

- As I read the newspaper every morning, I often marvel – albeit sorrowfully – at the mystery of evil, i.e., that evil is so prevalent and powerful in our world today.
- As a Christian with faith that God is both omnipotent and omnipresent, I’ve often wondered how it is that evil gains such a stronghold in the hearts of men, such that families, communities, cultures, and even whole nations can be destroyed by it.
- For the past 10 months in the Church, we’ve been called to ponder the mystery of God’s mercy in this extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy.
- But I don’t think we can fully appreciate God’s mercy without first pondering evil, and how men created in God’s image and likeness can give themselves so fully to sin.
- Just a cursory glance at 20th century history gives us numerous examples of unmitigated evils unleashed upon the world by the likes of Hitler, Stalin, and Saddam Hussein.
- Even now we witness the wanton cruelty and barbarism of ISIS, and the greed and depravity of the abortion industry, whose exploits are nothing short of a war on the most innocent and defenseless of our human family.
- So why does our good God allow it? Why does God allow evil to prevail so much?
- Of course the short answer to that question is that God has given us all free will – the freedom to choose – so that we might have a true capacity to love Him.
- And because of His great love, God will never revoke this gift for any of us, even when we misuse it in a way that hurts others – even millions of others.
- But there’s more to it than that, I think. In my own meditations I’ve come to understand that while God does not *will* man to commit evil, He does *allow* man to misuse his free will and commit evil so that He may bring a greater good out of that evil.
- And there is no evil that God cannot trump.
- Think of St. Paul. In our second reading today he tells us that “was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and arrogant,” and the foremost of sinners. We know as well from the Book of Acts that he was a murderer, consenting to the death of St. Stephen.
- Yet in one brief moment, while on the road to Damascus, the sinful Saul was converted to the saintly Paul through a divine encounter, and the world has never been the same.
- Because of his conversion, the Gospel message was transmitted to the Gentiles, and the Word of God was given fresh and fuller expression in his numerous letters and epistles.
- While we can see in St. Paul the marvelous workings of God’s grace and mercy and how a man can make a heroic response to that grace and mercy, the question still stands: How does man become so hard-hearted as to turn away from his Eternal Father?
- How did St. Paul become so hard hearted in the first place that he was in such dire need of divine intervention?
- Like any other man, Paul focused on himself rather than God. Before his conversion he refused to die to self and to his own will. The sinful Saul loved himself more than he loved God. In his pride he was acting for his own glory rather than God’s.
- Considering the dynamics of pride and selfishness operative in us all, we must ask: are we living and acting for God’s glory or our own? Whom do we love more: God or self?
- I love the words of St. John the Baptist when his own followers were worried that more people were following Christ rather than him. St. John simply said, “He must increase; I must decrease” (John 3:30). And so it is with each of us.

- If we wish to be holy, if we wish to be firmly united to the Father's will, *if we wish to go to Heaven*, we must decrease and Christ must increase! That's it. That's the answer!
- Rather than being concerned about what we think we need or are entitled to, we need to be like St. John and simply concern ourselves with getting out of Christ's way!
- In other words, in everything we say and do, whatever most pleases God and glorifies Him most must be the standard by which we determine our actions.
- And what pleases and glorifies God most? Our repentance! Our conversion! Our striving to be completely united to His will.
- Think of the words of our Gospel today: "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance." And truly, we are all sinners in need of repentance.
- As we ponder the story of the Prodigal Son that we hear in the Gospel today, we can see that we have every reason to repent and turn back to God!
- When the Prodigal Son found the humility to turn away from his life of debauchery and decided to humble himself before his father, he was welcomed back into his father's home as if he had returned from the dead!
- And dead he was: dead in mortal sin. Had the Prodigal Son died before repenting, he would have merited hell. Yet by humbly acknowledging his sins and determining to make atonement for them, he was completely restored to the good graces of the Father.
- Full restoration to the good graces of our Eternal Father is the reward of repentance!
- Today's Gospel should remind us so very clearly that not only is God willing to forgive any sin for which we're sorry, He desperately desires to show us His mercy. And as we look at the crucifix, we can see that He's dying to do so!
- As we are restored to the Father's good graces, a life of holiness becomes possible.
- Please understand that holiness doesn't happen by accident! Holiness is a choice that we make, a choice to be pleasing to God.
- We become holy by choosing to unite ourselves to God's will as best we know it, no matter what suffering comes to us by doing so.
- We become holy by humbly confessing our sins and atoning for them, throwing ourselves with complete confidence upon God's mercy.
- We become holy by our patient and faithful endurance of evil, recognizing that the sins others commit against us are often a means God uses to test our faith.
- We become holy by allowing God to have His way with us, trusting that if we are truly seeking His will, whatever He allows to happen to us – whether good or evil – is the very best thing that can happen to us.
- While human history often shows us the depths of evil to which man can fall, the Church's history of saints shows us the heights of holiness man can reach when he humbles himself to love and trust God with his whole heart.
- And there's no reason why we can't be just like the saints, for holiness is a choice we make, not an accident of grace.
- As we enter upon the last two months of this Jubilee Year of Mercy, let us remember that while God's grace is abundant and His mercy is for the taking, we must be willing to repent of our sins first and turn back to the Father.
- And as we turn back to the Father, let us choose to be holy in every way, loving God above all else, especially ourselves.

- And by our holiness of life, may we make reparation for the evil of others.