

Advent Day of Recollection

Introduction

First, thanks for being here for an evening of prayer and reflection as we enter upon the Season of Advent, a new liturgical year, and, of course, the Jubilee of Mercy which Pope Francis proclaimed last April. In the spirit of the season, I would like to propose that we structure our time together like a sandwich: the two pieces of bread will be the talks; the meat, lettuce, tomatoes, and mayo will be a time of prayer in-between the talks. The question and answer period will be like sparking champagne.

The two talks could not have a simpler structure. Both are based on Pope Francis' teaching on mercy, especially his document announcing the special jubilee year of mercy which begins with the words, "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy." The first is all about our receiving mercy; the second is all about our showing mercy. They are like two sides of one coin.

What Is a Holy Year?

But first a little refresher on what a holy year is meant to be. All of us have been around long enough to experience Holy Years. The last holy year was the great jubilee of the year 2000 which marked the beginning of the third Christian millennium. St. John Paul II's whole pontificate was preparation for that moment in which he prayed earnestly for the whole of the human race that there would be a new springtime in the life of the Church.

Once we got beyond our Y2K fears, we all had high hopes for this new era, but, as usual, our plans were not quite in sync with God's plans. If the early decades of this millennium were meant to be a new springtime, we'd have to admit that spring weather has been turbulent. We have only to think of 9/11, global terrorism, the sex abuse crisis, declining church attendance in Europe and the United States, and

changing cultural attitudes which make preaching the Gospel more challenging. Amid such turbulence, Pope Benedict XVI wrote his first encyclical - *God Is Love - Deus Caritas Est* and his second, *In Hope We Were Saved - Spe Salvi*. Pope Benedict's writings were rich and beautiful expressions of God's mercy.

Now Pope Francis has taken the Church and the world by storm. All of us were taken by his visit to the United States last September. It was flawless, except for the fact that he didn't come to Baltimore! In many ways, he is taking the teaching of the II Vatican Council and the teachings of the Popes following the Council - and making it accessible to us by his own style of writing and speaking and by his gestures of love, mercy, and simplicity coupled with openness and transparency. A papacy a panacea does not make but the Holy Father is opening doors for us and I pray each day that we, who form the Church of Baltimore, will have the grace and good sense to walk through them.

Holy Years began in the year 1300 to mark the anniversaries of redemption, presuming that Christ was born more or less on schedule. There have been other extraordinary holy years as in 1983 when Pope John Paul II celebrated the 1950th anniversary of our redemption. The present Jubilee of Mercy is not tied so much to an anniversary as to the Pope's burning desire to proclaim and bear witness to the Gospel of Mercy, a desire so very clear on every page of his letter entitled *The Joy of the Gospel*. This Jubilee of Mercy begins on December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, because that feast of Mary's innocence takes us back to the very beginning and reminds us that when we rebelled against God at the dawn of human history God did not wish to leave us in our sins.

The Pope will inaugurate the Jubilee by opening the Holy Door at St. John Lateran on the 3rd Sunday of Advent and subsequently the Holy Doors of all the major basilicas in Rome. On December 13, I will open Holy Doors at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen and at the Basilica of the Assumption, and doors of other churches around the

Archdiocese will also be opened. The Pope wants to open doors for us, the doors of mercy. He wants us to walk through the doors and to rediscover in the Church that God is mercy itself, that God is close to us, loving and compassionate, and that mercy unlocks for you and me the joy of forgiveness and the joy of being the Lord's disciples. During the Holy Year we are invited to go on pilgrimage, especially to Rome, but also to the more local churches that have been specially designated. It is a time of walking together, seeking God's mercy.

Talk One: Receiving Mercy

God's Mercy in Scripture

If we want to understand and receive God's mercy, let us turn to Scripture. Here the Holy Father offers us a thumbnail guide to God's mercy in the Scriptures, beginning with the Psalms. After all, the psalms were Jesus' prayer book and they are the Church's prayer book. I read them every day when I pray the Liturgy of the Hours (the Breviary) and so often I notice how much they stress God's mercy towards his people.

For example, the Psalms often describe God as "patient and merciful". He does not rush to anger and his goodness always wins over punishment. In Psalm 103 we read: "He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy." Reading the Psalms, we need to fill in the blanks. Which iniquities; what diseases, especially the diseases of soul; from what pit have we been rescued? How has he shown us steadfast love & mercy? In Psalm 146 we see the concrete signs of God's mercy: "He executes justice for the oppressed; gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind..." I am often tempted to read those lines as if the psalmist is talking about someone else but those lines are properly applied first and foremost to oneself so that when we approach the oppressed, the hungry, and the prisoner, we are not doing so out of *noblesse oblige* but as a fellow debtor. We must ask: "How

has God's merciful love reached us concretely?" In yet another psalm, we read how God "...heals the brokenhearted, binds up their wounds..." (Ps 147). The Jubilee is a moment for us to withdraw into our room to pray, there to see how our hearts are aching and how the Lord has tried to heal us. When we open our hearts to the Lord's mercy, we are ready to walk thru a holy door!

"His mercy endures forever," proclaims Ps. 136. It recounts all that God did to deliver the people of Israel from slavery and each stanza is marked by the refrain, "His mercy endures forever." This is a psalm that still marks Jewish feasts. It was the hymn Jesus sang with his apostles in the Garden after the Last supper. Jesus had just instituted the Eucharist as an everlasting memorial of the death he would endure the next day on the Cross. How poignant coming from the lips of Christ the refrain, "His mercy endures forever!" The Cross represents the triumph of mercy, the triumph of love over sin & death. Every morning, no matter what we are facing, no matter how we feel, how different would be the day if we repeated that refrain: "his mercy is everlasting" - meaning, it has the power to reach even us.

In the Gospels, we see the God of mercy fully revealed in Jesus. In fact, that's the one thought we should have whenever we hear or read the Gospels: Jesus reveals the fullness of God's love, the God who is love. He makes the God of love visible, tangible, audible - by proclaiming the Good News, by responding with love to those who approach him, by performing signs especially for the poor, the sick, and the marginalized. Time and again, we read how Jesus had compassion on the crowds who were exhausted and hungry... and not just a compassion of words but a compassion of deeds - he fed them! When he cured a man possessed by a devil, he told him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you..." Jesus called forth unlikely followers, like Matthew the tax collector... he chose him by looking upon him with merciful love...miserando atque eligendo. What's more, Jesus shows us that the God of mercy

never gives up on us. Think of all the parables about the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son... and think of how God's joy over a repentant sinner is revealed in the woman who finds her coin, the shepherd his sheep, the father his son... The truth is we give up on ourselves much sooner than God does!

Mercy in the Life of the Church

Clearly, the Pope wants the Church to be and to be seen as an instrument, a vessel, a steward, a trustee of God's merciful love in a world where mercy seems to be in short supply ... think of ISIS; think of how polarized we are as a nation; how harsh our rhetoric; how a person's foibles are forever enshrined in the social media ... As the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago famously said, "The world permits everything and permits nothing. God and the Church do not permit everything but forgive everything."

But let us also admit it, the Church is often not perceived as merciful, this despite the words of St. John XXIII at the beginning of Vatican II who said that "nowadays the Church prefers the medicine of mercy" ... or Bl. Paul VI who said at the close of the Council that "charity was the principal feature of this Council..." or St. John Paul II who wrote a whole letter on the richness & beauty of God's mercy. Pope John Paul II observed the lack of mercy in contemporary culture and Pope Francis, like his predecessor affirms that it is exactly this lack of mercy that should impel the Church to proclaim God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ all the more credibly and all the more insistently.

Pope Francis reminds us that God's mercy is the substance of what the Church teaches, preaches, celebrates, and administers. Mercy should be fundamental to every homily; it is the heart of every Eucharist and sacrament, especially the Sacrament of Penance; and it is expressed in the Church's ministries of charity, social justice, & education. And the Pope uses wonderful images to get this across - he famously described the Church as a field hospital where the wounds of human

existence are to be tended; he decries a style of church ministry that condemns and excludes and asks those who minister in the Lord's name to open our hearts in love. He says that where there are Christians everyone should find "an oasis of mercy". And he teaches us that to receive mercy we must be ready to show mercy.

At the heart of any holy year, including the current jubilee, is the forgiveness of sins. The Pope makes clear that mercy is not merely a divine pat on the head that says to the likes of you and me, "There, there, you're doing just fine." God loves us too much to patronize us or let us fall prey to the deceit of sin. His mercy is not a "get out jail free card" - a mere pardon such as a governor or president might give a criminal. Rather, God's mercy changes us; as St. Paul says, it "justifies" us. We aren't able to become just on our own. All of us are entangled in sin and smitten to one degree or another by the romance of sin. So we cannot justify ourselves by observing the law but rather by faith in Christ which unlocks the floodgates of redeeming mercy. That mercy in turn changes us, transforms our hearts, so that we in turn begin to love as we have been loved and to forgive as we have been forgiven.

The source of this mercy is Christ but the portal through which it is accessed is the Church. The Pope asks those who minister in the Church's name to go out in search of those who are searching for mercy. The Pope asks us all to accompany one another in our journey through life. How many people have questions, fears, doubts - and just as Jesus became one of us and walked with us on this earth, so too he asks us to walk with each other, to listen with compassion, to refrain from being judgmental, to break down barriers - all of that. Yet when we are accompanied by others or in turn we accompany them, we are not just affirming those with whom we journey. We are bearing witness to a mercy that transforms and justifies, a mercy that can bring about in our lives and in our hearts real change, real conversion, a true likeness to the One who loves us so.

Vital to this process is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Holy Father wants this

sacrament to be readily available. He wants it to be an experience of mercy in which we encounter the truth about ourselves - so that we can move beyond our sins to a life of joyful discipleship. He wants priests and bishops who administer the sacrament themselves to be good and humble penitents. True contrition for our sins is not to be a morbid experience but a life-giving experience in which we recover the source of our joy. Indulgences similarly are not meant to be a shortcut to sanctity but a way of tapping into the holiness of the Church's saints, getting their help so that the lingering effects even of those sins that are forgiven can be addressed and we can truly be made whole. So I would say that one thing we should put on our busy Advent list is the reception of the Sacrament of Mercy.

So let us conclude this talk on receiving mercy with prayer, realizing that the way to open the holy door of God's mercy is not with the push of a hand or an arm but rather with the openness of a heart that is humble and contrite.

May we receive mercy so that we can show mercy. May we who have received mercy ourselves show it to those around us!

Talk Two: Showing Mercy

Introduction

Let us now turn to the other side of the coin. If we have been dealt with mercifully, we must show mercy to others. What does that mean? And how do we go about showing mercy to others?

Showing Mercy in Scripture

It seems a little late in the game to introduce the theme of the Jubilee of Mercy but here goes - it is "Merciful like the Father!" It is taken from Luke's Gospel where Jesus says, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." These are words we hear a lot and they can be like water on a duck's back! But think of it - in baptism we were given a vocation to love - Because we share in God's redeeming love, we are to hand

on that same love to others. When Jesus tells us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, he doesn't imagine that we will never commit a fault or failing; he does urge us thereby to forgive those who trespass against us just as God the Father has forgiven our trespasses. By our being merciful like the Father: this is how we come to true Christian perfection.

Jesus has a lot to say about this in the Gospels. He answers Peter's question about how often we must forgive by saying that we must forgive not 7 times but 70 X 7. He tells the parable of a servant whose large debt was forgiven by his master but this servant in turn refused to forgive a much smaller debt owed him by a fellow servant ... The Master is infuriated when he learns of it and says "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?"

By the by, when teaching his disciples how to pray, Jesus included this poignant line in the Our Father: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Our own forgiveness is linked to our readiness to forgive others. So long as we harbor grudges, resentments, and anger in our hearts against others, we are closing the door to God's mercy in our own lives; we are prevent God's mercy from doing its transformative work in us.

So, it seems, being a disciple, a follower of Jesus demands not only that we receive mercy but that we show it. In fact, showing mercy is the true mark of an authentic follower of Christ and a son or daughter of the Heavenly Father. "In short," the Pope writes, "we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us." And he goes on to remark on how hard it is to forgive. We know this from experience, don't we? And we also know from experience that the longer we wait, the harder it becomes truly to forgive a spouse, a child, a co-worker, or an enemy from our hearts. Thus St. Paul urges us not to let the sun go down on our anger. Jesus tells us that mercy is also the path to happiness or beatitude - "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Let us return for a moment to the notion of accompanying others in life, which I mentioned in the previous talk. This idea is near and dear to the Holy Father, so much so, that he uses it to give special insight into the holy year pilgrimage. The travel agents, of course, are having a field day with the holy year but it's really not about planes and busses and hotel rooms, nor even the pasta! It's about walking together, accompanying one another, helping one another, listening to one another, strengthening one another's faith in the God whose love and mercy are everlasting... pilgrimage, Pope Francis says, should be 'an impetus to conversion'.

The steps on our pilgrimage are these: "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..." (Luke 6:37-38). The Lord is not asking us to condone evil or to look the other way. But the Lord also is warning us not to substitute our judgment for his. We judge by appearances but God sees the heart. And when we judge another harshly, we have been known to hand down our sentence by gossiping. Avoiding these things, however, is still not enough. We are not merely to refrain from judging and from gossiping but also to be sources of forgiveness and generous love. This is the way we seek to bring around an erring sinner.

The Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy

In addition to allowing ourselves to be forgiven and forgiving others, there are other ways in which we are to become instruments of God's mercy. As you know, Jesus went about proclaiming the good news but he also forgave sins, cured the sick, and raised the dead. So, as those in whom the Son of God lives through the Holy Spirit, we are called, especially during this jubilee year, to show forth God's mercy by practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Often, Pope Francis speaks about bringing the Gospel to the margins. One has the image of street preaching in some remote Appalachian town. But really, the Pope is talking about the margins that are very close to home, "the fringes which modern

society itself creates.” He is speaking about the poor, the sick, the troubled, the alienated – all of whom society so easily walks on by. Only a few blocks from here we can see exactly what the Pope is saying to us. The Pope urges us in this Jubilee Year not to be indifferent or cynical. Instead, he asks us to open our eyes to the misery of this world and to pour forth the oil of compassion on the wounds of our sisters and brothers.

The Spiritual Works of Mercy, in case we all need a refresher, are these: to counsel the doubtful; instruct the ignorant; admonish sinners; comfort the afflicted; forgive offenses; bear patiently those who do us ill; pray for the living and the dead. The Corporal Works of Mercy are these: to feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; welcome the stranger; heal the sick; visit the imprisoned; bury the dead. As you listen to this list, maybe you’re reminded why you joined Malta in the first place. You joined not because it is prestigious or honorific but because it is a way of handing on the mercy we’ve first been shown. We engage in these works of mercy, whether spiritual or corporal, not from some lofty platform but rather as fellow debtors, recipients of mercy. We must do so, as the Pope elsewhere urges, with deep respect for the poor and the needy and the sick – as our own spirituality says, “My lords, the sick!”

In Matthew 25, we discover that in the final judgment the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are “big ticket” items – we will be judged on whether and in what spirit we did them. Did we recognize the face of Christ in the poor, the sick, the imprisoned? Did we spend time with those whom society often shuns? Did we give not from our excess but from our substance? Was our presence filled with the joy of the Gospel such that we were an instrument in helping them find God’s love in their lives? And were we open to the truth that it is often the poor who help us to discover God’s love at a much deeper level? These are the things that will matter on the day of Christ Jesus! As St. John of the Cross wrote “In the evening of our lives, we will be

judged on love.”

Finally, we show that we have received mercy by working to create a society that is not only just but also compassionate. Charity is important, indeed it is vital, but we should also be working for a society that values the lives of all, especially those who are most vulnerable. Welcoming the stranger is a difficult prospect in an age of terrorism. Cherishing the terminally ill is difficult in an era of high health care costs. Respecting the life of the unborn is often painted as a war on women. Working to improve Baltimore’s poorest neighborhoods is seen by some as an exercise in futility – Just as the Father never tires of us bestowing his mercy upon us, so too our mercy has to be deep, pervasive, and persistent.

Conclusion

One way I can show mercy is by bringing this talk to a conclusion! And I will, by invoking the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Mercy. Through Mary the God of Mercy became incarnate. Though Mary was sinless, she celebrated his merciful love, reaching out to her cousin Elizabeth in her hour of need and living the Beatitudes even before Jesus preached them. More than any other, Mary fully shared in the ultimate act of mercy, as she stood beneath the Cross by which we are saved.

Let us ask Mary to pray with us and for us, so that, during this Jubilee Year of Mercy, we may have that humble, contrite heart capable of receiving God’s mercy and that we may manifest the mercy we receive by what we say, what we do, how we live, how we pray, and how we serve.

Then, next year, when we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King and this special holy year draws to a close, we will rejoice and be glad “for his love, his mercy is everlasting!” May God bless us and keep us always in his love!