



DIOCESE OF DERRY

JESUS CHRIST IS THE FACE OF THE FATHER'S MERCY

Pastoral Letter for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy
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The Face of the Father's Mercy

The word 'respect' is much used today. We take it for granted that we should respect another person's privacy or their dignity. But the word has an interesting origin. It comes from the Latin words that mean 'to look back at'.

Pope Francis has written that "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy" As many people in the Gospels discovered, "Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth." In Jesus, God looks straight back into our eyes with love, encouragement and mercy – no matter where we have been in life. God never ceases to respect our privacy or our dignity.

The Year of Mercy, which begins on December 8th 2015, is intended to be a time when people within the Church discover and rediscover the loving mercy of God in our lives. It is an invitation to see ourselves through the eyes of the God who loves us and desires to heal us. Then, and only then, can we dare to go out to offer it to so many of our contemporaries who hunger and thirst to know mercy and healing in their lives.

The Love Story

In his amazing first encyclical, published almost 10 years ago *Deus Caritas Est* Pope Benedict XVI used a phrase that has stuck with me. He described the interactions between God and the human race as the love-story recounted by the Bible. This Year of Mercy is an invitation to engage with the belief that human history is not primarily about the boardroom and the battlefield but about the divine project to heal broken relationships between us and God and among ourselves.

That love story begins with God making man and woman in the divine image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). And even when Adam and Eve made disastrous choices, God desired to bring humankind back to the dignity for which it was created.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." (John 3:16) In the Gospels, Jesus saw crowds who were tired and exhausted – he read their hearts and responded to their deepest needs. He offers hope and food.

But he was not just a nice person. Jesus was sent to soak up all the sin of the world on the Cross – and his Resurrection was a sign that God's dream can never be destroyed, even by the worst that human beings can do to themselves and to others.

In the power of the Spirit, Jesus sent out his apostles to tell people about God's plan for them – and how the forgiveness won by Jesus was readily available to all those who turned to God for mercy and healing.

The Prodigal Son

This is one of the world's great short stories. The younger son causes huge pain to his father and makes a fool of himself abroad. But the father never stops waiting for him to come home – even



when others would have told him that he was stupid to keep up his hopes. Love is always bigger than pain.

The older, well-behaved brother does not understand this. Divine forgiveness does not mean punishing or getting angry. Mercy, born of love, loves the offender into believing that he can be welcomed back, as a child and not just as a servant.

Divine mercy helps us to forgive ourselves. It frees us from being prisoners of our past. It invites us to be called forward, not to be held back. God wants us to have life and to have it to the full (John 10:10)

There are many people who need to be healed of terrible and traumatic memories. Some feel tortured by feelings that they are useless or that their life has no value. We all know individuals who have made a lot of bad judgements – and who feel that it is not worth trying to change their damaging patterns of behaviour. In God's eyes, no matter what has happened in the past, we can forgive and be forgiven.

The Church

Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her 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. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love (MV 10)

Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, and the Church is the Body of Christ. Those who have become members of Christ have the vocation to make God's mercy visible in our day. That has been visible in every generation in people who have cared for the young and the sick, for those who experience illness, imprisonment or loss.

But in every generation, there have also been terrible examples where those who claimed to act in Jesus' name have been harsh, sometimes brutal and – as we know from our own country – abusive of the weak. The credibility of Christ's message has been damaged by some who claimed to act in his name.

As church people we need to bring our shame to the gaze of Jesus

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and humbly ask for forgiveness. And we need to ask pardon from those who have been hurt, or neglected or not believed. On behalf of the Catholic Church in the diocese of Derry, I ask for pardon and forgiveness from those who have suffered in any way from people who were supposed to reveal the mercy and compassion of God.

And many people do not see the ministry of the Church as compassionate. We have much to do if we are to be credible witness to the Jesus of the Gospels. This year calls the Church to renewal so that we can be credible messengers of God's loving kindness. The terrible sins of some do not stop us from believing in God's mercy.

Sacrament of Reconciliation

Jesus was introduced by John the Baptist as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn 1:29). He spoke clearly about the possibility of being forgiven. On the evening of the first Easter Sunday, Jesus said to his disciples, 'As the Father sent me, so am I sending you... Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven.' (Jn 20:20-22)

As we know from the New Testament, there were various ways in which sins could be forgiven. But since the early centuries of the Church, individual confession of sins to a confessor has been a core part of the Church's healing ministry in Christ's name.

At the Irish national Marian Shrine in Knock, some 5,000 people per week come to celebrate the mercy and love of God for us. Other places of pilgrimage witness great stories of healing and renewal. It is because of the possibility of a huge outpouring of grace in the Sacrament that Pope Francis wrote, 'the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy which spurs us on to do our best (EG44)

But many people have painful memories of being rejected when they sought mercy. Some still hurt from carrying a heavy cross of guilt.

In this Year of Mercy, we hope to

- Help priests to reflect on and renew their ministry in Jesus' name in how they offer and celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation;
- At key times in the year, to offer teaching about and access to the Sacrament in centres across the diocese;
- Support young people in going beyond our often superficial culture and to know the Lord who looks loving into their eyes.

Corporal Works of Mercy

But mercy is not just something to be experienced in the spiritual realm. Jesus recognised that people had many needs. He identifies with the least of his brothers and sisters – the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick and prisoners (Mt 25: 31-46)

A church that speaks of the mercy of God has to make that mercy visible in the poverties of our time. Pope Benedict XVI wrote

Love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the universal Church (DCE 20)

Compassion does not just mean feeling sorry for someone and going on. The root of the word means 'suffering with'. Mercy involves our feelings and our actions. Our prayer is meant, not to protect us from the world, but to send us out into the midst of it.

This Year of Mercy is also a call to all followers of Christ to be well known for their unobtrusive generosity and compassion. We have to reflect whether clergy, consecrated brothers and sisters, and parishioners are actively concerned for the homeless, the sick, the refugee and the young person at risk. Our actions are the best measure of how seriously we take the mercy mission in Jesus' name. The parish community cannot sub-contract mercy to the St Vincent DePaul Society or to Trócaire.

Pilgrimage

The Israelites' Exodus journey from Egypt to the Promised Land is an image of the constant journey for each person – from slavery and limitation to freedom and flourishing.

Christians have always gone on pilgrimage. The outward journey is a sign of an inner movement. Pilgrimages are times where there is space to break with daily routines and to discover new opportunities.

This year we will offer a range of opportunities for pilgrimage.

- Lourdes (July 1-6)
- Lough Derg
- Cursillo Walk to Knock in July
- (Croagh Patrick)
- World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland (July 21-31st)
- Rome (September 2-7th)
- Local pilgrimages to Mass Rocks and other sites

Need for Mercy

The news media reflect to us a world much in need of mercy. The face of the planet is scarred by conflict, injustice, inequality and a degradation of the environment. And in all of these realities, it is the poor and the weak who suffer first and most.

What do we hope for from this Year of Mercy?

This is not just an opportunity to do a few holy things – and go back to where we were. This is not a soft message that 'anything goes'. It is a clear assertion that we are capable of great things – and that the Father is always waiting for us to return to the dignity that we thought we had lost, or believed that we never had.

It is a communal opportunity for all of us to understand better the mercy of God – and to become a more merciful Church in the service of Christ. The outcome is not that we can feel holier or better – but that Jesus, the face of the Father's mercy, will be better known and loved.

