



A LIVING FAITH

A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation

by Todd Graff, Director of Lay Formation (February, 2016)

THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD'S MERCY

*“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy....
Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth”*

(Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, #5).

“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy.” So begins the “Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy” [entitled “*Misericordiae Vultus*” or “The Face of Mercy”], the statement by which Pope Francis formally declared the Jubilee Year and described its purpose. It is valuable for us, as we enter more deeply into this year, to examine Pope Francis’ vision for this Jubilee Year and to reflect on its roots in the Church’s scriptures and tradition.

Our Merciful God

Saint Thomas Aquinas taught that God manifests his omnipotence (“all powerful-ness”) by exercising mercy. An ancient liturgical prayer of the Church invokes God, “who reveal[s] your power above all in your mercy and forgiveness.” Again and again, the Old Testament speaks of our great and all-powerful God as being “patient and merciful.”

As the Psalmist attests:

- “He executes justice for the oppressed; he gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.... The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless” (Psalm 146:7-9).
- “He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds... The Lord lifts up the downtrodden” (Psalm 147:3, 6).
- In all of God’s actions, we give praise “for his mercy endures forever” (Psalm 136).

The Face of the Merciful Father

Our all-powerful and all-merciful God is then revealed fully and definitively in the gospels. We come to understand and experience God’s mercy most truly by looking at Jesus of Nazareth, who “by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God” (*MV*, #1). God’s mercy, then, has a human face – it is the face of Jesus.

The mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, received from the Father, is to reveal “the mystery of divine love in its fullness.” As the First Letter of John states, and as Pope Benedict reminded us in his encyclical, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16; “*Deus Caritas Est*”).

This love and mercy of God is “not an abstract idea.” It manifests itself in Jesus’ ministry in very concrete ways as he:

- cures the sick, heals the lame, and frees the possessed (e.g., cf. Mark 1:32-34 and Matthew 15:30)
- provides bread and fish for his hungry followers (Matthew 15:32-38)
- restores the life of the grieving widow’s son (Luke 7:11-15)
- reaches out and welcomes the sinner and the outcast (Luke 5:27-32).

In summary, the “signs” Jesus works, “especially in favor of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion” (MV, #8).

Parables of Mercy

He teaches clearly of this abundant mercy of the Father not only through his deeds, but also by his words. Through his parables, Jesus offers powerful and moving images of this:

- the loving and forgiving father who welcomes back his “prodigal son” (Luke 15:11-32)
- the compassionate Samaritan who stops to assist and care for a fellow traveler lying wounded along the roadside (Luke 10:25-37)
- the caring owner who leaves his flock to seek out one lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-14).

And, in another parable (Matthew 18:21-35), Jesus teaches clearly that this same mercy is also to be lived out by his followers in their own lives. The “ruthless servant” of Matthew’s gospel has a debt forgiven by his master, but then refuses to forgive the debt owed him by a fellow servant. The master strongly rebukes the “wicked” servant, and Jesus concludes the parable by teaching that each of us must “forgive ... from [our] heart.”

Pope Francis further spells out the implications of this parable: “Jesus affirms that mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are.... Pardoning offenses becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves” (MV, #9).

Next month, we will explore more deeply the challenge Pope Francis offers to the Church and to her members to proclaim and give witness to Christ – the “Face of Mercy” – to our sisters and brothers in this Jubilee Year. *Deo Gratias!*

“As we can see in Sacred Scripture, mercy is a key word that indicates God’s action towards us. He does not limit himself merely to affirming his love, but makes it visible and tangible. Love, after all, can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes, and behaviors that are shown in daily living. The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us.” (Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, #9).