and His plan for the whole of creation from “the beginning” (Gen 1:1) simply in order to spare His Son, to selfishly “take the easy way out” and refuse to suffer in any way, to abandon His promises and go back on His word—not only would that be unjust, but it would also be unmerciful.

Thus, justice is also revealed as mercy: by remaining faithful to Himself and to us, God refuses to abandon His word, drawing us out of the misery of our weaknesses and sins, and granting us the means to attain eternal life. As St. John Paul II writes:

Therefore ‘for our sake (God) made him (the Son) to be sin who knew no sin.’ If he ‘made to be sin’ him who was without any sin whatever, it was to reveal the love that is always greater than the whole of creation, the love that is he himself, since ‘God is love.’ Above all, love is greater than sin, than weakness, than the ‘futility of creation,’ it is stronger than death; it is a love always ready to raise up and forgive…This revelation of love is also described as mercy (*RH* 10).

God reveals His mercy in sending His own Son to redeem us. Yet simultaneously, this act of mercy is required of Him through justice. Clarifying the relationship between justice and mercy even further, St. John Paul II writes:

…mercy is in a certain sense contrasted with God's justice, and in many cases is shown to be not only more powerful than that justice but also more profound… nevertheless love is "greater" than justice: greater in the sense that it is primary and fundamental. Love, so to speak, conditions justice and, in the final analysis, justice serves love. The primacy and superiority of love vis-à-vis justice—this is a mark of the whole of revelation—are revealed precisely through mercy…Mercy differs from justice, but is not in opposition to it (*DM* 4).

Thus, although justice and mercy are not opposed, justice serves mercy but not vice versa. In other words, love—specifically that dimension of love known as mercy—subsumes justice and extends infinitely beyond it. Mercy does not destroy justice in any manner; rather, mercy gives what is due and then gives even more. Mercy coincides with generosity in that it achieves justice but rather than stop at this bare minimum, mercy desires to give even more than what is required.

Perhaps an example will help illustrate this relationship between justice and mercy. Further below, I will provide another example from St. John Paul II, but a brief example from St. Thomas Aquinas clarifies this relationship well. St. Thomas states that if a man owes another person $100, he acts justly when he repays the $100 and nothing more. However, the man acts mercifully when he not only pays back the $100, but he goes beyond what strict justice requires and pays $200. In other words, he goes beyond the $100 minimum required of him, and gives the extra money as a gift. In this sense, “mercy does not destroy justice, but in a sense is the fullness thereof.”[[71]](#endnote-71) Mercy goes beyond justice because of the goodness of the giver, who seeks not only to give what is due, but to give a gift too.

## Creation as Gift

We can deepen our understanding of this relationship between justice and mercy by turning to the mystery of creation itself, where both justice and mercy are present. Looking to the mystery of creation, we must keep in mind that God always acts for the sake of His own goodness, truth, and beauty. Everything He does is out of an acknowledgement of a kind of “debt” He “owes” to Himself. He “owes” it to Himself to be what He is: the superabundant and generous fullness of Being, a communion of fruitful Love. Acting with creative love is therefore, for God, always acting with justice toward Himself. Thus, justice is present in the act of creation, as God gives Himself His “due.” Simultaneously, in the act of creation, mercy is present. For God “owes” nothing to anyone outside of Himself, as no one yet exists. The act of creation cannot therefore be an act of justice towards anyone but God. Yet, God does create the universe. In so doing, He creates not out of justice towards the world but out of mercy towards the world. Through His bringing creatures into existence from non-existence, He goes beyond the demands of justice, in an act of mercy—“love’s second name” (*DM* 7). Because He is Love (1 Jn 4:8)—because He is Mercy—God creates the world out of sheer generosity and goodness; He seeks to bring us out of the “misery” of nothingness in order that we too may share in His life of Love. He draws us out of our nothingness, out of “the abyss” (Gen 1:2), to give us a share in His abundant goodness. In Christ’s words to St. Faustina, **“Everything that exists has come forth from the very depths of My most tender mercy.”[[72]](#endnote-72)**

St. John Paul II explains God’s act of creation not in terms of mercy, but in terms of gift. Reflecting on what he says allows us to see the relationship between mercy and gift. Concerning God’s mercy in the act of creation, St. John Paul II writes, “creation thus means not only calling from nothing to existence… it also signifies gift; a fundamental and ‘radical’ gift, that is, an act of giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothing.”[[73]](#endnote-73) As a “fundamental” and “radical” gift, creation is precisely an act of mercy. Creation is wholly gratuitous, wholly unearned, wholly undeserved. It is illogical in a certain sense. The gift extends beyond mere justice; there is no reason for the giving other than the sheer goodness and joy that results from the gift being shared. Such a revelation about the giftedness of creation reaffirms the truth about mercy. Mercy extends beyond justice, beyond our trying to prove ourselves. Mercy—another name for God’s Love—is so powerful that it brings us into existence, as a sheer gift from Him, wholly surpassing our understanding. Thus, an act of mercy is nothing other than an offer of a gift. Mercy and gift interpenetrate, becoming two ways of revealing the same gratuitous Love of the Creator.

What do such reflections then teach us? They teach us a new and eye-opening way to define sin, which we will do now. In our manner of viewing the world through the lens of concupiscence, we often forget that all of creation is a gift from God’s abundant Love and Mercy. We often forget that “God *is* Love” (1 Jn 4:8)[[74]](#endnote-74) and Mercy. Like the first man in the garden, who accepted the tempter’s motivations that cast “doubt on the Gift and on Love, from which creation takes its origin as gift,”[[75]](#endnote-75) we too distrust God’s goodness. In other words, we too view the Lover with suspicion, and in doing so we fail to accept the divine gift of love. For love can only be given and received in an act of trust, in an act of self-surrender that views the lover without any trace of suspicion. When we fail to trust God and see creation as a gift of His love, when we doubt the Goodness and Love of the Creator, we sin, denying ourselves the love which we so desperately crave, the love that gives meaning and fulfillment to our very lives. In essence, this is sin: doubting God’s goodness and therefore refusing to give and receive love. Sin is a refusal to receive our lives as a gift of love from God, a refusal to allow God to love us, therefore fulfilling the deepest longings of our hearts.

## Redemption as Gift

But as we have already mentioned, God does not allow us to perish in our sins. No. God continuously offers us His gift, His mercy. Thus, after creating us in love, He redeems us in love. We must now look at this continuity between creation and redemption, seeing how God remains faithful to Himself and to us, and how the nature and logic of gift enable us to understand this great act of redemption.

Through our sin, we doubt God’s goodness, we doubt that He “is Love” (1 Jn 4:8), and we are tempted to believe that, although creation was originally a gift of love that we could not have merited, once we were given this gift, in order to keep it we must earn it through our good works. Such an understanding is only part of the truth. For as we explored at the beginning of this paper, a gift requires not only gratuity on the part of the giver but also a receptive response on the part of the receiver. In this sense, it is indeed true that once we’ve been given the gift of creation we must do something in response. But, it is important to remember that the response to a gift is not the same kind of giving as the offering of a gift. Instead, the reception is a giving of a different, complementary kind. Thus, the response to the gift of creation is not an earning of our continued existence through good works, but is rather a stance of gratitude that seeks to actively receive the gift—the gift of life and love—that is offered from the Creator.

But as we know, we do not do this. We sin. We mistrust the Creator and refuse to receive the gift of His love. We think that because of our sins, we no longer deserve this gift of love and we must reject it even though we so desperately crave it with the entirety of our being. How can we avoid such refusal of the gift? By continually reminding ourselves that love is *always* a gift, it is *always* an act of mercy, and “God is [indeed] Love” (1 Jn 4:8). As we have already seem, when man turned away from God through sin, God did not leave him on his own to languish in fear and shame. Rather, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). God did not just create us in an act of mercy and then demand that we earn His love in order to remain in existence. The Creator Who is abundant, generous Love and Mercy did not suddenly change into a God of strict justice and equal exchange, demanding repayment for our coming into being. Rather, when we turned away from Him through sin, He remained the same; He never ceased to be Love and Mercy Itself. He keeps His word. He sustains us in the existence He has gifted to us in creating us. He remains faithful to Himself. He remains faithful to us. Taking it upon Himself to create us in Love, He takes it upon Himself to redeem us in Love. After we sin and turn away from His gift, in His mercy He draws us out of our “misery,” out of our sin, offering us forgiveness if we repent and are willing to accept it.

God sends His Son for this purpose. Christ comes to remind us, to reveal to us, that from all of eternity, God is a God of Mercy. Christ makes mercy known and even:

makes it incarnate and personifies it. He Himself, in a certain sense, is mercy. To the person who sees it in Him—and finds it in Him—God becomes ‘visible’ in a particular way as the Father who is rich in mercy (*DM* 2).

Mercy, which “appears as a correlative to the interior experience of individuals languishing in a state of guilt or enduring every kind of suffering and misfortune” (*DM* 4), is God’s response upon seeing the first man suffering from shame in the garden. Sending His Son to bring us back to “original innocence,” to bring us back into a participation in the divine vision of the world—the hermeneutic of the gift—God the Father reveals His Mercy. He reveals that, in Christ’s words to St. Faustina, “**The greater the sinner, the greater the right he has to My mercy.**”[[76]](#endnote-76)

All of this being said, we can begin to glimpse the continuity between our creation and our redemption, even in the midst of their differences. Showing mercy in the act of creation, God created *ex nihilo*, meaning, He created out of nothing; as St. John Paul II says, creation is “a fundamental and ‘radical’ gift, that is, an act of giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothing.”[[77]](#endnote-77) In the gift of creation, the capacity for receiving the gift is itself given to the creation. Redemption is slightly different. For God does not redeem nothing, He redeems something. Thus, in redemption, the capacity for receiving the gift is presupposed and necessary. In other words, God willed to create us without help on our part, but He does not will to redeem us without help on our part. When God offers us the gift of our creation, He gives us the capacity to receive our very selves. When God offers us the gift of our redemption, we already possess the capacity to receive our selves; thus, we must simply exercise this capacity, humbly receiving the gift that is being offered. We do not earn this redemption through good works, for the response to a gift is not the same kind of giving as the offering of a gift. The reception is a giving of a different, complementary kind. Thus, in receiving the gift of redemption, we give God the gift of turning away from a life of sin. In other words, we trust in God’s goodness and humbly submit to His will, trying our best to receive His love by being obedient to Him, Who knows us and loves us even more than we know and love ourselves.

## The Parable of the Prodigal Son

An example that illustrates this act of receiving redemption would serve us well. St. John Paul II provides us with a perfect example in *Dives in misericordia* when he reflects on Christ’s Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Parable of the Prodigal Son beautifully captures the relationship between justice and mercy understood through the hermeneutic of gift, illustrating the continuity between creation and redemption. For St. John Paul II states, this parable “expresses the essence of the divine mercy in a particularly clear way” (*DM* 5). In this story of the father and his two sons, the seemingly confusing and contradictory ideas of justice and mercy fall into place.

Found in Luke 15:11-32, the Parable of the Prodigal Son tells the story of a father with two sons. The younger son asked his father for his share of the inheritance, and upon receiving his possessions, he went to a distant land “where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation” (Lk 15:13). When famine struck that country, the younger son attempted to find work to keep from starving. “Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger” (Lk 15:17). Getting up, he planned to go home, repent to his father, and ask him to receive him back as a hired worker. The younger son began to make his way home, and “While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). Repenting, the younger son speaks to his father stating, “‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son’” (Lk 15:21). But the father hears none of his words, ordering the servants to clothe him with the “finest robe…put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet,” and to “Take the fattened calf and slaughter it” and “celebrate with a feast” (Lk 15:22-23). When the older son “heard the sound of music and dancing” (Lk 15:25), he inquired one of the servants as to what it might mean. The servant replied, “‘Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound’” (Lk 15:27). Hearing such a response, the older brother was filled with anger and refused to join in the celebration. His father came to bring him inside, but the older son complained that even though he had never disobeyed his father’s orders, he had never received such an elaborate feast. Replying to the older son the father “said to him, ‘My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.’ But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found’” (Lk 15:31-32).

Commenting on this parable in his encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, St. John Paul II writes:

“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…” (*DM* 5).

St. John Paul II continues to observe that, according to the order of justice, “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” (*DM* 5). Because the son squandered his father’s property, the father owes it to himself to take his son back as a servant in order to repay the lost property. The father does this. Yet in so doing, the father goes beyond the demands of justice. Rather than merely receive his son as a hired servant—thereby justly receiving back his lost, squandered property—the father looks upon his son with mercy. Through his merciful gaze, the sees his son despite his sins. He does not limit his vision to the strict demands of justice, but rather opens himself to the unlimited vision of love, manifest as mercy. Thus, in his mercy, the father restores the son to his original relationship. As St. John Paul II puts the matter, “The father of the prodigal son is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love that he had always lavished on his son” (*DM* 6).

This love, this mercy, can only be described adequately as gift-love, or love manifest as gift. As gift, this love is wholly gratuitous yet simultaneously it demands a response. At the beginning of the parable, neither son understands this relationship of gratuity and response required by a gift. The younger son believes that the father will give him his share of the inheritance despite his manner of conduct; thus, he takes his possessions and goes away, assuming that the gratuity of the gift demands no sustained response on his part. Conversely, the older son believes he must work to earn his inheritance; thus, he remains with the father serving him and never disobeying his orders (see Lk 15:29), assuming that through this work he will earn the gift. Thus, in the younger and the older son respectively, we see manifest the two opposing views of mercy and justice, salvation through faith versus salvation through good works. Yet neither son properly understands the nature of a gift. It is through the father’s act of mercy—through his receiving the younger son back into his status as son in an act of gift-love—that the true nature of gift shines forth. Neither the older nor the younger son ever “*deserve[s]* to be called…son” (Lk 15:19);[[78]](#endnote-78) the status of son-ship is not something that one can earn, for it is a sheer and utter gift given in the act of pro-creation. Yet at the same time, the sons must receive their being as son through living a continuous relationship with the father. Living with him in a reciprocal relationship of love—a reciprocal giving and receiving of the gift—the father can truly say, and the son can truly believe, that “everything I have is yours” (Lk 15:31). This generous giving and sharing of all of his possessions on the part of the father is not due to the sons’ desert, but rather resides wholly in the father’s gratuitous, merciful love.

Thus, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the father’s act of mercy reveals to his sons that the relationship between them and he is and always was a sheer and utter gift; they were created in love and are sustained in love. Despite the younger son’s turning away from him in “a life of dissipation” (Lk 15:13), the father remains faithful to his fatherhood, thereby remaining faithful to himself and faithful to his son. Thus, as St. John Paul II helps to make clear, justice and mercy are not opposed. Rather, mercy not only upholds justice, but it also opens our vision to the logic of gift—the logic of love—that extends beyond justice’s strict boundaries. It is only through gift that these seemingly opposed concepts attain a harmonious resolution, and it is only through this understanding of gift that redemption can be properly understood. As St. Paul states, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the *gift* of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:8-9).[[79]](#endnote-79)

# V. Objections to Divine Mercy

Truly the logic of the gift allows us to once again understand the relationship between justice and mercy, creation and redemption, and the love between the creature and the Creator. However, our sinful selves can still react to such ideas and raise objections. It is fitting to look at one such objection, especially as it may have crossed some of our minds throughout our reading.

One might think, “Despite such seemingly beautiful and compelling ideas, such mercy, such generosity on the part of the giver seems to degrade the recipient of this love.” As St. John Paul II presents the matter: “…we see in mercy above all a relationship of inequality between the one offering it and the one receiving it. And, in consequence, we are quick to deduce that mercy belittles the receiver, that it offends the dignity of man” (*DM* 6). Isn’t it degrading to man to tell him that he must allow himself to be saved by God? Doesn’t this make it sound like God is a God who lords His power over man, a God who has purposely created man as a weak and vulnerable creature? If God offers us mercy, He must be looking at us and thinking, “Oh, look at that poor soul. I need to go and save it, because without me it is too helpless to do anything.” Although these words would be true in a sense—wholly separated from God we would cease to exist—they do not adequately account for our relationship with God.

Replying to this compelling objection, we must affirm that God does not belittle us as His creatures, seeing our dependency upon Him as a way of degrading us. Rather, God created us in His image and likeness, bestowing upon us a unique dignity as His sons and daughters. As we affirmed in the beginning of this paper, God is a Trinity; He is a Communion of three Divine Persons. When Christ becomes incarnate, He reveals the “the mystery of the Father and His love” (*GS* 22). In other words, whatever Christ does in the flesh is a revelation of what He has always done as the Eternal Son within the inner life of the Trinity. Therefore, the way in which mercy is achieved in salvation history is simply an unfolding of what God the Son not simply does on earth, but what He *is.* Thus, through contemplating Christ and His actions on earth, we are able to know God Himself; the Triune God is made visible in every act of Christ. On the cross, this is made especially clear. There, Christ reveals Himself as the Eternal Son, who receives His Person as a gift. Wrists nailed to the cross, Christ hangs, receiving His entire Being from the Father. He reveals that to be Son, He can only “find himself” through the “sincere gift of self” (*GS* 24). By giving His very Self in Love, He receives His Self in Love.

Yet at the same time, the Father and the Son are each distinct Persons. The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. Thus, Scripture reads:

After they had crucified him… Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, if you are the Son of God, [and] come down from the cross!’ Likewise the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him and said, “He saved others; *he cannot save himself.* So he is the king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. *He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him*. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (Mt 27: 35, 39-43).[[80]](#endnote-80)

Christ cannot save Himself. Christ—the Only Begotten Son of God, consubstantial with the Father, God Himself—cannot save Himself. Christ must allow Himself to be given the gift of His Person *as Son* through receiving His Person from the Father; He cannot be the Father or He would cease to be the Son. Therefore, in His eternal exchange of love with the Father, the Son must allow Himself to be Son. As revealed on the cross, Christ must therefore allow Himself to be saved by Another; saving Himself is not a possibility. The Father alone can save the Son, and He does so in an act of merciful love.

This act of love is not degrading or shaming, for Christ too is God. The Father does not somehow lord power over the Son, for they are One and the same Godhead. There is no competition between the Persons of the Trinity, as if One is better than the Others because of the distinctive role He plays in the Trinitarian relationship. Rather, each Person works together, equal in Love. Understanding this relationship, St. John Paul II writes concerning mercy:

An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us. If this bilateral and reciprocal quality is absent, our actions are not yet true acts of mercy (*DM* 14).

In the Godhead, each Person understands that through being His unique Self, He is allowing the Others to be their unique Selves and thus contributing to the Good of their One-ness. In this exchange of Love, there is as St. John Paul II puts it, a “bilateral and reciprocal quality” (*DM* 14). Thus, there is no superiority of one Person over the Others. Rather, there is a pure equality that allows for each Person to find His distinctive role in the Triune Communion of Love.

Although this may be true concerning the Persons of the Trinity, the question arises: Where does man fit into all of this? One is tempted to believe that because man is not equal to God, God’s act of mercy towards man cannot contain this “bilateral and reciprocal quality” (*DM* 14), and it is indeed shaming towards man. On the contrary, “‘Christ the new Adam,’…‘He who is the 'image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15), is himself the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin” (*RH* 8). Christ does not come to redeem us in some degrading, powerful way, thereby revealing His divinity. Rather, Christ comes to redeem us *as one of us*. He takes on human flesh, identifying with us to the point of death, “even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). By becoming one of us, by taking on our flesh, Christ saves us by bringing us with Him to the Father. Just like in the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity, there is no competition between Christ and man, as if He is better than the rest of creation. Rather, in Christ’s act of redemption, He humbly takes on our frail human nature, becoming one of us in all things except sin.

This mercy of God, this humble identifying with us creatures, far from degrading man’s dignity, instead elevates his dignity. Through becoming man, Christ enables man to become an adopted son or daughter of God; through our Baptisms, we too are given divine life, becoming incorporated into the “Body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27), and through Him becoming sharers in the life of the Trinitarian Love.

St. John Paul II further addresses the objection of those who misunderstand mercy to be degrading by commenting on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, stating:

The parable of the prodigal son shows…the relationship of mercy is based on the common experience of that good which is man, on the common experience of the dignity that is proper to him. This common experience makes the prodigal son begin to see himself and his actions in their full truth (this vision in truth is a genuine form of humility); on the other hand, for this very reason he becomes a particular good for his father: the father sees so clearly the good which has been achieved thanks to a mysterious radiation of truth and love, that he seems to forget all the evil which the son had committed (*DM* 6).

Man is a “common good” for himself and for God; as *Gaudium et spes* states, “man…is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself” (24). God regards man as a good in himself, recognizing man’s goodness by showing mercy towards him. As St. John Paul II observes:

It is precisely because sin exists in the world, which ‘God so loved...that he gave his only Son,’ that God, who ‘is love,’ cannot reveal Himself otherwise than as mercy. This corresponds not only to the most profound truth of that love which God is, but also to the whole interior truth of man and of the world which is man's temporary homeland (*DM* 13).

Because of sin, God can only reveal His esteem for man through loving man with the love revealed as mercy. With this merciful love, God “is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin” (*DM* 6). In this act, “the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and ‘restored to value’” (*DM* 6).

Through receiving mercy, man realizes his good as man. Contemplating the Triune God, man accepts and appreciates the fact that the Son is not the Father, and that the Father is not the Son. In an analogous way, man also realizes that it is good for him to be creature and not Creator. Christ shows us in His Person as the Eternal Son that, unlike the tempter’s lie in the garden, in order to “be like gods” (Gen 3:5), we must be like the Son. Rather than grasp for equality with God, we become like God by humbly imitating the Son, receiving our existence as a gift from the Father. By His taking on flesh, the Eternal Son reveals that it is good to be a creature, it is good to have limitations, it is good to be in need, and not to be perfectly self-sufficient and autonomous. For if we were not dependent upon God and one another for our existence, what would be the purpose for having relationships with others at all? If we did not rely on God for our creation and for our redemption, if we could just save ourselves, God could not be God—He could not be our Creator, our Savior, our Redeemer.

Truly the objection that mercy degrades the recipient is far from the truth. Yet how does one receive this mercy of God in order to understand his goodness as creature and as man? Let us look to see.

# VI. Receiving Mercy: Living Like the Son,

# Trusting in God’s Goodness and Mercy

Made in the image and likeness of God, we learn to receive mercy by imitating the Son who has become man. “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, *fully reveals man to man himself* and makes his supreme calling clear” (*GS* 22). Imitating Christ, the Eternal Son of God, “man… cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (*GS* 24). Here we need to recall what was said above, regarding the gratuitous exchange of love within the Trinity itself, an exchange of love that is then imaged by the call of the human person to love. Like the Persons of the Blessed Trinity, man finds himself—his fulfillment—in making himself a gift to God in love. For man who “cannot live without love” (*RH* 10), must give himself to the source of love—God—who is Love Itself. By doing so, man allows the Holy Spirit to dwell within his heart, transforming it into an image of Christ’s love. St. John Paul II tells us, “It is the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and the Spirit of Truth, who guides us along the ways of Divine Mercy.”[[81]](#endnote-81) The Holy Spirit not only convinces the world of its sin, but He also “makes known the fullness of salvation in Christ.”[[82]](#endnote-82) As such:

On the one hand, the Holy Spirit enables us, through Christ’s Cross, to acknowledge sin, every sin, in the full dimension of evil, which it contains and inwardly conceals. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit permits us, again through Christ’s Cross, to see sin in the light of the *mysterium pietatis*, that is, of the merciful and forgiving love of God (cf. *DV* 32).

Consequently, this ‘convincing concerning sin’ also becomes a conviction that sin can be laid aside and that man can be restored to his dignity as a son beloved of God. Indeed, the Cross ‘is the most profound condescension of God to man [...]. The Cross is like a touch of eternal love upon the most painful wounds of man’s earthly existence’ (*DM* 8).[[83]](#endnote-83)

By contemplating Christ on the cross, we can know the extent of God’s love—God’s mercy—for us. By reflecting on this mercy, by receiving it and allowing it to permeate the core of or being, we glimpse our goodness, our dignity as God’s sons and daughters. We begin to once again see ourselves through His eyes—through the eyes of love—which are not blinded by concupiscence and sin. Seeing with His vision, which is none other than the hermeneutic of gift, we truly begin to live life abundantly, tasting the eternal life that is to come. As St. John Paul II states,

The Heart of Christ! His "Sacred Heart" has given men everything:  redemption, salvation, sanctification…Through the mystery of this wounded heart, the restorative tide of God's merciful love continues to spread over the men and women of our time. Here alone can those who long for true and lasting happiness find its secret.[[84]](#endnote-84)

Through contemplating Christ, Who makes mercy “incarnate and personifies it” (*DM* 2), man can begin to understand his lofty calling as an adopted son of God. Yet, because of his sin and shame, the temptation always threatens him to think that he must somehow deserve this mercy or otherwise reject it. Recognizing the evil of which he is capable and observing the evil present in the world, man finds it easy to doubt God’s goodness and love. “Modern man often anxiously wonders about the solution to the terrible tensions which have built up in the world and which entangle humanity. And if at times he lacks the courage to utter the word ‘mercy,’ or if in his conscience empty of religious content he does not find the equivalent” (*DM* 15), he is tempted to fall into despair, loosing all confidence in life’s goodness. Without the experience of love, man’s life “becomes senseless” (*RH* 10). In order to once again realize the goodness of God, the goodness of his self, and the goodness of the rest of creation, man must encounter mercy. For as Christ tells St. Faustina, “**Humanity will not find peace until it turns trustfully to Divine Mercy.**”[[85]](#endnote-85) St. John Paul II teaches:

This consoling message [of Divine Mercy] is addressed above all to those who, afflicted by a particularly harsh trial or crushed by the weight of the sins they committed, have lost all confidence in life and are tempted to give in to despair. To them the gentle face of Christ is offered; those rays from his heart touch them and shine upon them, warm them, show them the way and fill them with hope. How many souls have been consoled by the prayer "Jesus, I trust in you", which Providence intimated through Sr Faustina! This simple act of abandonment to Jesus dispels the thickest clouds and lets a ray of light penetrate every life.[[86]](#endnote-86)

Thus, man must humble himself, trusting that God indeed loves him despite his sinfulness. Trust is the key to man’s joy and fulfillment. By trusting in the Lord’s word, by trusting in the Person of Christ who demonstrated this love to the point of death, by trusting that this love is true, man can attain rest and joy. Trust is both the theme of St. Faustina’s Diary and the key to viewing life through the lens of gift and Divine Mercy. St. John Paul II understands and stresses its importance, knowing that only in trusting God can we receive His gift of mercy, therefore gaining our redemption and our salvation.

St. John Paul II writes:

Mercy in itself, as a perfection of the infinite God, is also infinite. Also infinite therefore and inexhaustible is the Father's readiness to receive the prodigal children who return to His home. Infinite are the readiness and power of forgiveness, which flow continually from the marvelous value of the sacrifice of the Son. No human sin can prevail over this power or even limit it. On the part of man only a lack of good will can limit it, a lack of readiness to be converted and to repent, in other words persistence in obstinacy, opposing grace and truth, especially in the face of the witness of the cross and resurrection of Christ (*DM* 13).

No sin can exclude the sinner from the mercy, the love, of God. Yet if man fails to believe this truth, if he fails to trust in God’s infinite goodness, he excludes himself from the forgiveness he so desires. To understand this, let us consider two alternative endings to the Parable of the Prodigal Son.[[87]](#endnote-87)

## The Parable of the Prodigal Son: Alternate Endings

First, let us consider the scenario where the prodigal son had taken his inheritance, squandered it on a life of loose living, and began to starve in a foreign country, thinking to himself, “How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger” (Lk 15:17). Yet rather than resolve to get up and go to his father, begging him to hire him as one of his hired workers, the son instead thinks to himself, “Father will not take me back and will not want to see me after I squandered his inheritance. I deserve to starve in this foreign land, because what I have done is beyond forgiveness. I should not go back home to even ask my father to hire me as a servant because even that is too good of a reward for what I have done. I must instead remain here, starving as a punishment for my many sins.” Such thoughts, such despair, are rooted in the conviction that the father lacks the goodness to accept his son and that the son lacks the goodness to deserve a second chance. In other words, the son’s refusal to go to his father reveals a lack of trust in his father’s goodness and in his own goodness. Remaining obstinate in this belief, refusing to go to the father to even ask for a second chance, the son excludes himself from receiving the mercy that he so desperately needs.

A second alternate ending to the parable can also reveal a similar belief. Perhaps the prodigal son, after squandering his inheritance and finding himself dying of hunger, does decide to go to the father and ask to be hired as a servant. Yet, when the father sees his son and orders his servants to clothe him with the “finest robe…put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet,” and to “Take the fattened calf and slaughter it” and “celebrate with a feast” (Lk 15:22-23), the son refuses. He insists, “Father, I cannot accept this robe, these sandals, or this ring. I cannot accept a party in my honor. I want to work as your servant. Please, allow me to repay you for all that I have lost. I refuse to be treated with this extravagance.” Thus, even though the son believes in the goodness of his father enough to approach him and ask for forgiveness, he refuses to believe in his own goodness, stubbornly insisting on the strict rules of justice and the need to earn his way back to a relationship with the father. Once again, the son does not allow the father to show him mercy, and he instead insists on seeing himself as lacking goodness and needing to earn it back.

Although these two alternate endings are clearly different, in each one, the son thinks that refusing mercy is better than receiving mercy. The son believes that by punishing himself, he is getting what he deserves. Yet, through St. Faustina, Christ tells us that the converse is true: “**The greater the sinner, the greater the right he has to My mercy.**”[[88]](#endnote-88) A refusal of mercy is precisely *not* what the son in the parable deserves. He cannot remedy his evil with evil; rather, he must remedy his evil with good. The son deserves to be healed of his wounds with the medicine of mercy.

To receive this love, the son must trust in his father’s goodness and in his own goodness. Rather than think that he is being humble by refusing mercy, saying that he is “too bad” for such a gift, in a paradoxical way he is actually acting with great pride. By refusing the gift of mercy he is actually saying, “I know you think that I’m good and you want to bestow this gift on me. But unfortunately you’re wrong. I cannot accept your gift. I know what I am—I am a wretched sinner. By treating me as something that is good, you are mistaken.” In other words, “I’m right and you’re wrong. There’s nothing that you can say to convince me otherwise.” Such “humility,” which insists on one’s sinfulness, is nothing but a twisted form of pride. To humble himself truly, the son must say, “Although I can think of myself only as a wretched sinner, although I cannot see anything good left in myself, although I firmly believe that there is nothing in me worth your love, *nevertheless* I accept your love. I trust that whatever good you see in me is truly present there, even if it is hidden under a heap of sins. I trust that your word is true, and I trust that you can and do love me despite my un-deservedness.” True humility is rooted in trust. The man of humility understands that love is a gift, and he resolves to receive this gift despite the many times that he has refused it in the past. Thus, the true ending of the Parable of the Prodigal Son—the son’s returning to his father and allowing his father to forgive him and endow him with the gift of mercy—reveals an act of authentic humility. The son’s humble return reveals a trust in his father’s goodness, as well as a trust that his father’s judgment is correct and that he too is indeed “very good” (Gen 1:31).

## Humility: Believing that God’s Mercy Can Forgive Any Sin

Thus, rather than allow himself to have the last word, man must humble himself and allow the Lord to have the last word, trusting that the Lord can and does know better than he. He must listen to the Lord’s words and allow them to take root in his heart. For He says, **“Let the sinner not be afraid to approach Me. The flames of mercy are burning Me—clamoring to be spent; I want to pour them out upon these souls.”[[89]](#endnote-89)** Contrary to the sinner’s beliefs, further punishment for his sins is precisely what God would *not* want for him. Rather, God desires to forgive his sins. As He tells St. Faustina:

My mercy is greater than your sins and those of the entire world. Who can measure the extent of My goodness? For you I descended from heaven to earth; for you I allowed Myself to be nailed to the cross; for you I let My Sacred Heart be pierced with a lance, thus opening wide the source of mercy for you. Come, then, with trust to draw graces from this fountain. I never reject a contrite heart. Your misery has disappeared in the depths of My mercy. *Do not argue with Me about your wretchedness.* You will give Me pleasure if you hand over to Me all your troubles and griefs. I shall heap upon you the treasures of My grace.[[90]](#endnote-90)

Rather than argue with the Lord, rather than refuse His loving mercy, the sinner pleases the Lord by accepting this great mercy in trust. In a certain sense, the sinner has mercy on the Lord through receiving this offer of mercy. For as St. John Paul II states, “An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us” (*DM* 14). If in giving mercy we are simultaneously receiving mercy, so too through receiving mercy we are simultaneously giving mercy. Thus, by receiving the Lord’s mercy, we are able to “have ‘mercy’ towards the Crucified One.”[[91]](#endnote-91) Through trusting in the Lord’s mercy, through allowing Him to endow us with this gift even though it may be difficult for us to accept, we allow the Lord to be Himself—our Savior and Redeemer. Continuously living trust as a way of life, receiving all as a gift from the Mercy of God, we give God great joy; **“no soul that has called upon My mercy has been disappointed or brought to shame. I delight particularly in a soul which has placed its trust in My goodness.”[[92]](#endnote-92)** When we sin, rather than hide in shame as Adam did in the garden, rather than doubt the Lord’s goodness, we must go before Him like His Son, imploring His mercy, and trusting that He is who He says He is: Love and Mercy Itself.

As St. John Paul II correctly states, “People can… run from the truth as soon as they glimpse it because they are afraid of its demands” (*FR* 28). Yet the Lord’s mercy is even gentler than we think it is. For if the Lord desires to give us this gift, He gives us the grace to accept it telling us: “**of yourself you can do nothing;**”[[93]](#endnote-93) “**Without special help from Me, you are not even capable of accepting My graces.**”[[94]](#endnote-94) He is there, helping us to accept His mercy, even when we are not aware of His presence. There is no reason to be afraid.

Thus, we must imitate Christ and actively receive the Lord’s mercy, convinced that no sin is too great to have destroyed our right to His Mercy and Love. Truly, “**The greater the sinner, the greater the right he has to My mercy**.”[[95]](#endnote-95)

Yes, salvation is a gift, just as creation is a gift, and redemption is a gift. The God of Love never ceases to reveal Himself as the Giver of good gifts. Truly salvation is not a test from God as to whether or not you merit heaven:

“My merits *are nothing*; they are not what give me the unlimited confidence that I feel in my heart. They are, to tell the truth, the spiritual riches that *render one unjust* when one rests in them with complacence and when one believes they are *something great.* …Ah! I really feel that it is not this at all that pleases God in my little soul; what pleases Him is that *He sees me loving my littleness and my poverty, the blind hope that I have in His mercy*… that it my only treasure.”[[96]](#endnote-96)

Salvation is a gift—a wholly unearned offer of merciful love from Love Himself; as St. John Paul II declares, “We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us…”[[97]](#endnote-97) Nevertheless, as a gift, this love must be received, and its reception is not merely passive; St. John Paul II’s statement continues, “we are the sum of the Father's love for us *and* our real capacity to become the image of his Son.”[[98]](#endnote-98) Receiving the gift is achieved in an *act* of love, an *act* of trust that imitates the active receptivity of the Son to love and through love. Thus, we must strive throughout the whole of our lives to receive this gift of love and to extend it to others. At each and every moment of our lives, we must trustingly and lovingly submit ourselves to the will of God, despite the difficulties it may bring or the seemingly “unloving” way He expresses this love. For:

“…**Souls on fire with love cannot remain inactive**. Like Mary, they may sit at the feet of Jesus, listening while His gentle words inflame their love, **giving Him nothing, so it seems, and yet giving Him more than a Martha** who is anxious about ‘*many things*’ (Luke 10:41).”[[99]](#endnote-99)

Salvation lies not in our good works, but in our active, living trust that God is Who He says He is: Love and Mercy Itself. In this humble resignation to do the Lord’s will—to sit at His feet like Mary and receive our being as a gift from Him—we give Him the gift of being our Redeemer and Savior. Thus, our reception is a giving, just of a different kind—“giving and accepting the gift interpenetrate in such a way that the very act of giving becomes acceptance, and acceptance transforms itself into giving.”[[100]](#endnote-100) When this profound and humbling process takes place throughout one’s life, salvation is won.

## “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Mt 5:7).

Resting in God—resting in the Love that we desire with an infinite yearning—we cannot help but allow this love to overflow from the depths of our being, extending it to others. St. John Paul II tells us:

In the humiliated and suffering Christ, believers and non-believers can admire a surprising solidarity, which binds him to our human condition beyond all imaginable measure. The Cross, even after the Resurrection of the Son of God, ‘speaks and never ceases to speak of God the Father, who is absolutely faithful to his eternal love for man.... Believing in this love means believing in mercy’ (*DM* 7). Let us thank the Lord for his love, which is stronger than death and sin. It is revealed and put into practice as mercy in our daily lives, and prompts every person in turn to have ‘mercy’ towards the Crucified One.[[101]](#endnote-101)

By Christ’s taking on human flesh and incorporating humanity into the “Body of Christ,” He thereby enables man to show mercy on God Himself. Through having mercy on our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not only having mercy on them, but we are also having mercy on ourselves and on the Crucified Christ. For, as was previously cited, “An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us” (*DM* 14). This profound event takes place when we give ourselves wholly to the Lord in a gift that seeks to receive His gift of mercy. This gift of self is not easy; as St. John Paul II states:

It is not easy to love with a deep love, which lies in the authentic gift of self. This love can only be learned by penetrating the mystery of God's love. Looking at him, being one with his fatherly heart, we are able to look with new eyes at our brothers and sisters, with an attitude of unselfishness and solidarity, of generosity and forgiveness. All this is mercy![[102]](#endnote-102)

By penetrating the love that God has for us, we are able to receive this love by giving it to others. Such an act can only be done with the help of the Lord, help that is itself a gift of mercy. Thus, by showing mercy to another, we are allowing them (and God who is working in and through them) to show mercy to us. Loving is difficult, and so too, receiving love is difficult. Yet God desires we learn to love in this way—He desires that we learn to love through giving a “sincere gift of …self” (*GS* 24)—because He knows that “man cannot find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (*GS* 24). He desires we learn to love in this way because He knows that with the help of His grace we can indeed love with this kind of self-gift. Thus, God alone truly sees the dignity and value of man, loving us infinitely more than we love ourselves, and knowing that “through Him, with Him, in Him; in the unity of the Holy Spirit” man is made capable of loving through giving a gift of self “forever and ever.”[[103]](#endnote-103)

St. John Paul II articulates the logic of the gift to reveal to us the logic of Love through which God operates. Made in God’s image, man is called to live such love, participating in the divine vision and the divine life. Man who “cannot live without love” (*RH* 10) can do this insofar as he receives love from the Source of Love—God Himself. In receiving this love, man simultaneously gives love to the Creator: “giving and accepting the gift interpenetrate in such a way that the very act of giving becomes acceptance, and acceptance transforms itself into giving.”[[104]](#endnote-104) Only through loving with this profound love, only through giving a gift of ourselves to the Lord by receiving His gift of mercy, can we find the happiness for which we are made; truly “Happiness is being rooted in Love.”[[105]](#endnote-105) Even though man spoiled this experience of “being rooted in Love” when he first sinned, through God’s mercy, man has been redeemed. “In his time, Christ was to be a witness to this irrevocable love of the Creator and Father, which had already expressed itself in the mystery of creation.”[[106]](#endnote-106) This love is synonymous with mercy. Therefore, even after man’s fall and experience of sin, he can return to the “grace of original innocence”[[107]](#endnote-107) through receiving the grace won for him by Christ’s taking on flesh and dying to restore him to new life. As Christ teaches in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, this merciful love is always offered to man, despite the gravity of his sins. All man must do is trust in God’s goodness, receiving such love as he receives a gift. Rather than refuse the gift and rather than attempt to pay for the gift through a repayment of proportional value, man must respond to the gift in a complementary and fitting manner: that of humble receptivity. Although the love—the mercy—offered to him is wholly unearned and undeserved, through receiving it as he receives a gift, he gives the Giver great joy. St. John Paul II exclaims:

As a gift to humanity, which sometimes seems bewildered and overwhelmed by the power of evil, selfishness and fear, the Risen Lord offers his love that pardons, reconciles and reopens hearts to love. It is a love that converts hearts and gives peace. How much the world needs to understand and accept Divine Mercy![[108]](#endnote-108)

May we too pray with this great mercy saint, trusting in the Lord’s great mercy and love, trusting in His goodness and receiving His love, His mercy, as the gift that it is, thereby giving ourselves as gifts to the Lord Himself:

Lord, who reveal the Father's love by your death and Resurrection, we believe in you and confidently repeat to you today: Jesus, I trust in you, have mercy upon us and upon the whole world.”[[109]](#endnote-109)

End Notes

1. When I use the term “man” throughout the text, I am using it in the sense of “human being,” whether man or woman. I intend the term to be inclusive of the entire human race. In doing this, I have no intention to exclude or subordinate women to men; I merely seek consistency throughout the text, using the term that is able to encompass both man and woman. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The same comment as in the previous footnote applies to pronouns. Although masculine, I intend these to include the whole of “human being.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. All Scripture references are taken from the Bible published on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ website at http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/index.cfm [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in misericordia*, November 30, 1980, 7. (Original at *AAS* 72 [1980], 1177-1232). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Throughout the text, I capitalize the first letter of all words referring to God including pronouns. I do this to indicate respect for God’s Personhood, which is greater than our own. Again, I use the masculine pronouns with no intention to call God masculine. God is immaterial and the source of all being, and as such, He contains both genders within Himself. I choose to use the masculine pronouns simply to keep with the tradition of the Catholic Church. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Charles E. Rice, “Evangelization: The Law and Public Morality,” in *The Church’s Mission of Evangelization*, 321. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis*, March 4, 1979, 9. (Original at *AAS* 71 [1979], 259-324). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *TOB*, 241. Emphasis in original. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Pope John Paul II *Regina caeli* message for Divine Mercy Sunday, April 3, 2005, 2. (Original at *AAS* 97 [2005:4], 685-689). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Michael E. Gaitley, MIC, *The Second Greatest Story Ever Told: Now is the Time of Mercy* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2015), 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 158-159. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 158-159. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Saint Faustina Kowalska, *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2014), 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The words of this sentence are specifically in boldface type. The reason for this is that the boldface words come as citations from the *Diary of Saint Faustina*, in which Jesus’ words always appear in boldface type. As such, I follow this convention. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Gaitley, *The Second Greatest Story Ever Told: Now is the Time of Mercy*, 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy* (New York: Random House, 2016), 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *TOB*, 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Fulton J. Sheen, *Three to Get Married* (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 1996), 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *TOB*, 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: with Modifications from the Editio Typica* (Washington, D.C./ Vatican: United States Catholic Conference, Inc./Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dominum et vivificantem*, May 18, 1986, 10. (original at *AAS* 78 [1986], 898-900). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. I place the word “creates” in quotation marks because the Holy Spirit was not in fact created in the strict sense that He once was not. Like the other Persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit also has existed from all of eternity as He too is One within the Triune God. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Pope Paul VI, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965, 22. (original at AAS 58 [1966], 1026-1066). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. St. John Paul II describes mercy as “love’s second name” (*DM* 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Thomas Dubay, S.M. states this beautifully. Describing the human condition, he states:

    As a human being, a spirit-in-the-flesh, you are a thirst (noun, not verb). Every single choice you make all day long is proof that you seek, you desire, you want, you lack. Nothing is ever enough. You always want more of delightful experiences, and when the same experiences begin to wear thin and bore you, you seek new ones as well as heightened intensities of the old. You are engaged in an endless whirl. Always you seek, desire, want, lack.

    Furthermore, you may have noticed that even after the most thrilling experience… when you are quiet and alone, you perceive deep down a small voice saying, ‘Is that all there is?’ Nothing is enough… You are a thirst in the flesh, an incarnated thirst. You yearn for endless beauty and joy, endless love and delight, endless security and happiness—and an immortality in which to enjoy it all.

    You cannot help being an incarnated thirst. Nor can I. We were born that way and we will die that way. We may differ in how we seek to slake our thirst. Some may go up blind alleys. Others go to the Fountain. But all seek.

    Thomas Dubay, S.M., *“And You are Christ’s”: The Charism of Virginity and the Celibate Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 21-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, September 14,1998. (original at *AAS* 91 [1999], 5-88). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Quoted in Carl Anderson and José Granados, *Called to Love: Approaching John Paul II’s Theology of the Body* (New York: Random House Inc., 2009), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Joseph Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. St. Augustine, *Confessio*, I, 1: *CSEL* 33, p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Anderson and Granados, *Called to Love*, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Pope John Paul II, 15th World Youth Day Vigil of Prayer, August 19, 2000. (original at *AAS* 92 [2000]). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Peiper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, December 25, 2005, 7. (original at *AAS* 97 [2005:12]). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. *TOB*, 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Anderson and Granados, *Called to Love*, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. *TOB,* 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid*.,* 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. *CCC*, 1850. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. *TOB,* 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. *CCC*, 397. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. *TOB*, 241. Emphasis in original. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. *CCC*, 405. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *TOB,* 238. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., 239. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 242. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 245. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 247. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. John 1:1-3 reads:

    In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.

    Thus, the *Logos*, the Greek word for “reason,” created the world and governs the world. The world contains an inner intelligibility due to the fact that it was created by Reason, the *Logos*, Itself. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. *TOB*, 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Anderson and Granados, *Called to Love*, 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. *ST* I. 21.3, accessed online at "Summa Theologica." *SUMMA THEOLOGICA: Home*. New Advent, http://www.newadvent.org/summa/ (accessed March 9, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. *Diary*, 699. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. *TOB*, 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. *TOB*, 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. *Diary*, 723. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. *TOB*, 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Voyage to Poland Dedication of the Shrine of Divine Mercy Homily in Kraków-Łagiewniki, August 17, 2002, 4. (original at *AAS* 95 [2003:1], 40-44). [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Pope John Paul II, Divine Mercy Sunday Homily, April 22, 2001, 5. (original at *AAS* 93 [2001], 585-588). [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. *Diary*, 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Pope John Paul II, Homily for the Mass in St. Peter’s Square for the Canonization of Sr. Mary Faustina Kowalska, April 30, 2000, 7. (original at *AAS* 92 [2000], 670-674). [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. These alternate endings are originally found in a Lenten reflection video found at http://redeemedonline.com. Although I have written them in my own words, the original ideas are from Bob Rice in this video. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. *Diary*, 723. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid., 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Ibid., 1485. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Divine Mercy Sunday Homily, April 22, 2001, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. *Diary*, 1541. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Ibid., 639. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Ibid., 738. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid., 723. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Quotation found in Michael E. Gaitley, MIC, *Consoling the Heart of Jesus: A Do-It-Yourself Retreat Inspired by the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2013), 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. Pope John Paul II, 17th World Youth Day Homily in Toronto, Downsview Park, Sunday July 28, 2002, 5. (original at *AAS* 94 [2002]). [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of the Little Flower*, trans. Michael Day, CONG., ORAT. (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2010), 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. *TOB*, 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Divine Mercy Sunday Homily, April 22, 2001, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. Homily for the Canonization of Sr. Mary Faustina Kowalska, April 30, 2000, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Excerpts of the English translation of *The Roman Missal* © 2010, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc. All rights reserved. Found online at http://www.catholicbishops.ie/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Order-of-Mass.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. *TOB*, 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Ibid., 190. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Ibid., 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. *Regina caeli*, April 3, 2005, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. Ibid.

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