



# A LIVING FAITH

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*A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation*

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

## LIVING THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY

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Last month, we examined the context for the Year of Mercy in the Church's scriptures and tradition as described in Pope Francis' "Bull of Indiction" of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy" [entitled "*Misericordiae Vultus*" or "The Face of Mercy"], the statement by which he formally declared the Jubilee Year and described its purpose.

To review, Pope Francis describes mercy in this way:

*"We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness."* [MV #1]

With this context in mind, we will now look at how the Year of Mercy can find concrete expression and explore the challenge Pope Francis offers to the Church and to her members to proclaim and give witness to Christ – the "Face of Mercy."

### **An "Oasis of Mercy"**

First, it is most important to understand how Pope Francis identifies mercy as being "the very foundation of the Church's life." All of the Church's pastoral activity "should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy." [MV #10]

The Church is to proclaim the mercy of God to every person and to act in a way that gives witness to Christ who ministered to everyone without exception. The Church's "first truth" is the love of Christ, and her primary mission is to be the servant and mediator of Christ's love to all people – a love this is both giving and forgiving.

Each of her words and all of her actions "must transmit mercy.... [W]herever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident." And so, whenever people approach the Church and however they do so – in a parish, school, or diocesan setting; at a church institution; or even simply to an individual or small group of her members – they will find Christ's love and care, and "an oasis of mercy." [MV #12]

## A “Program of Life”

The goal for all of us, as Pope Francis states it, is “to live this Jubilee Year in light of the Lord’s words... ‘Be merciful just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36).” To do so offers us “a program of life as demanding as it is rich with joy and peace.” [MV #13]

But, how do we enter into such a way of living, and how do we become truly merciful in the day to day practice of our faith? Pope Francis offers us several ways to guide us along the way:

- ♦ **Attend to God’s Word.** To be capable of mercy, we must first open our hearts and listen to the Word of God. To “contemplate God’s mercy and adopt it as our lifestyle” will demand that we take time in silence to meditate on God’s Word as it comes to us in prayer and through reflection on Sacred Scripture. [MV #13]
- ♦ **Go on Pilgrimage.** During the Jubilee, each of us is invited to travel in pilgrimage to one of the Holy Doors established for this year. [See the Jubilee insert in this issue for a listing of Holy Door / Pilgrimage sites in our diocese.]

To make such a trip will require some “dedication and sacrifice” on our part. And, as we pass through the Holy Door, we seek the grace of conversion so that “we will find the strength to embrace God’s mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us.” To be merciful, our Holy Father explains, we must *not judge* and *not condemn*, but rather seek *to give* and *to forgive*. [MV #14]

- ♦ **Practice the Works of Mercy.** At the heart of the Year of Mercy is an invitation also to embrace anew our practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. [A listing of each of these can easily be found online or in a Catholic prayer book or catechetical resource.] Critical to engaging in these works is the need for us to open our hearts “to those living on the outermost fringes of society.”

We must resist the “indifference” and the “cynicism” that keep us from hearing the cry of our sisters and brothers in need, and seeking to “heal [their] wounds” and “to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care.” Pope Francis reminds us here of Jesus’ teaching that “[i]n each of these ‘little ones,’ Christ himself is present.” [MV #15]

- ♦ **Celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.** The Lenten season is an especially fruitful time to encounter God’s great mercy. Central to this experience for Catholics is the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation where we “rediscover a path back to the Lord ... [and] touch the grandeur of God’s mercy with [our] own hands.” [MV #17]

For those who have been away from this sacrament for some time, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops offers a helpful online resource, “*God’s Gift of Forgiveness*” ~ “*How to Go to Confession...*” ([www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)).

As Pope Francis exhorts us: “Let us live out the Jubilee by beginning with these signs that carry the great power of love.... Take courage and step forward!” [General Audience - 12/16/2015]. *Deo Gratias!*