How to Teach about Mercy

Bill Huebsch

The Story of Mercy
Teaching about mercy has become very important to us in the Church because we are preparing for and celebrating a Jubilee Year which has a focus on Mercy. Teaching about mercy is not done in the same way that one might teach about history. It’s not a list of facts, doctrines, or quotations from the Catechism. It is, instead, the telling of a story – God’s story, your story and your students’ stories – of how God has offered mercy to you and how you now, therefore, offer it to others.

Mercy is learned in the telling of our story and in no other way. These notes will guide you to help your students explore mercy through three distinct but related sets of stories.

1. The Story of God’s Mercy.
First, we want them to learn what the stories of mercy are in the Scriptures. There are many stories of mercy in the Bible and we cannot treat them all, of course. But we can teach learners to read the text with an ear to God’s endless and loving mercy.

2. The Story of God’s Mercy on Us.
Second, we want learners to be able to tell the story about how mercy has been given to them. In order to do this, they must first admit or embrace their need to have mercy. That need, which we tend to downplay, results from sin. We are sinners; we act selfishly: greed, lust, power, pride, envy, inaction, grudges, and over-eating or drinking. We take more for ourselves than our share of things, leaving scraps and leftovers for the poor. In spite
of this, God is merciful toward us, forgives us, and calls us to come home to him. The ministry of the Church provides key moments of grace as we open ourselves to such reconciliation and to receiving God’s mercy.

3. The Story of Our Mercy on Others.
Third, we want learners to know the stories of others, pay attention to them, and understand them. Know the poor. Know the ones who are rejected in society. Keep an eye out for those on the margins, including within your own family or neighborhood. Look inwardly to become conscious of who it is you shove away, who you judge harshly, and who you ignore. They are the very ones on whom you are called to have mercy!

Because we have been forgiven and loved so greatly, we become the agents of mercy to the world. The Church has long taught us to practice “works of mercy” both spiritual and material works. Mercy must now extend from us to others and to the entire world.

Lessons on Mercy

As you shape your lessons on mercy, therefore, incorporate these three elements into what you teach: (1) Help your students come to understand that God loves them endlessly. When they turn to him and ask forgiveness, it is already granted! Teach them to know this gracious and generous God. Do not frighten them with tales of hell and damnation, but lead them to see the light of truth in God’s grace.

(2) Learning about mercy begins at home. You can help your students by sharing your own stories of giving and receiving mercy in your life. Do not share anything inappropriate to your group, but be open and honest about your own experience.

(3) Likewise, call your students to be merciful to others. This is not an exercise in theology but a practical course on what we can actually do for others. Mercy befriends the lonely; it offers hope to those in despair; it treats the earth with gentleness; it shares its wealth with the poor. Mercy shows patience with those who are slower, joy to those who are sad, and acceptance to those who are rejected. Teach your students to become persons of Mercy and your will change their lives forever!
Mercy defined

We begin here by defining mercy, more or less. The idea of mercy escapes exact definitions. It is the work of the Spirit in our lives calling to us to works that, in ordinary times, we would never see as ours to do. Here are some talking points to help you lead your students to a more clear understanding.

- Mercy is the ready willingness to help anyone in time of need, especially through pardon or reconciliation. It is a habitual inclination of the will.
- This means that mercy is an attitude on our part, a way of treating others and the world around us, which comes to us automatically in situations.
- Mercy is the compassionate care for others whereby one takes on the burden of another as one's own. It is an active quality of the virtue of charity, motivated by love. While mercy is often treated as a rather benign term, its power is conveyed more accurately by looking at it in a scriptural context.
  - Jesus is the most eloquent witness to mercy in the New Testament. He is never vague in his proclamation of God's mercy, and rather than using only parables or discourses, he reveals God's mercy in his everyday relations with people from all strata of society. Jesus is an active agent of God's mercy — confronting the crowd about to stone the woman taken in adultery, meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, weeping with the other mourners at the death of Lazarus, and ultimately taking up the cross laden with the sins of the world and being led to his death.
  - According to Matthew 25:31-46, mercy will be the quality on which the Christian will ultimately be judged. This understanding of the necessity of mercy was also developed in the early Church.
- Mercy goes beyond the issues of who is responsible. Mercy is simply love’s response to suffering.
- Mercy is expressed as patience with that old woman who has taken too long to find her coupons in the checkout lane. It is kindness toward the friend who has come with the same old problem once again, even if you’re tired of hearing about it. When someone hurts you, mercy is turning the other cheek. Mercy makes it easy for
your friend to come to you for advice or to apologize. Mercy eagerly helps, even if the need for help is an interruption in your day. Mercy always thinks of the mitigating circumstances in the life of the other. No throwing them a look; no grunts of disapproval; no sniping to others. Mercy opens the heart, allows you to give generously, and forgives freely.

- Do you start to understand this? Mercy is told in the story of your daily life, treating others and yourself as God treats you. If you’re using these points to teach right now, pause and invite your people to think back over this very day, the one we are living right now. How did we show mercy—or fail to show it? Ask for specific stories, and they should be many.
- Mercy is the way of life for the Christian.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
Luke 4:16-19
Resources for teaching about Mercy

Pompeo Batoni: The Prodigal
Public domain

Look at this picture in your prayer time now. What do you see? Whom do you see? What image of God does this painting suggest to you, gender aside?

Using art to teach about Mercy helps those in your group who see things better than they hear them.

Once a learner has encountered an image such as this one, invite him or her to write a prayer asking to be given the gift of compassion.
Stories of Mercy in the Bible

It helps to have a grasp of the breadth and depth of the teaching on mercy in the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. As Pope Francis has observed, we have not done a good job of helping people understand God or even Jesus as agents of mercy. We have sometimes presented them as angry, hostile, punishing, and distant. Here is a selection of stories from Sacred Scripture to help you as you teach about mercy.

Joseph (Genesis chapters 37-50)
In the Scriptures, we read the story of Joseph. He was treated very badly by his brothers who were jealous of him. They threw him into a well and later sold him into slavery, but he became a manager in pharaoh’s court. Later, Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt to buy food because of a famine. Joseph was in a position to exact justice for their mean behavior toward him. Instead, Joseph returned good for evil. He had mercy on them, not only in providing food to sustain them through the famine, but also by bringing them to Egypt to live.

Joseph’s family found it hard to believe his mercy was genuine. They were unable to grasp how anyone they had treated so badly could forgive them, be merciful to them, and offer them a place in his new life. Their guilt and lack of understanding was so deep-seated that when Jacob died seventeen years later, they worried that Joseph would still be vengeful. They evidently had learned little about the character of their brother.

Moses (beginning in exodus, chapter 3)
Moses also received mercy at the hand of God and reflected the same in dealing with his people. At his birth God shielded him from Pharaoh and provided Moses with forty years of tranquil existence to prepare him for his role as leader of his people. Moses must have meditated on God’s kindness and mercy toward him because when he was

Luke 1:50-51

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

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called at the burning bush Moses revered God, trusted him, and (reluctantly) accepted God’s call to lead the Israelites to a new land.

As leader of Israel Moses was the instrument of God’s mercy to them. Through him, God provided the people with manna when they were hungry and water when they thirsted. Moses provided judgment for their disputes and God used him to establish their priesthood. When the Israelites created a golden calf during Moses’ prolonged absence, God told Moses that his anger was kindled against them. God intended to destroy them and make of Moses’ posterity a great nation in their place. Moses’ reaction was motivated by his compassion toward the people and a concern for God’s honor among the Egyptians and the other nations. He besought God to extend mercy to the people so that God’s character would not be diminished even among Israel’s enemies. They had broken their promises but Moses trusted in God’s mercy.

Because of his adultery with Bathsheba and the arranged death of Uriah, God decreed that David and Bathsheba’s ill-conceived son would die, a decree that seems to be anything but merciful. For seven painful days, David lay prostrate before God coming to grips with what he had done and seeing the consequences of his actions. After the son died, David had to live with the fact that he had been the cause of his son’s death. David would rather than died himself than lose his son!

Eventually, David realized that God had indeed been merciful to him. God had not taken his life, nor the life of Bathsheba, nor had God removed the kingdom from David. David’s appreciation for God’s mercy was reflected in the psalms he wrote in which he extols the mercy of God:

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Psalm 145:8).

The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands (Psalm 138:8).

David (2 Samuel 11 and following)
Another recipient of God’s mercy was King David. God demonstrated his mercy by choosing David even though he was the youngest son. How often God chooses the unlikely to lead! But the most amazing example of God’s mercy occurred after David’s sin with Bathsheba and Uriah.
Micah
The prophet Micah teaches us an even deeper understanding of God’s mercy.
He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

Speaking here for God, Micah shows that only justice and kindness are divine standards, coupled with a love for mercy. This does not mean merely mercy extended to oneself. The mercy Micah urges is mercy extended to others. If we hold before our minds a desire for retribution or vengeance we cannot claim a love for mercy. Jesus also teaches this in the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 5:38-48.

Micah says that God requires that we love mercy, not merely that we understand it. To love mercy is more life-changing than any other spiritual practice. It means having compassion, sympathy, and love so ingrained in our hearts that the exercise of mercy will be our natural reaction. And when we see mercy exercised toward others, it will bring joy to our hearts.

Peter.
Jesus provided an example of his mercy to all of his followers and to all of us when dealing with the apostle Peter. Having denied Jesus as Jesus predicted, Peter might have expected that Jesus would scold him when he and the other disciples met the resurrected Jesus at that fish fry on the beach on the shore of Tiberius in John 21:1-19. Instead, Jesus merely asked Peter a question to which Jesus already knew the answer:

...Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.”

Jesus used Peter’s answer to call Peter to spend his life proclaiming the message of the kingdom, to be merciful to his Jewish brothers and sisters, and even to extend God’s invitation to the Gentiles. Peter learned a huge lesson. We extend mercy even to those whom we deem unworthy; this is a lesson we all must learn.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.
Matthew 5:7
More from Scripture

Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
Hebrews 4:16 | NIV |

“The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.”
Numbers 6:24-26 | NIV |

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
Psalm 51:1-2 | NIV |

The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
Psalm 103:8 | NIV |

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.
Titus 2:11-12 | NIV |

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.
Ephesians 2:4-5 | NIV |

But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.
Matthew 9:13 | NIV |
And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.
1 Peter 5:10 | NIV |

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.
Micah 7:18 | NIV |

He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.
2 Timothy 1:9 | NIV |

For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.
Romans 6:14 | NIV |

Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.
For the Lord is a God of justice.
Blessed are all who wait for him!
Isaiah 30:18 | NIV |

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.
Revelation 22:21 | NIV |

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.
Philemon 1:25 | NIV |

Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice.
Psalm 112:5 | NIV |
May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands.
Psalm 90:17 | NIV |

Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good.
Psalm 25:6-7 | NIV |

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
Matthew 6:14 | NIV |

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
John 3:16 | NIV |

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.
Romans 3:23-24 | NIV |

So that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Romans 5:21 | NIV |

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.
Romans 12:1 | NIV |

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.
1 Peter 1:13 | NIV |
Examples of Teachings on Mercy
from Pope Francis

I think we too are the people who, on the one hand, want to listen to Jesus, but on the other hand, at times, like to find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others. And Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think — and I say it with humility — that this is the Lord's most powerful message: mercy.
— Homily on March 17, 2013

It is not easy to entrust oneself to God's mercy, because it is an abyss beyond our comprehension. But we must! ... Oh, I am a great sinner! All the better! Go to Jesus: He likes you to tell him these things! He forgets. He has a very special capacity for forgetting. He forgets, He kisses you, He embraces you and He simply says to you: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more" (John 8:11).
— Homily on March 17, 2013

Jesus' attitude is striking: we do not hear the words of scorn, we do not hear words of condemnation, but only words of love, of mercy, which are an invitation to conversation. "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." Ah! Brothers and Sisters, God's face is the face of a merciful father who is always patient. Have you thought about God's patience, the patience He has with each one of us? That is His mercy. He always has patience, patience with us, He understands us. He waits for us. He does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to Him with a contrite heart. "Great is God's mercy," says the Psalm.
— Angelus on March 17, 2013

In the past few days I have been reading a book by a Cardinal ... Cardinal Kasper said that feeling mercy, that this word changes everything. This is the best thing we can feel: it changes the world. A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just. We need to understand properly this mercy of God, this merciful Father who is so patient. ... Let us remember the Prophet Isaiah who says that even if our sins were scarlet, God's love would make them white as snow. This mercy is beautiful.
— Angelus on March 17, 2013

Together let us pray to the Virgin Mary that she helps us ... to walk in faith and charity, ever trusting in the Lord's mercy; He always awaits us, loves us, has pardoned us...
-----Regina Caeli on Divine Mercy Sunday, April 7, 2013
In today's Gospel, the Apostle Thomas personally experiences this mercy of God. ... Thomas does not believe it when the other Apostles tell him: "We have seen the Lord." And how does Jesus react? With patience: Jesus does not abandon Thomas in his stubborn unbelief ... He does not close the door, He waits. And Thomas acknowledges his own poverty, his little faith. "My Lord and my God!" with this simple yet faith-filled invocation, he responds to Jesus' patience. He lets himself be enveloped by Divine Mercy; he sees it before his eyes, in the wounds of Christ's hands and feet and in His open side, and he discovers trust.

— Homily on Divine Mercy Sunday, April 7, 2013

Let us ... remember Peter: three times he denied Jesus, precisely when he should have been closest to him; and when he hits bottom he meets the gaze of Jesus who patiently, wordlessly, says to him: "Peter, don't be afraid of your weakness, trust in Me." Peter understands, he feels the loving gaze of Jesus and he weeps. How beautiful is this gaze of Jesus — how much tenderness is there! Brothers and sisters, let us never lose trust in the patience and mercy of God!

— Homily on Divine Mercy Sunday, April 7, 2013

I am always struck when I reread the parable of the merciful Father. ... The Father, with patience, love, hope and mercy, had never for a second stopped thinking about [his wayward son], and as soon as he sees him still far off, he runs out to meet him and embraces him with tenderness, the tenderness of God, without a word of reproach. ... God is always waiting for us, He never grows tired. Jesus shows us this merciful patience of God so that we can regain confidence and hope — always!

— Homily on Divine Mercy Sunday, April 7, 2013

God's patience has to call forth in us the courage to return to Him, however many mistakes and sins there may be in our life. ... It is there, in the wounds of Jesus, that we are truly secure; there we encounter the boundless love of His heart. Thomas understood this. Saint Bernard goes on to ask: But what can I count on? My own merits? No, "My merit is God's mercy. I am by no means lacking merits as long as He is rich in mercy. If the mercies of the Lord are manifold, I too will abound in merits." This is important: the courage to trust in Jesus' mercy, to trust in His patience, to seek refuge always in the wounds of His love.

— Homily on Divine Mercy Sunday, April 7, 2013
Pope Francis’ Prayer for the Jubilee

Lord Jesus Christ,
you have taught us to be merciful like the heavenly Father,
    and have told us that whoever sees you sees Him.
    Show us your face and we will be saved.
Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew from being enslaved by money;
    the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things;
    made Peter weep after his betrayal,
    and assured Paradise to the repentant thief.
Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us, the words
    that you spoke to the Samaritan woman:
    “If you knew the gift of God!”
You are the visible face of the invisible Father,
    of the God who manifests his power above all
    by forgiveness and mercy:
    let the Church be your visible face in the world,
        its Lord risen and glorified.
You willed that your ministers would also be clothed in weakness
    in order that they may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error:
    let everyone who approaches them feel sought after,
        loved,
        and forgiven by God.
Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us with its anointing,
    so that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace from the Lord,
    and your Church, with renewed enthusiasm, may bring good news to the poor,
        proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed,
        and restore sight to the blind.
We ask this through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy,
    you who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit
    for ever and ever. Amen.

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PowerPoint on the Works of Mercy

It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead.

--Pope Francis: The Face of Mercy #15, 2015

When we teach about the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, it helps to use two teaching devices. First, help your student imagine how they can live these works of mercy in their daily lives. Avoid being too theoretical about them. Try to bring the works of mercy to a very practical level. Our PowerPoint presentation sets that up for you by giving examples. It accompanies our booklet, Be Merciful: Reflections on the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. Both can be purchased at PastoralPlanning.com.

The second device reflects what we said earlier here. It’s important to invite your students to “tell their stories” about doing mercy or having mercy done to them. In the stories, mercy becomes real and you can connect it to the story of Jesus. Again, this PowerPoint and our Booklet both provide many discussion points with suggestions to get you started.
The Salve Regina

Pope Francis has asked the whole church to pray this prayer throughout the Jubilee Year, asking the Mother of Mercy to guide and support us.

The Salve Regina, also known as the Hail Holy Queen, is a Marian hymn and one of four Marian antiphons sung at different seasons within the Christian liturgical calendar of the Roman Catholic Church. The Salve Regina is traditionally sung at Compline in the time from the Saturday before Trinity Sunday until the Friday before the first Sunday of Advent. The Hail Holy Queen is also the final prayer of the Rosary. The work was composed during the Middle Ages by German monk Hermann of Reichenau and originally appeared in Latin, the prevalent language of Western Christianity until modern times.

In Latin
Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiæ,
vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevæ,
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes
in hac lacrimarum valle.

Eia, ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos
misericordes oculos ad nos converte;
Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,
nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.
O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.

℣ Ora pro nobis, sancta Dei Genitrix.
℟ Ut digni efficiamur promissionibus Christi.

Oremus.
Omnipotens sempiterne Deus, qui gloriosæ Virginis Matris Mariae corpus et animam,
ut dignum Filii tui habitaculum effici mereretur, Spiritu Sancto cooperante præparasti: da,
ut cuius commemoratione lætamur; eius pia intercessione, ab instantibus malis, et a
morte perpetua liberemur. Per eundem Christum Dominum nostrum.  ℛ Amen.
In Spanish

Dios te salve, Reina y Madre de Misericordia,
viva, dulzura y esperanza nuestra,
Dios te salve.
A ti clamamos, los desterrados hijos de Eva;
a ti suspiramos, gimiendo y llorando
en este valle de lágrimas.
Ea, pues, Señora, abogada nuestra,
vuelve a nosotros esos tus ojos misericordiosos
y, después de este destierro, muestranos a Jesús,
fruto bendito de tu vientre.
iOh, clemente!, ioh, piadosa!, ioh, dulce Virgen María!

V./ Ruega por nosotros, Santa Madre de Dios.
R./ Para que seamos dignos de alcanzar las promesas de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo. Amén.

In English

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,
Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope.
To thee do we cry,
Poor banished children of Eve;
To thee do we send forth our sighs,
Mourning and weeping in this vale of tears.

Turn then, most gracious advocate,
Thine eyes of mercy toward us;
And after this our exile,
Show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
O clement, O loving,
O sweet Virgin Mary.

℣ Pray for us O holy Mother of God,
℟ that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ, thy Son.
Let us pray:

Almighty, everlasting God, who by the co-operation of the Holy Spirit didst prepare the body and soul of the glorious Virgin-Mother Mary to become a dwelling-place meet for thy Son: grant that as we rejoice in her commemoration; so by her fervent intercession we may be delivered from present evils and from everlasting death. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

**USCCB modern translation**

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope. To you we cry, the children of Eve; to you we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this land of exile.

Turn, then, most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us; lead us home at the end and show us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus: O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary. Amen.