

# **Memorial of St. Cecilia, Virgin and Martyr; Archdiocesan Leadership Team Retreat Mass**

## **I. Introduction**

A. Some 63 years ago today, President Kennedy was assassinated while riding in an open car through the streets of Dallas. If you are of a certain age you remember where you were and what you were doing on that fateful day when Walter Cronkite informed the nation of this tragedy. I was in the sixth grade along with 54 of my classmates when Sr. Mary William, the principal of our school, informed us and led us in prayer. On the bus ride home, we were not our normal, noisy selves; we were silent. It was hard for us to imagine that something like this had happened in our country. For many of us, it was our first encounter with an apocalyptic event.

B. As this liturgical year draws to a close, we are asked to confront the ultimate apocalypse. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the very center of Jewish life, worship, and hope for the future. The Temple's destruction, Jesus said, would be followed by all kinds of natural and man-made disasters . . . Jesus painted a frightening picture for his audience and for us as well. Yet he goes on to tell his followers that not to be terrified, perhaps easier said than done.

C. The Book of Revelation also presents an unsettling vision of what the final judgment at the end of time might be like. We read of sickle-wielding angels who gather the harvest of human history. The vision implies that the wheat was thrown into the fire and the grapes were cast "into the great wine press of God's fury." Reading this, we are tempted to say, "Yup, the Year of Mercy really is over!"

## **II. Withstanding the Apocalypse**

A. Strangely enough, however, today's apocalyptic readings help to make the case

for divine mercy, rather than undermine it. For God's mercy does not deny the truth we proclaim in the Creed, viz., that Christ will come in his glory "to judge the living and the dead". Nor does the faith we profess immunize us from catastrophes, big or small. Rather, faith unlocks the door of God's mercy which is more powerful than the rulers and opinion makers of this world, a mercy which is stronger than our sins and our personal tragedies, a mercy which ultimately triumphs over every human tragedy and death itself.

B. The title of the Pope's new letter on mercy is instructive. It's called "Misericordia et misera" - a phrase borrowed from St. Augustine that literally means, "mercy and misery" - the encounter of God's mercy with all forms of human misery. Pope Francis is never one to sanitize the true state of the human condition, whether it is the indifference of believers to the poor or the plight of refugees and immigrants moving about the world. His emphasis on mercy is not meant to diminish the sinfulness of sin but rather to proclaim the greatness and the tenderness of God's mercy. Mercy has the power to resolve all things and to conquer all things. Mercy helps us to face our personal apocalypses and 'to live in this passing world with our hearts set on the world that is come.'

### **III. Missionary Disciples**

A. Our own calling to be missionary disciples really is a calling to be missionaries of mercy. We follow a Savior who is the very incarnation of mercy and we really are called to be merciful like the Father. The Holy Father rightly challenges priests (and by extension all of us) to encounter the Mercy we proclaim in the sacrament of forgiveness. Only when we experience God's healing love can we bear witness to its power. When we have encountered God's mercy in Word and Sacrament, in prayer, in adoration, in confession, in Sunday Mass, in the poor and needy . . . then we are not merely teachers but witnesses. When we allow God's mercy to guide us in forgiving those who offend us, then we are witnesses to the power of his mercy in our lives.

B. Again, in his letter issued only yesterday, Pope Francis reminds us that divine mercy is the substance of the Church's mission. When we speak of going on mission and accompanying people, it means we are to be gentle and generous agents of

God's mercy who listen to and empathize with the stories of the people we encounter, who help them discern how to move forward in faith, and who give them the courage to hand over their sins, weaknesses, and tragedies to the Merciful and Loving Savior, in the community of the Church.

C. The Pope also urges us to speak of God's mercy in more than a theoretical way. He wants us and our co-workers to find God's love in our personal lives and then to treat each person as a unique individual removing whenever possible any and all obstacles to God's forgiveness. He want us also to translate the mercy lavished upon ourselves into works of mercy for the poor and vulnerable, practicing what Pope St. John Paul II called, "a charity that evangelizes" - a charity that reveals the merciful core of the Gospel.

## **IV. A Word of Thanks**

A. It is very clear that the Year of Mercy was not a one-off event but rather the way forward for the Church in our times. We are seeking to embrace that future in the Archdiocese of Baltimore especially through evangelization-based parish planning, through the promotion of vocations, through efforts to renew our Catholic schools, through revitalized evangelization and catechetical resources, and through the works of Catholic charities . . . and much, much more.

B. The past months have been a time of intense prayer and activity and the year ahead promises to be equally intense. Let me thank you from the bottom of my heart not only for your hard work but indeed for your team work - as you focus on the one mission given us by Jesus from the perspective of the ministries and good works you represent. In this week of Thanksgiving, I give thanks to God for you.

C. May this retreat day be a moment of spiritual refreshment, a day to re-charge our spiritual batteries for the work that lies ahead, such that we can resume our work without fear but rather with confidence, such great confidence in God's mercy that we are able to say with St. Paul, "If God is with us, who can be against us?"

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!