



School of Mercy

“There is a time for everything under heaven,” Scripture says—a time to give and a time to receive, a time to be merciful to others and a time to seek mercy for ourselves. For every charitable interaction is two-sided: a giver hands over the bread of compassion to a receiver who feeds on it. From one day to the next both roles in this decisive drama are yours and mine to play, so we need to learn to tell time: when to give mercy and when to receive it.

Mercy meets misery, and misery is two-sided as well. There is no mistaking the toll it takes on a contorted body in a sick bed or on an unsheltered sleeper in the street. But this *outer* corporeal side of misery all too often veils an *inner* spiritual side as well: a mind abandoned by peace, a soul shattered by loss, a heart broken by betrayal.

This miserable state of ours is precisely what Divine Mercy comes to touch and transform in Jesus Christ. His saving Gospel provokes us to recognize human misery for what it is, from the inside out. The more honestly I acknowledge my own misery from within, the more clearly I will see how much I need mercy from without—from the God Who saves me, from His children who console me.

We will more convincingly impart mercy to the miserable if we have first discovered what surprising things can happen when we bring

our misery to the merciful. One day years before I became a priest, my pastor treated me with great compassion in the confessional. As I stepped out, I said to myself, “It would be worth paying whatever it costs to be able to give just one other person the peace of soul that has just been given to me.” I’ve never forgotten that moment—and the desire it gave birth to.

“It begins with your family / and soon it comes ‘round to your soul,” the poet Leonard Cohen sings. The family is our first and best school of mercy because it is there that we learn the earliest and longest-lasting lessons of how mercy works. At home growing up, in the normal course of an ordinary day, we saw the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the lonely comforted, the sinner admonished, the ignorant instructed, the sick cared for, the offender forgiven. Without the works of mercy, which of our families would make it through a week? We don’t usually think in such terms, of course, because, growing up, the fed and clothed and comforted were none other than our brothers, our sisters, and ourselves. We have been on the receiving end of mercy since our mother first drew us to her breast.

“It begins with your family / and soon it comes ‘round to your soul.” Marriage and mercy go together inseparably in God’s saving design for our happiness. A man and a woman widen the embrace of their one-flesh union to include the children God gives them to be schooled in compassion, so they can apply lessons of mercy learned in family life to social and civic life as well. For our redemption hinges on the spread of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy from the heart of the family to the darkest corners of an uncomprehending world.