

Our Merciful Transformation



in Christ's Sacred Heart

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

Once (or maybe twice) in our earthly existence a life-changing book may fall into our hands, most times unexpectedly. It would almost seem that such an event was meant to awaken us to some latent transformation that lies deep within our depths and is waiting, though the touch and timing of God's grace, to be actualized. One such "book-event" that has made an enduring impact on many people (including myself) is the reading of the modern spiritual masterpiece *TRANSFORMATION IN CHRIST* by Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889—1977). Hildebrand lived and worked in Germany as a professor of philosophy and was considered one of the top enemies of Nazi authorities for his outspoken denunciations of National Socialist ideology. Ultimately, he fled Germany with his wife and young son and settled for a period of time in Vienna, Austria (he also lived in Switzerland and France) where he continued to publish challenging and illuminating articles aimed at awakening the public's consciousness about the dangerous thinking of the Third Reich. He became a "marked man" on the Nazi's "hit list," and because of this his life took the form of a refugee's. At times, it was necessary for him to adopt an outward disguise in order to escape detection. Fortunately in 1940 he was able to enter the United States, where he located to New York City and took on a teaching position at Fordham University, a Jesuit institution of higher learning. In 1948 *Transformation in Christ* appeared and became a classic text for the understanding of the Christian experience. As one of the book's reviewers remarked: "It is a masterly treatment of the spiritual life in terms of the fundamental attitudes which the Christian must develop." In chapter fifteen entitled "Holy Mercy" von Hildebrand deals with the timely topic of mercy, showing what it is and what it is not. His keen insights in this chapter may be of special interest to us as we approach the Jubilee Year of Mercy which commences this December 8th (2015) and concludes next November 20th (2016), Feast of Christ the King.

So let us begin to look at what von Hildebrand calls the virtue of "Holy Mercy." To begin, mercy, he says, is a divine virtue; actually it is the epitome of all virtues because it is the virtue *par excellence* of the heart of God. "Mercy primarily means the condescending, forgiving love of the absolute Lord, who bends down to us without our deserving it at all" (p. 335). It is particularly poignant in God's treatment of sinful humanity and constitutes a central point in Christian revelation. The whole Gospel breathes the spirit of mercy and that is why it became a stumbling-block to the Pharisees, who expected everything from justice founded on the fulfillment of the Law. Mercy, von Hildebrand states "speaks through the events of the Gospel in the moving parable of the Good Samaritan, in the parable of the master who released his servant from debt, and especially in Jesus' death on the cross where he forgives and prays for his slayers" (ibid).

If we wish to be transformed in Christ, then we must strive to emulate this specifically divine virtue. Why? Because it is pleasing to God. In fact, "our mercifulness is the condition on which we in our turn may find mercy in the eyes of God" (ibid). Mercy, it is further noted, is a manifestation of love, but it presupposes in its object some "misery" or "wretchedness." (von Hildebrand makes the distinction here that there cannot be mercy within the three persons of the Holy Trinity because they are all equal in quality). Moreover, it is not the same as compassion, which means

“suffering with.” A gesture of condescension is inherent to mercy, whereas for compassion an all-embracing solidarity is present with those who are in a suffering state (p. 336). Because of this substantial difference, mercy is a much more spiritual response in character “for it understands others from the viewpoint of God, in a light borrowed from God” (p. 338). Who, then can exercise mercy? Von Hildebrand points out that it can be exercised “by a person in health who can assist the sick; a priest who, by virtue of this office, can cure the wounds of the soul; also, anyone who may remit a debt, renounce a right, or waive a claim for the benefit of another” (ibid).

Merciful love is over and above the measure of merits. It is all inclusive of justice, but it is like an “overflow” because justice is contained value-wise to an even higher degree in mercy. Von Hildebrand notes: “God does not cease to be supremely just by being supremely merciful” (p. 339). As regards ourselves, mercy impels us to overstep justice only in regard to where it directly concerns ourselves. This would not be the case in reference to the claims of others, for instance, in the case of an arbitration, where we would not be directly involved (then we would not be at liberty to change the measure of justice, though we might try to persuade others to be merciful).

For reasons of incapability, there are some for whom the practice of true mercy is very difficult: the faint-hearted who fear conflict of any kind, the soft-hearted who refuse to inflict displeasure on others (and are slaves to their instinct of compassion), and the excessively generous who are ashamed to make their rights valid even when this would be the objectively right course to pursue (p. 340). Therefore, he urges that our conduct toward others stem from “that ultimate love which is above-all concerned precisely with the good of the person in question (regardless of whether it is easy or hard for my own nature to insist upon my right)” (p. 341).

Taking a look at the parable of the prodigal son, von Hildebrand has this insight to offer: the father in the parable hastens to welcome his spendthrift son because of the son’s *attitude of repentance* in approaching him. The father is not substituting mercy for justice but has accepted his son’s acknowledgment of guilt for past offenses and his resolution to change his ways. Thus, we come to understand how God’s heart treats our own transgressions. Every humble avowal of repentance on our part opens the mercy gates of the Father’s forgiving heart.

Another dimension of authentic mercy emerges when we are not only attentive to the external misery of another, but internal, as well. This type of generosity, says von Hildebrand, foregoes the need to “proudly acquit one’s obligations” that would turn a blind eye toward the law of charity (for example, bypassing a person in need on the way to a personal duty or commitment). “The man [sic] of mercy, on the contrary, is loath to overemphasize the distinction between what is and what is not strictly obligatory. He would not intend to slight duty or commitment, but he in no way recognizes these as placing a limit on his practice of mercy” (p. 345).

Finally, von Hildebrand sums up: “Mercy thrives in the souls of those alone who visualize everything in the perspective of the divine; who, in full awareness, measure everything by the supernatural. It presupposes inward suppleness, fluidity, a thoroughly melted, quickened, liberated heart.” These are high ideals indeed. The reasons why practicing perfect mercy are so lofty and so challenging are that all our inner “unfreedoms” thwart the path of mercy. And that is why “mercy must be the touchstone for our examination of conscience. Many are the occasions for mercy that are missed, as we pass by the wounded one, clinging to our own personal concerns, circumscribed by our own lack of freedom” (pp. 346, 347).

Concluding this important chapter, we hear von Hildebrand’s parting words: “The way to attain the virtue of mercy lies in our constant awareness of being encompassed by mercy: of the fact that mercy is the air we children of God are breathing. May the mercy of God pierce and transform our hearts. May it draw us into the orbit of its all-conquering, liberating, suave power, before which all worldly standards collapse. For only insofar as we become merciful ourselves may we harvest the fruits of His mercy and hear the words of the Sacred Heart: that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard: neither hath it entered into the heart of man” (1 Cor. 2:9) (p. 347).

These thoughts about the nature of mercy are greatly needed in our world, filled as it is with egoism and violence. During the Jubilee Year of Mercy, every Catholic is asked to reflect on the beauty of this divine virtue from the solid sources which are available in our tradition. Picking up a copy of *Transformation in Christ* can help to educate our minds and spirits in the most enriching of virtues and prepare us to be more effective witnesses to our faith. Our personal transformation in Christ may be the impetus for the transformation of others, paving the way for the peace that we earnestly pray for at this time of year. May the Heart of Christ bless the efforts we make to understand and practice the divine virtue of mercy, and may we always thank God for sending us his divine Son, born of the Virgin Mary, as the revelation of His love and mercy to all of us. +

* Quotes taken from the 1963 Doubleday Image Edition of *Transformation in Christ* by Dietrich von Hildebrand.

See the excellent biography *The Soul of a Lion: The Life of Dietrich von Hildebrand* (Ignatius Press, 2000).

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on December 6th, 2015. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, February 7th, 2016 at 4:00 p.m.