

Pope Benedict and the Divine Mercy Image

Not many of us are aware that our current Pope, Benedict XVI has recommended the re-introduction of icons and images into our Churches. To most Catholics this comes as a very welcomed surprise and an answer to many, many prayers.

Pope Benedict XVI, at the turn of the millennium, in one of his best known books, “The Spirit of the Liturgy” wrote extensively on the need for sacred art in every Catholic Church. He wrote of the misunderstanding of Vatican II and how the removal and destruction of images, in his own words, “left behind a void, the wretchedness of which we are now experiencing in a truly acute way”.

He spoke of the “crisis of art” today, being “a symptom of the crisis of man’s very existence”. We don’t have to go too far to see the “sense-less” art that is prevalent today. Modern sacred art with its unrealistic and odd-shaped corpses and statues does nothing to bring to mind anything of the sacred at all if it is not truly life-like. Our churches need to be adorned with sacred art that lifts our souls to a view of our heavenly home, where the saints abide with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Pope Benedict states “lack of images is incompatible”

The Pope explained, “The complete absence of images is incompatible with faith in the Incarnation of God. God has acted in history and entered into our ‘sensible’ world, so that it may become transparent to Him. Images of beauty, in which the mystery of the invisible God becomes visible, are an ‘essential’ part of Christian worship”. Note here that the Pope said “images of beauty” and not modern art.

What is most remarkable in the twenty plus pages that he dedicated to sacred art in this book, is the prevalence of the description of an image that could only be the Divine Mercy image itself. He not only noted that it was wrong to remove the images and icons, but he went on to explain what the perfect image would have to contain and only the Divine Mercy image could possibly meet all of his criteria.

I would challenge you to pick-up a copy of this book, but fasten your seat belt! As you read Part Three, Art and Liturgy, The Question of Images, keep in mind all the details of the Divine Mercy image. His thorough explanation of the essentials of sacred art, that is ordered to divine worship, could only apply to an image that has all the aspects of the Divine Mercy image that Jesus requested to be painted.

His brilliant and methodical explanation of sacred art is truly a masterpiece that everyone should read. Re-reading only takes you deeper into the intellect, which this Pope has, probably second to none, concerning liturgical worship throughout the ages. The more you read, the more you come to understand the importance and significance of having the Divine Mercy image in every single Catholic Church.

Not only is the Divine Mercy image appropriate and essential for everyday liturgy, as the Pope has declared, but it is also most appropriate for a Feast of Mercy. The readings on Divine Mercy Sunday, starting from the Opening Prayer, direct us to focus on the redeeming “blood”, the washing away of sins in “water”, a new birth in the Spirit, the institution of Confession, and the importance of trusting in Jesus.

The Pope said “On liturgical feasts the deeds of God in the past are made present. The feasts are a participation in God’s action in time, and the images themselves, as remembrance in visible form, are involved in the liturgical re-presentation.” He spoke of the images as being a “path of hope, into which the images draw us, giving us the assurance of the world to come, of the final coming of Christ”.

The Divine Mercy image is truly a “path of hope” which will lead us safely to the “final coming of Christ”. Jesus gave us this image specifically to give us hope and to give us a constant re-assurance that will lead us safely home to His coming. The words “Jesus, I trust in You” have been a great comfort to many people, especially in the parishes that have permanently installed images in their liturgical settings.

Benedict wrote “The icon is intended to draw us onto an inner path, the eastward path, toward the Christ who is to come again. Its dynamism is ‘identical’ with the dynamism of the liturgy as a whole... In the liturgy the curtain between heaven and earth is torn open, and we are taken up into a liturgy that spans the whole cosmos.” The Divine Mercy image portrays Christ coming to us from Heaven and opening up that curtain and bestowing upon us His inexhaustible grace and mercy.

It is interesting to note that the Pope said that the images “have a reference to the sacraments, and above all, to Baptism and the Eucharist, and, in pointing to the sacraments, they are contained within them... they are essentially connected with what happens in the liturgy”. The Divine Mercy image is this perfect depiction.

Jesus told us that the two rays in the Divine Mercy image denote the Blood (the Eucharist) which is the life of souls, and the Water (Baptism) that makes souls righteous. Jesus also indicated that we would be able to receive graces from these images, and why not, if the sacraments themselves are contained within them?

The Pope continued to explain that “the center of the icon of Christ is the Paschal Mystery: Christ is presented as the Crucified, the risen Lord, the One who will come again and who, here and now, hiddenly reigns over all. Every image of Christ must contain these three essential aspects of the mystery of Christ and, in this sense, must be an image of Easter”. The Divine Mercy image has all these three aspects!

The Divine Mercy image is the image of the risen Christ on that first Easter, on the evening of the Resurrection, miraculously appearing there in the Upper Room and bestowing on the Apostles the power of the Holy Spirit to forgive sins. His hand is raised in blessing, he shows them His wounds, and Jesus is looking for their trust. He breathes on them and says “Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, what sins you retain are retained”. (Gospel of John, 20:23)

Recall that St. Thomas, the doubter, was not there on that first Easter Sunday, but was actually there on that “Second Sunday of Easter”, the very first Divine Mercy Sunday. That entire scenario was intended to get humanity to trust in Jesus without seeing. Now we can see why Jesus insisted that the Divine Mercy image, with the words “Jesus, I trust in You” be in view and venerated in our churches on that day.

The Divine Mercy image portrays, not only the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, that Benedict XVI indicated as being essential, but as the Blessed Pope John Paul II indicated in one of his Divine Mercy Sunday homilies (2001), it also portrays, in the clear or pale light ray representing the Water, the giving of the Holy Spirit which is present in all of the other sacraments of the Catholic Church.

It is very clear that our Holy Father wrote this book with the intention of pouring out his heart to all of us, so that we might bring life and hope back into the liturgy. His many years as one of the Church’s foremost theologians and as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has earned him everyone’s respect. It would be of great benefit for everyone to read this book, especially the clergy.

His message of hope, which has become his hallmark, was very prevalent in this work, which was written just five years before his election to the Papal office. He often mentioned the word “hope” and associated it with the Second Coming of Christ. Indeed, this is our hope, and this image of the Divine Mercy was designed by our God, precisely, to bring us this hope, and trust, as we grow ever closer to that long-awaited, and very much anticipated, Second Coming of Christ.

The Divine Mercy image perfectly fits every single fundamental principle and identifying element that Pope Benedict XVI has so painstakingly described. Only by reading this masterful work will we come to understand the depth of the Pope’s insight and the urgent need to re-invigorate our churches with sacred art that is ordered to the liturgy, not just for Divine Mercy Sunday, but for every liturgy, of which no other image could represent so precisely as the Divine Mercy image itself.

Is it any wonder, why his predecessor, Pope John Paul II worked so hard to make us all understand how important Divine Mercy is? There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit was working through our Church and the Vicar of Christ to bring about this path of hope. The establishment of Divine Mercy Sunday was a sign from Heaven that now is the time for mercy. We must take advantage today, while there is time.

Every parish should have an image of the Divine Mercy, not only to prepare the world for the Second Coming of Jesus, but to bring peace, guidance and prosperity to the Church in the tough economic times that we are living in. The Church has given us this Feast of Mercy, as Jesus has requested, and we must not falter in any way to fully carry out the will of the Father by insuring that all souls be saved.

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