

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Second Sunday of Easter, the Octave Day of Easter. In the Church, octaves continue the celebration of major feasts for eight days straight. In the pre-Vatican II Liturgy, the Sunday after Easter was called Low Sunday to distinguish the end from the beginning of the eight-day celebration. Today the Second Sunday of Easter is called the Sunday of Divine Mercy or Divine Mercy Sunday. Every year the Gospel on this Sunday tells the story of Jesus' institution of the sacrament of reconciliation.

I was surprised last Monday morning when the first thing I heard on the radio was that Pope Francis had died. He seemed to be recovering, and he made multiple appearances during Holy Week, including blessing the people on Easter Sunday. We were being told that he was out of danger. Today I would like to reflect briefly on what I think were some of the major themes of his life and ministry and their implications for us.

Above all, Pope Francis often reminded us that mercy is the quality most proper to God. God's mercy, however, is not limited to God's forgiveness. What this means is that when we are good to others, when we give or share gifts with others, when we are sensitive and responsive to the needs of others, or when we forgive others, we are merciful and make God's mercy real and present in their lives. Pope Francis used the image of a "field hospital" for the church, often reminding priests that the confessional is not meant to be a "torture chamber."

In a talk to the cardinals even before he was elected, he expressed concern that the Church was too self-referential, too focused on itself. Therefore, he often spoke of the need for the Church to go out to the margins and the marginalized. In other words, the Church is called to be a missionary church, a servant church. Of course, we are the Church both as individuals and as a community. Therefore, we are called to be a missionary and servant parish. This also explains his compassion for migrants and refugees.

We often say that actions speak louder than words. Pope Francis not only taught by word. He also taught by gestures, setting an example for Church leaders. I believe it was the day after he was elected, he went back to the hotel where he had been staying to pay his bill. People were amazed that he personally went to pay his bill. Before one of his first trips, he was caught carrying his satchel into the airplane. He was amazed that people were amazed that he carried his own satchel. When people questioned what he had in it, I remember that he mentioned a razor and St. Therese's autobiography.

One of his big emphases and legacies is synodality. The synods called by previous Popes were controlled discussions. Pope Francis told everyone to speak his mind. The one thing he said that struck me forcefully was when he told participants to "speak boldly, but listen humbly." Obviously, this is wonderful advice to all those who exercise parish ministry. The Church is still exploring the meaning of synodality. Also, he opened synods up to non-bishops, both women and men, and gave them a voice and vote. We should also note that he gave women major responsibilities within the Roman Curia.

Another major emphasis he had was care for creation. Pope Francis, who came from a scientific background, realized that we are stewards of creation, not lords of creation. He also realized that when we do not take care of creation, it is the marginalized who are most negatively affected. Our role is to humanize the world, i.e., to make the world a better place for all human beings both today and tomorrow.

My brothers and sisters, Pope Francis diversified the college of cardinals. He chose cardinals from places in the world that never had had a cardinal. There was a time when most of the cardinals were from Italy. Then there was a time when most of the cardinals were from Western Europe and the United States. Because of this diversification, the cardinals do not know each other as they once did. Therefore, as the cardinals prepare to enter the conclave, it is imperative that we pray for the church and for the cardinals that they will choose the person God wants them to choose.