

Year of Mercy



In this year of mercy **Pope Francis** is hoping we will all experience “a true moment of encounter with the mercy of God...that the Jubilee (of mercy) be a living experience of the closeness of the Father, whose tenderness is almost tangible, so that the faith of every believer may be strengthened.”

We will come to know in a deeper and more profound way “A genuine experience of God’s mercy, which comes to meet each person in the Face of the Father who welcomes and forgives, forgetting completely the sin committed.”

What is Mercy?

What exactly would Francis like us to experience? What is mercy? What does the **merciful face of God** look like?

How would we recognize this God in our world...this merciful God?

❖ Seven Corporal Works of Mercy

- Feed the hungry
- Give drink to the thirsty
- Clothe the naked
- Shelter the homeless
- Visit the sick
- Visit those in prison
- Bury the dead

❖ Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy

- Counsel the doubtful
- Instruct the ignorant
- Admonish sinners
- Comfort the afflicted
- Forgive offenses
- Bear wrongs patiently
- Pray for the living and the dead

Francis wants us to **know more deeply this Jubilee year God's unconditional, merciful love** for us. *“It’s a journey that starts with spiritual conversion.”...toward a more compassionate and forgiving heart.*

Compassion or **forgiveness** shown toward someone *whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm (within the law)*

Synonyms: *leniency, grace, humanity, charity, love*

Mercy in Scripture

Micah 6:8

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness (or mercy), and to walk humbly with your God?”

Psalm 31:7

“Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness’ sake, O Lord.”

“I will be glad and rejoice in thy mercy: for thou hast considered my trouble; thou hast known my soul in adversities.”

Matthew 9:13

“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Colossians 3:12

“Put on then, as god’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

Titus 3:4-5

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

A Spiritual Work of Mercy

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and

went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'”

Pope Francis often uses the example of the father's embrace of his Prodigal Son as a witness of God's mercy.

We only offer mercy when people return to us?

Only when they come to see *their* errors?

Only when they seek forgiveness?

Only when they see the errors of their ways?

Must one seek forgiveness for mercy to be offered?

Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* (1661-1669)



Among his final works - completed about 2 years before his death. Rembrandt seems to have been haunted by this story... He depicted it eighteen times. Here Rembrandt shows the moment of the son's return to his father. The son has returned home in a wretched state from travels in which he has wasted his inheritance and fallen into poverty and despair.

He kneels before his father in repentance, wishing for forgiveness and a renewed place in the family. His father receives him with a tender gesture. Standing at the right is - what is thought by many to be the son's older brother, who crosses his hands in judgement.

Rembrandt interprets the Christian idea of mercy with extraordinary solemnity in the evocation of religious mood and human sympathy...with psychological insight and spiritual awareness.

This image represents a symbol of homecoming, of the darkness of human existence illuminated by tenderness; of weary and sinful mankind taking refuge in the shelter of God's mercy.

This image is especially a meditation on forgiveness for the seemingly unforgivable. The prodigal son's father spontaneously forgives his son without any terms and conditions under the eyes of his older son who seemingly portrays an attitude of unforgiveness.

In this image Rembrandt couples forgiveness and the unforgivable...a significant issue we all face in our lives...when to extend mercy, and when not.

In contrasting the complexity of the forgivable in the midst of the seemingly unforgivable, Rembrandt broke with biblical tradition: He included the presence of the elder son at the moment of the father's spontaneous forgiveness of his younger brother ...when biblically he was out in the fields.

For Luke, the older son thinks more according to the social structures of the law, merit, and reward rather than in terms of love and forgiveness. For Jesus, in Luke's interpretation, the older son would be compared to the Pharisees. He stays at home and obeys his father, maintaining all proper appearances but leans towards self-righteousness and is resentful; his behaviour is uncharitable and trusts in the efficacy of works.

To be fair, it could be argued that the father, by his very spontaneous gesture, grants forgiveness without any expectation, without any conditions. Is the forgiven son truly repentant? Has he made a

commitment to change his ways? Has he gone through a moral transformation? Or is he just down on his luck and feeling sorry for himself? In the older son's eyes the father has committed an injustice and fails to honour him, fails to see his own work and faithfulness.

Should forgiveness be granted unconditionally???

In portraying forgiveness along with the unforgivable, Rembrandt seems to claim that forgiveness escapes all conditional logic of exchange...it is not an economic transaction... forgiveness is not proportionate to the recognition of the fault, to repentance, to the transformation of the sinner who then explicitly asks for forgiveness.

But the image of the father with his two sons encourages us to think for ourselves...

Is forgiveness unconditional? Or is it inevitably linked with terms and conditions?

In forgiving so unconditionally, do we risk trivializing the concept of forgiveness? ie. Jesus forgave unconditionally??? Forgiving us who do not fully understand our sins???

Is Judgement Upon the Church Completely Unfounded? Completely Based Upon Misunderstanding?

People's judgemental, unforgiving manner towards us can be harsh, but it is a reality we can't dismiss outright. Such people, with more secular eyes, are growing, and we are generally not credible in them.

We have to be mindful of such eyes upon us. Their manner of looking upon us we cannot ignore or dismiss.

Do they see something amiss in our behaviour that we are blind to?

Are we growing blind to how we are living our vocations?

Are we slipping in any way?

Ignoring or dismissing such judgements upon us as a Church community has no pastoral value... it has no evangelical value... because, in some way, I dare to say, they are often right.

Though we may be judged harshly, what they see does have some accuracy...though much in their eyes is taken out of context.

What Do People See In Our Christ-like Witness... or Not See?



What are our spiritual ailments that we are giving witness to?

Pope **Francis** named **some** of them at Christmas. Though they were more directed to the Vatican curia, many of them could easily apply to us I'm sure:

- ❖ ***Spiritual narcissism*** that leads us to behave like lords and masters.
- ❖ A '**Martha Complex**' of **excessive activity** that can so easily squeeze out our basic human sympathy.
- ❖ ***Spiritual Alzheimer's/Spiritual Emptiness that builds walls and routines*** around ourselves, ***forgetting the spirit of the Gospels.***
- ❖ ***Cliquishness, indifference to others***

Francis draws our attention to the reality that our Church's compelling message of Jesus as all loving and merciful is growing less and less compelling...is not getting through.

On the decline of the Church in Latin America, Francis reflects:

"Perhaps the Church appeared too weak, perhaps too distant from their needs...perhaps too cold, perhaps too caught up with itself...perhaps the world seems to have made the Church a relic of the past, unfit for new questions..."

Jesus himself had many detractors, as we know. He did not ignore them or dismiss them.

He fraternally engaged with them. He treated them with compassion and respect. **He responded pastorally and mercifully to anyone who asked for his care, or even challenged him.**

He formed his disciples to do the same.



Everyone Understands the Language of Pastoral Presence

Though many may not understand the theological foundations of our faith in Christ, or the traditions behind our theological development, ***everyone understands and responds to our pastoral language, if we speak it, if we act it... it is universal. If we smell like the sheep, people know it; they will smell us. It is time to renew this language...to speak with renewed energy in this way...***not at the expense of our theological foundations, but upon them.

Do We Speak This Language Enough???

For many of us, perhaps this is ***a language that we have not spoken as much as we could and should have.***

We know this language... have been compelled by it... but we can easily ***lose sense of it in the course of our busy, responsibility-laden lives.***

Francis' Words to New Cardinals

Earlier this year (February 2015) Francis spoke to those he had just named and installed as cardinals. His words to them spoke of a new vision of the church, of how he wanted them to live and work as cardinals.

Our First Priority

Their (*our*) first priority was to seek out and welcome those around them, no matter who they were, or their situations.

Their (our) first priority was 'engagement...' being attentive to the outcasts of our society, going beyond ourselves... the cultures and worlds we are most comfortable in.

Their (our) first priority should be 'pastoral conversion.'



Credibility

Francis draws our attention to this:

The credibility of our church and on the Christian message rests entirely on how Christians serve the marginalized.

“We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalized... The Gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake, is found, and is revealed.”



Pope Francis' Vision of Mercy for the Church

Francis says to us:

"(The Church) is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also existentially: to the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and to all misery... We must be capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy in a world of wounded persons in need of understanding, forgiveness, love."

If we can not maintain and further develop this religious and spiritual capacity as human beings, as a Church, the world will remain cold to us, continuing to judge us harshly and objectively because we are not close to it; we have no human relation with it.

Are we Christian ministers who can warm the hearts of the people?

Are we Christian ministers who can walk with people in their darkness?

Are we Christian ministers who can descend/reach down where so many are?...without getting lost ourselves???

To be such ministers requires that we step outside of ourselves. That is **not** easy!, for any of us. That is why we are here.

To reflect on who we are, presently, as Christians... To reflect on who we want to be as Christians...To grow in prayerful strength to be such Christians... To continue to grow into the Christians we pray to be.

Scriptural Reflections:

Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)

Contemplate how delicately Jesus steps outside of himself... How he senses another's pain, suffering and confusion...

How he enters into it. Contemplate how the disciples respond to Jesus' pastoral presence....

"Their hearts were burning within them."

I Was In Prison and You Visited Me (Matthew 25:34-40)

Reflect back, who have been the hungry and thirsty in your lives? Who the stranger?

Who the naked? Who the ill and sick? Who the imprisoned?

Did you feed and give them something to drink? Did you help cloth them? Did you care for them? Did you visit them?

How did you do such ministry?

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

