



## Second Sunday of Advent December 6, 2015 C

### **The Year of Mercy begins December 8, 2015**

In proclaiming the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis envisions a non-judgmental and non-condemning church.

Writing from Vatican City, Joshua McElwee of National Catholic Reporter shares with us the following reflections on the upcoming Year of Mercy.

*Officially proclaiming the upcoming jubilee year of mercy, Pope Francis has powerfully called on the entire Catholic church to refashion itself as a place not of judgment or condemnation but of pardon and merciful love.*

*Writing in an extensive document convoking the year, which will begin Dec. 8, the pontiff states that the church's "very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love."*

*"Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy," writes Francis in the document, released Saturday evening with the Latin title *Misericordiae Vultus* ("The Face of Mercy").*

*"The temptation ... to focus exclusively on justice made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step," the pope continues.*

*"The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more," he states.*

*"It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters," writes the pontiff. "Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope."*

*Francis also notes that Dec. 8 will mark the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council and says: "The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive."*

*Francis' document, released Saturday during a prayer service at St. Peter's Basilica for the celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday, officially proclaims the extraordinary jubilee year the pontiff first announced last month.*

*The jubilee, which is to be called the Holy Year of Mercy, will begin on this year's Catholic feast of the Immaculate Conception. It will close on Nov. 20, 2016,*

*the day celebrated that year as the feast of Christ the King.*

*Explaining his reasons for calling the mercy jubilee with the some 9,500-word document Saturday, the pontiff firmly identifies mercy as the central function of the church and the key aspect of Jesus' ministry and work.*

*Exhaustively citing from the teachings of previous popes and stories from the Old and New Testaments, Francis also says mercy is a key attribute of God's actions towards human beings and that our own exercise of pardon will determine how we will eventually be judged.*

*In one section, the pope quotes from Peter's question in Matthew's Gospel about how many times it is necessary to forgive, where Jesus responds: "I do not say seven times, but seventy times seventy times."*

*"This parable contains a profound teaching for all of us," states Francis. "Jesus affirms that mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are."*

*"In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us," he continues. "Pardoning offenses becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves."*

*Later in the document, the pope mentions that every holy year involves a process of pilgrimage for people -- whether it be in coming to Rome to celebrate the year or in personal prayer.*

*Then, quoting from Luke's Gospel, Francis outlines two steps everyone needs to make on their own pilgrimages.*

*"The Lord asks us above all not to judge and not to condemn," states the pontiff. "If anyone wishes to avoid God's judgment, he should not make himself the judge of his brother or sister."*

*"Human beings, whenever they judge, look no farther than the surface, whereas the Father looks into the very depths of the soul," writes Francis.*

*A jubilee year is a special year called by the church to receive blessing and pardon from God and remission of sins. The Catholic Church has called jubilee years every 25 or 50 years since the year 1300 and has also called special jubilee years from time to time, known as extraordinary jubilee years.*

The pope begins Saturday's document by explaining the process of the holy year, saying that on Dec. 8 he will be opening the special holy door of St. Peter's Basilica to mark the beginning of the jubilee.

### **'Door of Mercy'**

Francis states that he hopes that with its opening, the door "will become a Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instills hope."

To emphasize that the special year is just not for those able to come to Rome, the pontiff says he is going to ask every diocese to identify a similar "Door of Mercy" at a cathedral or other special church to be opened during the year.

"Every Particular Church, therefore, will be directly involved in living out this Holy Year as an extraordinary moment of grace and spiritual renewal," writes the pope.

Francis notes that the holy year will begin on the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council.

"With the Council, the Church entered a new phase of her history," writes Francis. "The Council Fathers strongly perceived, as a true breath of the Holy Spirit, a need to talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way."

"The walls which too long had made the Church a kind of fortress were torn down and the time had come to proclaim the Gospel in a new way," he continues. "It was a new phase of the same evangelization that had existed from the beginning."

Among other special initiatives for the holy year, Francis also announces Saturday that during the 2016 season of Lent he will be asking some priests to serve as special "Missionaries of Mercy."

The pontiff says he will ask those priests to go around the world to hear confessions and that he will grant them "the authority to pardon even those sins reserved to the Holy See."

With that authority, the pope states, the priests will be "living signs of the Father's readiness to welcome those in search of his pardon."

"I ask my brother Bishops to invite and welcome these Missionaries so that they can be, above all, persuasive preachers of mercy," writes Francis.

The pontiff also says he is giving the holy year a motto taken from Luke's Gospel: "Merciful like the Father."

### **'God's justice is his mercy'**

Francis spends about two pages in the document addressing the relationship between mercy and justice, which he says, "are not two contradictory realities, but

two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love."

Mentioning the Bible's frequent use of the image of God as a judge, Francis says that in many passages, "justice is understood as the full observance of the Law and the behavior of every good Israelite in conformity with God's commandments."

But he continues: "Such a vision ... has not infrequently led to legalism by distorting the original meaning of justice and obscuring its profound value."

"To overcome this legalistic perspective, we need to recall that in Sacred Scripture, justice is conceived essentially as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God's will," writes the pope.

Quoting Jesus' response to the Pharisees in Matthew's Gospel — "Go and learn the meaning of 'I desire mercy not sacrifice.'" — Francis says, "Jesus is bent on revealing the great gift of mercy that searches out sinners and offers them pardon and salvation."

"One can see why, on the basis of such a liberating vision of mercy as a source of new life, Jesus was rejected by the Pharisees and the other teachers of the law," he continues. "In an attempt to remain faithful to the law, they merely placed burdens on the shoulders of others and undermined the Father's mercy."

Meditating then on Paul's letter to the Philippians, Francis states that, "Paul's understanding of justice changes radically. He now places faith first, not justice."

"Salvation comes not through the observance of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, who in his death and resurrection brings salvation together with a mercy that justifies," writes the pope.

"God's justice now becomes the liberating force for those oppressed by slavery to sin and its consequences," he continues. "God's justice is his mercy."

Continuing on that theme by exploring the words of the prophet Hosea, Francis states: "If God limited himself to only justice, he would cease to be God, and would instead be like human beings who ask merely that the law be respected."

"But mere justice is not enough," he writes. "Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in its destruction. This is why God goes beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness."

### **Jesus: 'Nothing but love'**

Earlier in the document, Francis focuses on Jesus' ministry during his earthly life as a sign of the centrality of mercy in the Christian faith.

Citing St. Thomas Aquinas, Francis says that "God's mercy, rather than a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence."

*"The mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality through which he reveals his love as that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child," states the pope.*

*"It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a 'visceral' love," he says. "It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy."*

*Francis mentions how the Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus' passion states that before his death Jesus sang a hymn that may have been Psalm 136: "For his mercy endures forever."*

*"While he was instituting the Eucharist as an everlasting memorial of himself and his paschal sacrifice, he symbolically placed this supreme act of revelation in the light of his mercy," writes Francis.*

*"Within the very same context of mercy, Jesus entered upon his passion and death, conscious of the great mystery of love that he would consummate on the cross," he continues.*

*"Knowing that Jesus himself prayed this psalm makes it even more important for us as Christians, challenging us to take up the refrain in our daily lives by praying these words of praise: 'For his mercy endures forever.'"*

*Jesus' person, says Francis, "is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously."*

*"The relationships he forms with the people who approach him manifest something entirely unique and unrepeatable," states the pope. "The signs he works, especially in the face 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," he says.*

*Jesus, Francis says, also reveals God's nature "as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy."*

*Mentioning the fifth beatitude—"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy"—the pope states that is the beatitude "to which we should particularly aspire in this Holy Year."*

*Speaking of how God acts with humans, the pope says, "mercy is a key word that indicates God's action towards us."*

*"The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us," writes Francis. "He feels responsible; that is, he desires our wellbeing and he wants to see us happy, full of joy, and peaceful."*

*"This is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel," he continues. "As the Father loves, so do his children. Just as he is merciful, so we are called to be merciful to each other." Applying that attribute to the level of the church,*

*Francis states: "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," writes the pope.*

### **'Opening our hearts'**

*The pontiff also asks that people live the Holy Year by "opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes modern society itself creates."*

*"How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today!" exhorts Francis. "How many are the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich!"*

*"Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new!" he continues. "Let us ward off destructive cynicism!"*

*"Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help!" he exhorts, again.*

*Francis also says that is his "burning desire" that during the jubilee year people reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, Christian actions and practices attributed to Jesus' directive in Matthew's Gospel for how his followers should act.*

*"We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison," states Francis.*

### **Inter-religious dimension**

*Francis also refers the practice of the mercy jubilee to Judaism and Islam, saying: "There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church."*

*The pope notes both that "the pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy" and that Muslims often refer to the creator as "Merciful and Kind."*

*"I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions and with other noble religious traditions," states Francis.*

*"May it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination," he asks.*

## *Ways to live this Year of Mercy*

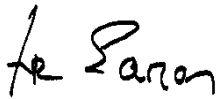
“ *Act Merciful*: the motto for this jubilee year is ‘Merciful like the Father.’ Every time we show mercy, we become a little more like our merciful God.

“ *Refrain from judging and condemning*. That is God’s job. Our job is to love.

“ *Practice the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy*, e.g., feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger.

“ *Be a missionary of mercy in your home, workplace and neighborhood*.

Have a blessed week,



## **Pope Francis' Prayer of Mercy**

### **Lord Jesus Christ,**

you have taught us to be merciful like the heavenly Father,  
and have told us that whoever sees you sees Him.  
Show us your face and we will be saved.  
Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew  
from being enslaved by money;  
the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness  
only in created things;  
made Peter weep after his betrayal,  
and assured Paradise to the repentant thief.  
Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us,  
the words that you spoke to the Samaritan woman:  
"If you knew the gift of God!"

### **You are the visible face of the invisible Father,**

of the God who manifests his power above all  
by forgiveness and mercy:  
Let the Church be your visible face in the world,  
its Lord risen and glorified.  
You willed that your ministers would also be clothed  
in weakness in order that they may feel compassion  
for those in ignorance and error: let everyone  
who approaches them feel sought after, loved, and  
forgiven by God.

### **Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us with its anointing,**

so that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace  
from the Lord,  
and your Church, with renewed enthusiasm,  
may bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to  
captives and the oppressed, and restore sight to the blind.

**We ask this through the intercession of Mary, Mother of  
Mercy,** You who live and reign with the Father and the Holy  
Spirit for ever and ever.

Amen.