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“The Jubilee Year of Mercy”

Miserando atque Elegendo, these are the words on the Episcopal coat of arms of Pope Francis. He chose this phrase written by St. Bede the Venerable when he was consecrated a bishop in 1992: “He saw the tax collector and, because he saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him, he said to him: *Follow me*” (from the Office of Readings for the Feast of St. Matthew). He saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him! The Holy Father recently commented on the call of St. Matthew on his apostolic voyage to Cuba:

[Jesus] looked at Matthew calmly, peacefully. He looked at him with eyes of mercy; he looked at him as no one had ever looked at him before. And this look unlocked Matthew's heart; it set him free, it healed him, it gave him hope, a new life, as it did to Zacchaeus, to Bartimaeus, to Mary Magdalen, to Peter, and to each of us. Even if we do not dare raise our eyes to the Lord, he looks at us first. This is our story, and it is like that of so many others. Each of us can say: “I, too, am a sinner, whom Jesus has looked upon.” [...] After the Lord looked upon him with mercy, he said to Matthew: “Follow me.” Matthew got up and followed him. After the look, a word. After love, the mission. Matthew is no longer the same; he is changed inside. The encounter with Jesus and his loving mercy has transformed him. [...] Jesus looks at him and Matthew encounters the joy of service. [...] The gaze of Jesus gives rise to missionary activity, service, self-giving ([Homily at the Mass in the Plaza de la Revolución Calixto Garcia Íñiguez de Holguín, 21 September 2015](#)).

From receiving mercy, we are called to give mercy! This is the whole point of this great Jubilee Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis which will begin on the 8th of December. As we receive from the Lord, we are called to give and become Missionary Disciples of Mercy!

But before we go there, let's reflect for a few minutes on the meaning and significance of a Jubilee Year.

On the 2nd anniversary of his election as the successor of St. Peter (3/13/15), Pope Francis announced this very important Jubilee Year (from 12/8/15 – Immaculate Conception to 11/20/16 the Feast of Christ the King). The date of opening is also significant because 50 years earlier December 8th marked the close of the Second Vatican Council. The Pope himself asks the question for us: “why a Jubilee of Mercy today? Simply because the Church, in this time of great historical change, is called to offer more evident signs of God's presence and closeness” ([Divine Mercy Sunday, First Vespers, 11 April 2015](#)).

The concept of a jubilee begins in our Jewish roots of forgiving debts and offering freedom to slaves every 50 years. Pope Boniface VIII began this tradition in the Church in the year 1300 and since that time there have been 26 such jubilees – the last one being in the year 2000. It is no

coincidence that with Advent 2015 we will begin hearing from the Gospel of St. Luke “The Evangelist of Mercy” who offers us the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the merciful Father (cf. Lk. 15).

Obviously Pope Francis wants the whole world, which at times appears to be completely lost, to know that God the Father who is “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4) is seeking out every last member of His family. The Good Shepherd came “to seek and save the lost” (Lk. 19:10).

And so there are 2 very important reasons that Pope Francis has introduced this year: 1) For each of us to know on a deeper level the love and mercy of the Father and 2) to become ministers of His mercy in the midst of the world. Some feel that the Pope is being soft and is avoiding the tough issues by speaking of mercy. However, the contrary is true – one doesn’t speak of mercy if there is no sin. How brilliant our Holy Father is! In his very first interview he defined himself by saying “I am a sinner.” Remember Pope Francis views the Church as a “field hospital” where sinners need to find comfort and healing. He is looking to us to be the doctors of this MASH unit preaching conversion and mercy to all those who will listen.

So the first reality we have to acknowledge is that there is sin in the world and that we are sinners. Jesus Himself doesn’t deny the sin of the woman caught in adultery, rather He forgives her and then says “Go and sin no more” (John 8:1-11). This is the heart of the Good News – the Mercy of God is greater than our greatest sin. At his very first Angelus address, Pope Francis said: “Mercy [...] is the best thing we can feel: it changes the world. [...] God never tires of forgiving us!” ([17 March 2013](#)). One of the great gifts we possess as Catholics is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Take advantage of this treasure with renewed vigor this year. I can remember my first “adult confession” when I graduated high school – the first time I chose to go on my own. I have never forgotten the joy and freedom I felt that day. This is what the Jubilee Year of Mercy is all about. God is always waiting for us to turn to Him, not to condemn us but to embrace us. We are reminded that Mercy has a face! We are invited to encounter Christ. That confession at 18 years old was the true beginning of my lifelong journey of conversion.

The Pope reminds us so beautifully and simply: “Do not forget that God forgives all, and God forgives always. Let us never tire of asking for forgiveness” ([Announcement for the Year of Mercy, 13 March 2015](#)). Be not afraid of going to confession. Like going to the gym, if we only go once a year, it is going to hurt a lot and we will likely be very sore. However, if we go regularly, not only does it not hurt, it is energizing, and with some regularity we get stronger and stronger. If we avoid confession because of the “same old sins” then we are depriving ourselves of the very solution and healing needed. The Pope reminds us that “When God forgives he forgets” (ibid). Thus we need to let go of our sins. People often beat themselves up for years and never forgive themselves. Let it go and move forward in faith for this is what God wants for you, to be free! “But I did such and such” (now imagine your worst sin) then bring it to confession and let it go! We acknowledge sin in our lives and in our world not to be dragged down (like “Debbie Downer”) but to give God greater glory. We can cry out with the Psalmist “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, His mercy endures forever” (cf. Ps 136).

So once we have received mercy we are to be “ministers of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18); dispensers and missionaries of mercy for our world. This requires an intimate encounter with the healing and mercy of Christ, and then once forgiven we are called to share the Good News with all around us. “What you have received as gift, give as gift” (Lk. 6:37-38). The first step is for us to step out of our comfort zones and reach out. As Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium* (on the “Joy of the Gospel”):

The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. *1 Jn* 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved ([Evangelii Gaudium, 24](#)).

This is where the Pope starts making the world nervous; this is where he starts making me/us nervous. “Be merciful like your heavenly Father is merciful” (Lk. 6:36). Is that the way I/we live? Or do I hold on to resentments, hurts (real or perceived), prejudices? How often am I judgmental or harsh in my judgments thus closing myself off to the possibility of God using me as an instrument of his peace. “How blessed are the merciful, mercy shall be theirs” (Mt 5:7). I certainly want mercy – am I willing to give it? In his Lenten Message 2015 Pope Francis said: “How greatly I desire [...] our parishes and our communities may become islands of mercy in the midst of the sea of indifference!” ([Lenten Message 2015](#)). This is the key to the New Evangelization – we must transmit mercy if we are going to be credible witnesses! (cf. Pope Francis, [Misericordiae Vultus: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy](#), 13).

I was traveling recently and I found myself closing my heart to people around me: the woman dressed in a man’s suit, the young man with tattoos and piercings, in a word, anyone who was not like me who I could put in a box – am I not like the scribes and Pharisees? What about the crazy homeless man on the corner? The divorced and remarried Catholic that feels excommunicated? The neighbors in a same sex union who I avoid eye contact with? This is precisely where the Pope, or should I say Jesus Himself, is challenging me (image of Pope Francis as a Master fisherman, chumming the water drawing all of the fish close to the barque of Peter). Notice sin is not denied, but if we do not look upon our neighbors with the same gaze of mercy and love, how will they ever come to hear the Gospel of forgiveness and healing? Our openness to other people – people who are different than we are, people on the peripheries and fringes of society – they need us to look upon them with love. Without watering down the faith, without denying sin, we invite all people “come and see” (Jn. 1:39) and then “go and sin no more” (Jn. 8:11). This is certainly one of my challenges this year – to have Christ’s eyes of mercy. This is how the Kingdom of God is made manifest in the world and we do our part to bring healing and communion to all those around us. The Church has also given us a couple of lists that we can work on to bring mercy into the world. These are age old, tried and true: they are called the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. This is an application of the Church’s social doctrine and social justice in the world today where there is so much inequality and suffering amongst the materially and spiritually poor. Mercy is another way, a more spiritual way to understand the needs of the world.

First of all, the corporal works of mercy – that is, something we “do” physically/corporally to manifest God’s mercy; they are based upon Mt 25 when Jesus reminds us, “Whatever you did for the least of my brothers, you did it to me.”

1. Feed the hungry
2. Give drink to the thirsty
3. Clothe the naked
4. Welcome the stranger
5. Heal the sick

6. Visit the imprisoned
7. Bury the dead

This sounds a lot like a list of our apostolic assignments

- Caring Kitchen where we feed the hungry;
- FAU and Lynn University where our college students are thirsting for the truth;
- St. Anne's Place, the Cathedral of St. Ignatius' Social Ministries, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society where we clothe the naked;
- Our Lady Queen of Peace Mission where we welcome the stranger;
- The hospitals of JFK, St. Mary's, and the V.A., not to mention your summers of CPE where we visit, minister to, and bring healing to the sick;
- The Palm Beach County Jails where we visit the imprisoned;
- And the Trustbridge Hospice Centers prepare the dying and assist their families to say goodbye and bury the dead.

The second list is the Spiritual Works of Mercy – that is, they are not tangible but nonetheless real:

1. Counsel the doubtful
2. Instruct the ignorant
3. Admonish sinners
4. Comfort the afflicted
5. Forgive offences
6. Bear patiently those who do us ill
7. Pray for the living and the dead.

Think about these for a moment:

- The Women's Center and the Treatment Center where we counsel those struggling with doubts;
- Teaching catechism at St. Luke, St. Juliana, St. Joan of Arc, St. Rita, St. Patrick, St. Mark, and our local High Schools of JP II and Cardinal Newman where we instruct (not to mention all of our great professors who have been called to this mission of instructing the ignorant at St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary!);
- Priests and deacons preaching in the many parishes who are challenging, admonishing, and encouraging the people in the pews;
- Nursing homes like Noreen McKeen and Brookdale where we comfort the afflicted and lonely;
- Soon you will have the privilege of forgiving offences in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but this must be broader too as men of forgiveness in community.

Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. At times how hard it seems to forgive! And yet pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully. Let us therefore heed the Apostle's exhortation: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (*Eph 4:26*). Above all, let us listen to the words of Jesus who made mercy an ideal of life and a criterion for the credibility of our faith: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (*Mt 5:7*): the beatitude to which we should particularly aspire in this Holy Year (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 9).

- And it is also in community where we continue to learn to bear patiently with one another - a practice that we will need in rectories, parish offices, and wherever we encounter fallen humanity;
- And finally, our “pastoral priority par excellence”, to use the words of our Pope Emeritus, is our daily Eucharistic gathering and the Liturgy of the Hours where we pray for the needs of the living and the dead.

You see brothers we already *are* striving to be Missionaries of Mercy, but this year calls us to become more aware and intentional of living it out by becoming more conscious of being Christ and bringing Christ to all.

Allow me to close with five suggestions for us to work on during this Year of Mercy:

1. Reflect on how much we need God’s Mercy – Receive His gaze and grow in relationship with our Triune God. This is the first key!
2. Go to confession at regular intervals of at least once a month - the better penitent we are, the better confessor we will be. Pope Francis reminds us of this point:
I will never tire of insisting that confessors be authentic signs of the Father’s mercy. We do not become good confessors automatically. We become good confessors when, above all, we allow ourselves to be penitents in search of his mercy.
[And then he gives us confessors a little advice:] May confessors not ask useless questions, but like the father in the parable, interrupt the speech prepared ahead of time by the prodigal son, so that confessors will learn to accept the plea for help and mercy pouring from the heart of every penitent. In short, confessors are called to be a sign of the primacy of mercy always, everywhere, and in every situation, no matter what (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 17).
3. Take advantage of the opportunities to receive Jubilee indulgences through works of Mercy, entering specified Holy Doors, offering particular prayers, and many other possibilities. The Pope gives the best and simplest description I have seen regarding indulgences:
Despite being forgiven, the conflicting consequences of our sins remain. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God forgives our sins, which he truly blots out; and yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act. But the mercy of God is stronger even than this. It becomes *indulgence* on the part of the Father who, through the Bride of Christ, his Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin. [...] To gain an indulgence is to experience the holiness of the Church, who bestows upon all the fruits of Christ’s redemption, so that God’s love and forgiveness may extend everywhere. Let us live this Jubilee intensely, begging the Father to forgive our sins and to bathe us in his merciful “indulgence” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 22).
4. Try to love more, judge less, and look upon all with the eyes of Christ. As Jesus reminds us: “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (*Lk* 6:37-38).
5. Be ever more conscious of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy that we are already involved in. Be the mercy of God and make present the mercy of God in the world.

Pope Francis is not denying the importance of doctrine, but he is reminding us that people must always come first. It is the reminder that it is about encounter not confrontation (cf. [Homily during Midday Prayer with the Bishops of the United States, 23 September 2015](#)).

I will close with the words of Pope Francis that we heard him speak on September 23rd:

For the source of our joy is “an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of our own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy.” [...] Father Serra had a motto which inspired his life and work, a saying he lived his life by: *siempre adelante!* Keep moving forward! For him, this was the way to continue experiencing the joy of the Gospel, to keep his heart from growing numb, from being anaesthetised. He kept moving forward, because the Lord was waiting. He kept going, because his brothers and sisters were waiting. He kept going forward to the end of his life. Today, like him, may we be able to say: Forward! Let’s keep moving forward!” ([Homily at the Canonization Mass for St. Junípero Serra at the Catholic University of America, 23 September 2015](#)).

Let us receive and give mercy in an extraordinary way so as to make the Kingdom of God ever more present in the world and make this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy a time to remember!

¡Siempre adelante!