

THE MERCIFUL LOVE OF THE TRINITY IN THE LIFE OF THE FAMILY

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In this year of the Holy Family for our spiritual family, we have been called by the Lord to reflect upon our own personal identity and mission within the life of the Church. As a part of the Universal Church, whose mission is to direct man's gaze, in every age, towards Christ and the mystery of God,¹ we as a family place ourselves within this timeless mission and summons borne from the heart of the Holy Trinity. In this light, I want to reflect upon our Spiritual Father, Servant of God John Paul II's, understanding of the Trinity in the life of the family. The mystery of the Redemption, the redeeming love of God



revealed in Christ, is at the heart of John Paul II's Trinitarian theology and is thus cause for his words that "Christ fully reveals man to himself."² And what is this revelation, if not love? For as we have been told and have come to believe,³ God is love; it is rightly said, therefore, that love is the fundamental vocation of every human being.⁴ We will thus look at the love of the Trinity made manifest in the Paschal Mystery, the pinnacle of the Redemption; the Church's mission borne from this redeeming love; and the family's particular response to the redeeming love of the Trinity within the life of the Church. Because the Church is the model for all families, who have the great call and dignity to be "Ecclesiae Domesticae," domestic Churches which participate in the sanctifying reality of the spousal love of Christ for His Church and its mission to serve and to reign,⁵ families live and make manifest the redeeming love of the Trinity. In so doing, as John Paul II writes, they become the community of life and love they are called to be, one which guards, reveals, and communicates love, and is "[thus] a living reflection of and a real sharing in God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church His bride."⁶

All communion, love, and life comes from the Holy Trinity, who in Himself is the perfection of these three realities. According to the Catechism, St. John the Apostle penetrates the heart of the mystery of the Trinity when he writes that "God is love," for in so doing, he affirms that "God's very being is love. By sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."⁷ John Paul II echoes this same testimony to love that exists in the very nature of the Trinity. He writes, "[God] lives a mystery of personal loving communion."⁸ The love and communion of the Holy Trinity is revealed in fullness in Jesus Christ, and in particular, the Cross. Thus, as Pope Benedict XVI writes, "The Cross [. . .] is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ, we can understand [. . .] that 'God is love' [. . .] In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move."⁹ As the Holy Father states, it is only in the Cross that one can truly understand love, and that God *is* merciful, redeeming love. Furthermore, he makes it clear that "God's love for man is both *eros* and *agape*,"¹⁰ because it is a love which individual and personal, as is *eros*, yet is bestowed freely and offers forgiveness, as does *agape*. In *Deus Caritas Est*, the Holy Father demonstrates that *eros* and *agape* are not two mutually exclusive dimensions of love, but rather, they form a unity, and each dimension of love is not complete without the other.¹¹ We shall return to this point later as we speak about the love that exists within the Sacrament of Marriage, love which is, as is the love of God, both spousal and redeeming.

In the Paschal Mystery, the spousal and redeeming love of the Trinity is made manifest in a most radical and radiant way to the world. John Paul II testifies to this truth as he writes, "the cross of Christ [. . .] is a radical revelation of mercy."¹² Through the Cross, therefore, God wishes to reveal His merciful love to mankind, and it is through our Savior, Jesus Christ, that He does so. St. Maria Faustina, the great Apostle of Divine Mercy, writes in her diary of the inseparability of God's love and mercy, for as she says, "God's love is

the flower—[m]ercy the fruit.”¹³ So it is that the love of the Trinity cannot be considered without contemplating the mercy that flows from God’s love, which is His very essence. John Paul II championed the message of God’s mercy, revealed anew in our modern age through St. Faustina; thus, the merciful love of God is a strong and common thread uniting His three Trinitarian encyclicals *Redemptor Hominis*, *Dives in Misericordia*, and *Dominum et Vivificantem*. In them, we can further see the depth of God’s redeeming love—His merciful love—displayed in the giving up of His Son on the Cross, and what this love means in the life of the Church, the family of Jesus, and the life of all families on earth.

From the very beginning of salvation history, as John Paul II explains, the Lord revealed His mercy to Israel, the people whom He had chosen to be His own. Above all, the Lord’s love towards His people was merciful love, revealed in His unconditional forgiveness and faithfulness to His covenant with them, despite the violating of this covenant that occurred time and time again by the Israelites themselves.¹⁴ Thus, the Lord’s faithful love is rightly seen as a spousal love, which becomes mercy in the face of sin.¹⁵ Our access to the Father lies completely within the realm of God’s unfathomable mercy; likewise, the same can be said of our access to the Trinity. The Paschal Mystery, therefore, testifies to the timeless fidelity of the Father. The Cross speaks to the Father’s love that invites one into Divine life; so it is that through the Cross, we become His adopted sons and daughters.¹⁶ Not only is the truth about God revealed through the Cross, but the truth about love, as well. John Paul II writes, “this revelation of love [in the Cross] is also described as mercy; and in man’s history this revelation of love and mercy has taken a form and a name: that of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ It is Christ, therefore, the second Person of the Trinity, through Whom God reveals His very essence: merciful, redeeming love.¹⁸

According to John Paul II, the Paschal Mystery constitutes the fullness of the revelation of the Trinitarian mystery of God.¹⁹ As we have seen, the unfathomable merciful love of the Father is revealed in Jesus Christ, who was given to the world that the world might be saved through Him.²⁰ The love of God demonstrated through the Cross defines what love truly is: to give oneself for the other.²¹ The love of the Trinity is self-giving, and it is the Holy Spirit who is “the personal expression of this self-giving [. . .] He is Person-Love. He is Person-Gift.”²² Thus, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the completion of the revelation of God’s self-giving, merciful, redeeming love. In his encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, John Paul II teaches that the sending of the Spirit marks the “new beginning of the self-communication of the Triune God to humanity.”²³ It marks the beginning of the “era of the Church”²⁴ in which the life and love of God is revealed in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit from the Son to the Church and the world is, in itself, a testimony to God’s Triune nature. John Paul II explains that the farewell discourse in John’s Gospel is a particular extension of the communion of the Trinity. In it is contained the “logic”, so to speak, of the giving and self-giving which exists in the Trinity and comes to its fullest expression in the Son’s sending of His Spirit.²⁵ There is, therefore, a close link between the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit, for it is only through the necessary departure of the Son that the Spirit, the Second Counselor, may come to continue the redemptive mission of the Son in the Church.²⁶ The sending of the Spirit is the final seal and pledge of God’s merciful love, a love which promises “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”²⁷

The Church, borne from the Holy Spirit and spouse of Christ, the bridegroom and head of the Church, witnesses to the merciful and redeeming love of the Trinity. In *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II states that Christ is the focus and center of the Church’s life and mission. The cause of this, he explains, is the Redemption, which manifests the great love of God and which, through Christ, reveals man to himself.²⁸ As we have previously seen, in revealing man to himself, Christ reveals to man the truth of love, merciful love, which is the life of God and the vocation of every human being. Thus, the Church cannot but proclaim the mercy of God! John Paul II writes that the Church lives an authentic life when she professes, proclaims, and practices mercy. To do so most potently, the Church must draw near to the heart of Christ to discover in depth the merciful love of God.²⁹ Furthermore, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit, who renews man from within, that man is strengthened to give a sincere gift of self and thus live his authentic personhood: a personhood of love.³⁰

Within the family, as we have previously seen, there exists a summons to live together such an authentic personhood of love by guarding, communicating, and revealing love to each other, to the Church, and to the world. As John Paul II writes in *Familiaris Consortio*, it is only “through the Cross that the family can attain the fullness of its being and the perfection of its love.”³¹ So it is that the merciful love of the Trinity, the love that is self-giving and life-giving, is the same love which all are called to live; in a special way, this includes the family. John Paul II attests that self-giving is the “deep inner dynamism of love.”³² Thus, the merciful, redeeming love of the Trinity becomes the principle and life force of all families who receive their name and identity from the Eternal Father.³³ In his Apostolic Exhortation to families, John Paul II identifies the four general tasks of the family, tasks which enable the family to live and perfect its call to love: to form a community of persons; to serve life; to participate in the development of society; and to share in the life and mission of the Church.³⁴ It is to these four tasks that we now turn, to contemplate them in light of the merciful, redeeming love of the Trinity.

The first and most fundamental task of the family, says John Paul II, is to “live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons.”³⁵ The inner principle of this task, the vivifying force which makes communion possible is *love*: the permanent power and final goal of communion. Within the Trinity, as we have seen, it is the Holy Spirit who is love in Person, who in Himself is the self-giving love that exists in the communion of the Trinity. Thus, it is the same Holy Spirit who enables the family to discover and live, day by day, a deeper reality of their communion of hearts. Fundamentally, this communion is built upon the communion that exists between husband and wife. Marital love sanctified in the Sacrament of Matrimony becomes the foundation upon which all familial communion is built.³⁶ This communion, when lived to its fullest as it was designed by God, is so powerful precisely because it lives the love of the Trinity, love that is both redemptive and spousal. Fr. Walter Schu testifies that the Pauline image of marriage as outlined in chapter five of Ephesians unites both the redemptive and spousal dimensions of love.³⁷ Marital love is redemptive because marriage is, as Paul writes, a sacrament in which one gives oneself up for the other in order to be a channel of sanctification for the other. Furthermore, marital love is spousal because this love is faithful, one which “nourishes and cherishes” the other as one would one’s own self.³⁸ Thus, within the family, husband and wife are the first participants in, and exercisers of, the redemptive, merciful, and spousal love of the Trinity.

Moreover, the Trinitarian love from which families draw their strength to live and strive for communion is a creative love, as John Paul II writes in *Dives in Misericordia*.³⁹ It is a love which has the power to bear and communicate new life to the world. As we have previously seen, it is only when the Church proclaims, practices, and professes mercy that She lives an authentic existence. What holds true for the Church, therefore, holds true for families, domestic Churches. As John Paul II goes on to explain, mercy is indispensable between those closest to each other—namely, as he writes, families.⁴⁰ Merciful love must begin in the home, flowing between husband and wife to their children, teaching their children, in turn, to receive and give the merciful love of God. Because familial communion is made possible from the potency of Trinitarian love, it cannot be achieved without sacrifice. As John Paul II has taught us, the inner logic of love is that of self-giving; thus, it is self-giving, practiced in mercy, which can be thought of as the “glue” which seals family communion, built upon the bricks of merciful, redeeming love.

The second task of the family is to serve life. Throughout his entire pontificate, John Paul II proclaimed to the Church that the reality of service is kingly: to serve is to reign!⁴¹ As a disciple of Christ, the family is called to embrace this reality in all of the manifold ways that it is able to do so in both the ecclesial and secular spheres. In so doing, they witness to the merciful, redeeming love of Christ “who came not to be served, but to serve.”⁴² All Christians are called to this witness of merciful love, yet it is the family which does so in a particular way, especially now at this time in history in which the family, the heart of society, is threatened by evils that prey upon its very essence. So it is that the Church, and in particular, the domestic Church, serves life by witnessing to the civilization of life and love which only a relationship with the living and Triune God makes possible.⁴³ Thus, the family helps reveal to man the essential truth about himself, his identity, and what is most important about him: that he is loved and created by God, and it is only in loving and serving Him that one will truly be fulfilled.

In this light, the third task of the family must now be mentioned, for it flows from the second: to participate in the development of society. This task is a call to help bring about God's Kingdom on earth, to help further the Father's design to unite all of His children who have been bought and redeemed by the blood of His Son.⁴⁴ Through the power of the Holy Spirit, who transforms and strengthens man from within,⁴⁵ families are able to speak volumes to the world not only in what they do, but most importantly, in *who they are*. It is the family's witness to unity, first and foremost, that enables it to bear witness to the Kingdom and peace of Christ.⁴⁶ This is so because the witness of unity is the very call of the Church itself, of whom Jesus prayed the night before He died that they may "all be one."⁴⁷ John Paul II notes in *Dominum et Vivificantem* that this prayer necessarily implies "a certain likeness between the union of the divine persons and the union of the children of God."⁴⁸ Again, we see here that the communion of the Trinity, formed by self-giving, abundant love, is the same communion which all are called to live in the Kingdom of God. As domestic Churches, families must strive eagerly to live a witness to unity, communion, self-giving love, and mercy which points beyond themselves to the Kingdom of God and to the love of the Trinity. In so doing, they help pave the way for the Holy Spirit to transform hearts and minds in the world from within, so that God may be, as John Paul II writes, "'all in all': as gift and love [. . .] this is the eternal power of the opening of the Triune God to the world [. . .] in the Holy Spirit."⁴⁹

The last task that John Paul II speaks of for families is of particular significance in our reflection on families, for it is the family's call to share in the life and mission of the Church and thus become more fully who it is: a domestic Church. Love and life, therefore, constitute the core of the family's mission within the life of the Church. Love immerses the family in the threefold mission of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet, and king.⁵⁰ As John Paul II teaches, the Christian family participates in the prophetic role of Jesus Christ when it discovers and lives its identity as a believing and evangelizing community, one which welcomes and announces the word of God.⁵¹ In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II places primacy upon *receiving* (welcoming) the Word, the reception which is so necessary in order for one to proclaim the Word with truth and transparency. It is in welcoming the Word and making a home for the Word in their hearts and homes that families are able to become more deeply, day by day, believing communities. Families become believing communities because they encounter Jesus Christ, the Word of God, and are drawn deeper into the power of the love of God. This is the foundation upon which their call to evangelization is built. As Fr. Schu testifies, families have the great call to evangelization within the Church because they have encountered, and perpetuate in a manner uniquely their own, the redeeming love of Christ.⁵²

Families participate in the priestly role of Jesus Christ when they become a community in dialogue with God. By the very fact that the family is a part of the greater body of the Church, the members of whom are a priestly people, the family, too, is a sanctified people called to sanctify.⁵³ As a domestic Church, moreover, the family is called to live in a unique way this call to mutual sanctification, beginning with themselves, and extending to the world. In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II writes that the family's immersion into their call to share in the life and mission of the Church is directly proportional to their prayer life.⁵⁴ Praying together, their home becomes a home for the Word and a place to encounter God together, as we have previously seen. Praying together brings them into dialogue with God and with each other in the Spirit. Thus, the family's fruitfulness in its ecclesial mission is indispensably linked to prayer.

Lastly, the kingly role of Jesus Christ is ultimately a call to serve, for as John Paul II has taught us, to serve is to reign! Families participate in the kingly role of Christ by placing themselves and their hearts completely at the service of each other, a service prompted and infused by love. Thus, the kingly role of Christ is ultimately a call to love. John Paul II reminds families of the New Commandment to "love one another"⁵⁵ and its centrality in the life of the family. As John Paul II writes, families are called to form persons in love and serve the Church in love.⁵⁶ The law of the family, then, in its domestic, secular, and ecclesial spheres, is the law of love, the law of the Spirit.⁵⁷ Ultimately, it is the faithful living of this law of love and commitment to it that gives the family the strength and grace necessary to be who it is, to more fully witness to the world of the primacy of God's redeeming, merciful love.

The family is a great gift of God to the Church and the world. As we have been taught by both Mother Adela and our spiritual father, John Paul II, all committed love is founded upon a covenant of hearts, and that covenant is strong inasmuch as it is founded on the Eternal Rock: Jesus Christ. Chosen and named by God, families manifest to the world the radiance of the union of the Trinity and the life-giving, merciful love of God that heals, restores, edifies, and nourishes us. In this year of the Holy Family, we have the great gift to delve more deeply into this mystery of love and life as specifically lived in the life of the family. With gratitude to God for having given us the gift of family both biologically and spiritually, I close with the words of our great father in the faith, St. Paul, who prayed,

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with the fullness of God.⁵⁸

¹ *Redemptor Hominis*, 10

² *Ibid.*, 8

³ 1 John 4:16

⁴ *Familiaris Consortio*, 11

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49

⁶ *Familiaris Consortio*, 17

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 221.

⁸ *Familiaris Consortio*, 11

⁹ *Deus Caritas Est*, 12

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7

¹² *Dives in Misericordia*, 8

¹³ St. Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diary: Divine Mercy in my Soul* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 1987), 948.

¹⁴ *Dives in Misericordia*, 4

¹⁵ Walter Schu, LC, *The Splendor of Love: John Paul II's Vision for Marriage and Family* (New Hope: New Hope Publications, 2003), 134.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁷ *Redemptor Hominis*, 9

¹⁸ *Dives in Misericordia*, 3

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8. See also *Dominum et Vivificantem* 23

²⁰ John 3:16

²¹ *Dives in Misericordia*, 7

²² *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 10

²³ *Ibid.*, 23

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 24

²⁷ Matthew 28:20

²⁸ *Redemptor Hominis*, 7

²⁹ *Dives in Misericordia*, 13

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59

³¹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 86

³² *Familiaris Consortio*, 41

³³ Ephesians 3:14

³⁴ *Familiaris Consortio*, 17

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19

³⁷ Walter Schu, LC, *The Splendor of Love*, 139.

³⁸ Ephesians 5:25-6; 28-9

³⁹ *Dives in Misericordia*, 14

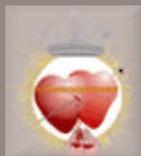
⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

- ⁴¹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 63
⁴² Mark 10:45
⁴³ *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 59
⁴⁴ *Redemptor Hominis*, 13
⁴⁵ *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 58
⁴⁶ *Familiaris Consortio*, 48
⁴⁷ John 17:21-22
⁴⁸ *Dominum et Vivificantem* 59
⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ *Familiaris Consortio* 50
⁵¹ Ibid., 51
⁵² Walter Schu, LC, *The Splendor of Love*, 347.
⁵³ *Familiaris Consortio*, 55
⁵⁴ Ibid., 62
⁵⁵ John 13:34
⁵⁶ *Familiaris Consortio*, 64
⁵⁷ Ibid., 63
⁵⁸ Ephesians 3:14-19

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