

Why do we say “Lord have mercy”?

The gift of mercy is a free and undeserved pardon. Napoleon gives us an example of mercy in this conversation he had with the mother of a condemned criminal. The emperor said the crime was dreadful; justice demanded his life. "Sir," sobbed the mother, "Not justice, but mercy." "He does not deserve mercy," was the answer. "But, sir, if he deserved it, it would not be mercy," said the mother. "Ah yes, how true," said Napoleon. "I will have mercy."

If Napoleon, in his humanity, can understand and grant mercy, how much more perfectly does our Heavenly Father wish to bestow even greater mercy on us? At the beginning of Mass, immediately following the priest's invitation to recall our sins, we call out for mercy either in the familiar “Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy” or in the Greek Kyrie eleison. We join our voices with King David who recognized his need for mercy following his acts of adultery and murder, echoing psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness; in your compassion blot out my offense.”

We have no power within us to absolve ourselves from sin. When we have hurt another person, we can't just think the apology in our mind and expect they will forgive us – we must make our apology and hope for their forgiveness. Beyond our understanding, God wants to forgive us for every sin we have ever committed. With our true contrition and request for mercy, He wishes to wipe away even the remembrance of our sin.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells us of His desire to be merciful in the parable of the repentant tax collector: “the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Keeping in mind that we must go to sacramental confession for serious, mortal sin, let us not hesitate to lay bare all our offenses before the Lord and trust that in His infinite Divine Mercy He wishes to heal and restore us. Let us cry out often: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”