



## Living the Faith Step 4

### ***The Joy of Discipleship:***

<https://cruxnow.com/church/2016/04/17/pope-francis-the-joy-of-discipleship/>

*[Editor's note: The Joy of Discipleship: Reflections from Pope Francis on Walking with Christ is the third book by Pope Francis to be published in English. In this excerpt, Francis lays out his vision of mercy for the special jubilee "Year of Mercy" he decreed to run from Dec. 8, 2015, to Nov. 20, 2016.]*

In the Gospel the essential thing is mercy. God sent his Son; God made himself man in order to save us-that is, in order to grant us his mercy. Jesus says this clearly, summarizing his teaching for the disciples: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:36).

Can there be a Christian who isn't merciful? No. A Christian must necessarily be merciful, because this is the center of the Gospel.

And faithful to this teaching, the Church can only repeat the same thing to her children: "Be merciful," as the Father is, and as Jesus was. The Church is Mother, by teaching her children works of mercy. She learned this manner from Jesus; she learned that this is what's essential for salvation.

It's not enough to love those who love us. Jesus says that pagans do this. It's not enough to do good to those who do good to us.

To change the world for the better, it is necessary to do good to those who are not able to return the favor, as the Father has done with us, by giving us Jesus. How much have we paid for our redemption? Nothing, totally free! Doing good without expecting anything in return. This is what the Father did with us, and we must do the same.

Someone might say to me, "But Father, I don't have time," "I have so many things to do," "It's difficult," "What can I do with my feebleness and my sins, with so many things?" We are often satisfied with a few prayers, with a distracted and sporadic participation in Sunday Mass, with a few charitable acts; but we do not have the courage "to come out" to bring Christ to others.

We are a bit like St. Peter. As soon as Jesus speaks of his Passion, death, and resurrection, of the gift of himself, of love for all, the apostle takes him aside and reproaches him.

What Jesus says upsets Peter's plans, seems unacceptable, and threatens the security he has built for himself, his idea of the Messiah. Jesus looks at his disciples and addresses to Peter what may possibly be the harshest words in the Gospels: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." (Mark8:33).

God always thinks with mercy: Do not forget this. God always thinks mercifully. He is the merciful Father!

When we enter our hearts, we find things that aren't okay, things that aren't good, as Jesus found that filth of profiteering...in the Temple. Inside of us, too, there are unclean things; there are sins of selfishness, of arrogance, pride, greed, envy, jealousy... so many sins!

We can even continue the dialogue with Jesus: "Jesus, do you trust me? I want you to trust me. Thus I open the door to you, and you cleanse my soul." Ask the Lord that. As he went to cleanse the Temple, he may come to cleanse your soul. We imagine that he comes with a whip of cords....

No, he doesn't cleanse the soul with that! Do you know what kind of whip Jesus uses to cleanse our soul? Mercy. Open your heart to Jesus' mercy! Say, "Jesus, look how much filth! Come, cleanse. Cleanse with your mercy, with your tender words, cleanse with your caresses." If we open our heart to Jesus' mercy, in order to cleanse our heart, our soul, Jesus will trust himself to us.

The Church, which is holy, does not reject sinners; she does not reject us all; she does not reject us because she calls everyone, welcomes them, is open even to those furthest from her. She calls everyone to allow themselves to be enfolded by the mercy, the tenderness, and the forgiveness of the Father, who offers everyone the possibility of meeting him, of journeying toward sanctity.

"Well! Father, I am a sinner; I have tremendous sins. How can I possibly feel part of the Church?"

Dear brother, dear sister, this is exactly what the Lord wants, that you say to him, "Lord, here I am, with my sins." Is one of you here without sin? Anyone? No one, not one of us. We all carry our sins with us. But the Lord wants to hear us say to him, "Forgive me, help me to walk, change my heart!"

The Lord can change your heart. The prophet Hosea says, "I have walked with you, and I taught you how to walk as a father teaches his child to walk." It's beautiful, this image of God! And this is God with us: he teaches us to walk. And it is the same attitude he maintains toward the Church.

We, too, despite our resolve to follow the Lord Jesus, experience every day the selfishness and hardness of our heart. When, however, we recognize ourselves as sinners, God fills us with his mercy and with his love. And he forgives us, he always forgives us.

It is precisely this that makes us grow as God's people, as the Church: not our cleverness, not our merits-we are a small thing, it's not that-but the daily experience of how much the Lord wishes us well and takes care of us.

It is this that makes us feel that we are truly his, in his hands, and makes us grow in communion with him and with one another. To be Church is to feel oneself in the hands of God, who is father and loves us, caresses us, waits for us, and makes us feel his tenderness.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Lord never tires of having mercy on us, and wants to offer us his forgiveness once again—we all need it—inviting us to return to him with a new heart, purified of evil, purified by tears, to take part in his joy. How should we accept this invitation?

St. Paul advises us: “We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). This power of conversion is not only the work of mankind; it is letting oneself be reconciled. Reconciliation between us and God is possible thanks to the mercy of the Father, who, out of love for us, did not hesitate to sacrifice his only begotten Son. Indeed, Christ, who was just and without sin, was made to be sin (2 Cor. 5:21) when, on the cross, he took on the burden of our sins, and in this way he redeemed and justified us before God.

“In him” we can become just, in him we can change, if we accept the grace of God and do not allow this “acceptable time” to pass in vain (2 Cor. 6:2).

Please, let us stop, let us stop a while and let ourselves be reconciled to God. Celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation means being enfolded in a warm embrace; it is the embrace of the Father’s infinite mercy.

Let us recall that beautiful, beautiful parable of the son who left his home with the money of his inheritance. He wasted all the money and then, when he had nothing left, decided to return home, not as a son but as a servant. His heart was filled with so much guilt and shame.

The surprise came when he began to speak, to ask for forgiveness. His father did not let him speak; he embraced him, he kissed him, and he began to make merry.

But I am telling you: each time we go to confession, God embraces us. God rejoices! Let us go forward on this road. In the Church, the God we encounter is not a merciless judge but is like the father in the Gospel parable. You may be like the son who left home, who sank to the depths, furthest from the Gospel.

When you have the strength to say “I want to come home,” you will find the door open. God will come to meet you because he is always waiting for you. God is always waiting for you, God embraces you, kisses you, and celebrates. That is how the Lord is, that is how the tenderness of our Heavenly Father is.

[The father in the parable] went every day to see if his son was coming home: This is our merciful Father. It indicates that he was waiting for him with longing on the terrace of his house. God thinks like the Samaritan who did not pass by the unfortunate man, pitying him or looking at him from the other side of the road, but helped him without asking for anything in return—without asking whether he was a Jew, a pagan, or a Samaritan, whether he was rich or poor: he asked for nothing.

God is like this. God thinks like the shepherd who lays down his life in order to defend and save his sheep.

One might say: I confess only to God. Yes, you can say to God, “forgive me,” and confess your sins, but our sins are also committed against the brethren and against the Church. That is why it is necessary to ask pardon of the Church, and of the brethren in the person of the priest.

“But Father, I am ashamed...” Shame is also good; it is healthy to feel a little shame, because being ashamed is salutary. In my country when a person feels no shame, we say that he is “shameless”. But shame, too, does good, because it makes us humbler, and the priest receives this confession with love and tenderness and forgives us on God’s behalf.

Also, from a human point of view, in order to unburden oneself, it is good to talk with a brother and tell the priest these things that are weighing so much on my heart. And one feels that one is unburdening oneself before God, with the Church, with his brother.

The sacrament of reconciliation is a sacrament of healing. When I go to confession, it is to be healed; to heal my soul, to heal my heart, and to be healed of some wrongdoing. The biblical icon that best expresses them in their deep bond is the episode of the forgiving and healing of the paralytic, where the Lord Jesus is revealed at the same time as the physician not only of souls but also of bodies (see Mark 2:1-12; Matt. 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26).

The forgiveness of our sins is not something we can give ourselves. I cannot say, “I forgive my sins.”

Forgiveness is asked for, is asked of another, and in confession we ask for forgiveness from Jesus. Forgiveness is not the fruit of our own efforts, but rather it’s a gift; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who fills us with the wellspring of mercy and of grace that flows unceasingly from the open heart of the crucified and risen Christ.

Second, Jesus reminds us that we can truly be at peace only if we allow ourselves to be reconciled, in the Lord Jesus, with the Father and with one another. And we have all felt this in our hearts, when we have gone to confession with a soul weighed down and with a little sadness; when we receive Jesus’ forgiveness we feel at peace, with that peace of soul that is so beautiful, and that only Jesus can give, only him.

Jesus gave the apostles the power to forgive sins. It is a little difficult to understand how a man can forgive sins, but Jesus gives this power. The Church is the depository of the power of the keys, of opening or closing to forgiveness. God forgives every man in his sovereign mercy, but he himself willed that those who belong to Christ and to the Church receive forgiveness by means of the ministers of the community.

Through the apostolic ministry the mercy of God reaches me, my faults are forgiven, and joy is bestowed on me. In this way Jesus calls us to live out reconciliation in the ecclesial-community-dimension as well. And this is very beautiful.

The Church, who is holy and at the same time in need of penitence, accompanies us on the journey of conversion throughout life. The Church is not mistress of the power of the keys but a servant of the ministry of mercy, and she rejoices every time she can offer this divine gift. Do not be afraid of confession!

When one is in line to go to confession, one feels all these things, even shame, but then when one finishes confession, one leaves free, grand, beautiful, forgiven, candid, happy. This is the beauty of confession.

When was the last time you made your confession?

Think about it.... Two days, two weeks, two years, twenty years, forty years? If much time has passed, do not lose another day.

Go, the priest will be good. Jesus is there, and Jesus is more benevolent than priests. Jesus receives you; he receives you with so much love. Be courageous and go to confession!

Perhaps many do not understand the ecclesial dimension of forgiveness, because individualism and subjectivism always dominate, and even we Christians are affected by this. Certainly, God forgives every penitent sinner, personally, but the Christian is tied to Christ, and Christ is united to the Church.

For us Christians there is a further gift; there is also a further duty: to pass humbly through the ecclesial community. We have to appreciate it; it is a gift, a cure, a protection, as well as the assurance that God has forgiven me. I go to my brother priest, and I say: "Father, I did this..." And he responds: "But I forgive you; God forgives you."

At that moment, I am sure that God has forgiven me! And this is beautiful; this is having the surety that God forgives us always, he never tires of forgiving us.

And we must never tire of going to ask for forgiveness.

*Excerpt from The Joy of Discipleship by Pope Francis (Loyola Press 2016).  
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