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## Divine Mercy

by Deacon Bill Stimpson Jr.  
[stimpson.jr@sbcglobal.net](mailto:stimpson.jr@sbcglobal.net)

Over the past three weeks, I offered a suggestion as to why the Jews of Jesus' time might demand the release of Barabbas. I concluded the series by asking the question, "Who would we choose?" Of course, it is a bit unfair to compare us to the Jews of 2,000 years ago. We are an Easter people, we, as Paul Harvey might say, "...know the rest of the story." We have the benefit of God's complete revelation of His plan of salvation. We have the benefit of 2,000 years of sharpening, defining and refining our insight and understanding of that first Easter morning. The real question then is not just who we would choose, but what will we do about and with our choice. With this question, there is no separation of time or culture between a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian and a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew.

There are a lot of reasons, rationalizations, for the many ways we deny God, deny Christ. We can argue almost any point and proffer almost any excuse, but equally as frequently, these boil down to our ignoring God's will in favor of our own. The Jews in the time of Christ regarded sin as breaking the Law. This breaking of the Law could be a dietary infraction, a social or a ritual discrepancy, but sin was breaking the Law. Jesus spent his entire public ministry and gave himself up to death, trying to expand the concept of sin beyond the legalism of the Pharisees to include the will of his Father, to genuinely love one another, to genuinely love God. Paul writes in many of his letters, especially in his Letter to the Romans, that the Law cannot save, only faith in Christ has salvific power. We Christians, as much of the world, seem to have lost our sense of sin. We seem to have fallen into the same trap of legalism (Only this time it is secular law that defines our morality and idea of sin). If we don't break the civil laws, then we don't sin.

Still, even with our Easter faith, we seemed to be plagued by a human and worldly sense of justice that comes by way of retribution. We look about and see all the evil that exists and we think that, "Someone's got to pay." The idea of God's retribution permeated the Jewish Law and covenant. Violations of the Law were met severe punishments, sometimes even death. Atonement for sins, in Judaism, was possible, but only through prescribed sacrificial rites. Much of this idea of retribution would become a large part of Christian theology of sin and penance. The Church teaches that the effect of sin is to separate oneself from God. Certainly this is a grave danger for the unexamined conscience. For those who do concern themselves about their sins, truly regret them and sincerely desire not to repeat them can be absolved of the effect of sin, i.e. separation, through the sacrament of Confession and Eucharist. Still, unless we have a proper understanding of sin and our willing cooperation, then we can never appreciate Easter beyond a day of colored eggs and candy. We can never appreciate the reality of God's greatest gift.

The first Sunday after Easter, in the Catholic tradition is Divine Mercy Sunday. It formerly concludes the *octave of Easter* and reminds us of God's unfathomable love for humanity and the wonder of the Cross. It was not in ignorance of our sin, nor despite our sin that Christ came to redeem humanity, but specifically because of our sin. To call this a Divine Mercy is an oversimplification, but how else can one describe such a gift? A month ago, I had an opportunity to share some of my experience visiting the Mayan ruins in Mexico with some 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students at St. Mary Magdalene Catholic School, in Hazel Park. Part of my discussion covered the mythology of their tradition of *human sacrifice*. Quite naturally, the children were astounded that anyone would willingly allow themselves to be killed – sacrificed – to a god. This provided a perfect "teaching moment" to remind them of just what Easter is about. Christ willingly sacrificed his life, so that humanity, dead in sin, might have life anew. That is a Divine Mercy!!