

Pastoral Letter - Lent 2016

MERCY AND FORGIVENESS



Merciful like the Father

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We have entered into a year of grace and forgiveness, which Pope Francis has proclaimed as a Jubilee Year of Mercy. It is a year in which God's merciful and forgiving love is offered to us in greater abundance. "When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy" (Pope Francis).

To receive mercy and forgiveness of our sins is something very precious. It lightens the burden that weighs on our heart. It gives peace of soul and makes us happy. We should not miss this chance to receive God's mercy and pardon.

In our Diocese we have three Holy Doors opened: one in the Cathedral, another in Ards Friary and the third in Rossnowlagh Friary. A plenary indulgence may be gained by walking through a Holy Door, going to confession within a week, receiving Holy Communion that day and saying the Creed and a prayer for the Pope's intentions.

Going through the Holy Door is in itself not a magical or automatic way of receiving God's forgiveness and mercy. We walk as pilgrims through a Holy Door which is a symbol of Christ who said: "I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved" (Jn 10: 9).

This passage through the Holy Door, through Christ, leads in a special way to the confessional. It is through a good personal confession that God's mercy flows into our lives most abundantly. After his resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples and all ordained priests the power to forgive sins in his Name, and the gift of conferring peace on the repentant sinner. He appeared to the Apostles, breathed upon them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20: 22-23).

Going to confession is not easy. We have to humble ourselves and admit our sin. But then there comes liberation and peace. Pope Francis said; "Do not be afraid of confession, when one is in line to go to confession, one feels all these things, even shame, but then when

one finishes confession one leaves free, in good form, forgiven and happy. This is the beauty of confession” (19-2-2014).

Many have experienced the sense of peace and even of joy that descends upon the soul after a good and humble confession. Because we have named our sin and are sorry for it, we are at peace and set free. If we do not name and confess it to the priest who takes the place of Christ, it remains a dark secret in our soul that tortures us. This Year of Mercy then is a golden opportunity to go to individual confession regularly, or to return to it after being away for a while, even for a long time.

Learning to forgive

In this special Year of Mercy, we are asked not only to open our hearts to receive God’s merciful love but also to learn ourselves to show mercy to others and forgive them. “Be merciful even as your Father (in heaven) is merciful” (Lk 6: 36).

This Year then is an invitation and an opportunity to forgive others the wrong they did against us, just as God forgives us the offences we commit against Him. Forgiving others is not easy. It costs; it is a sacrifice. Yet with God’s grace we can do many things that otherwise would seem to be impossible. Another person may have offended and hurt us. But to offend God is something far more serious. We expect to receive God’s forgiveness and he does pardon us if we repent, no matter how serious our sin may be. We should do the same with anyone who offended or hurt us. “Bear with one another (St. Paul says), forgiving each other as soon as a quarrel begins; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col 3: 13).

If we are to be merciful and to forgive others as God forgives us, then we have to mean what we say, to forgive from the heart. The person who offended us may not deserve our forgiveness, but that is not the

point. We do not deserve to be forgiven by God, yet “God shows his love for us in that, while we were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5: 8).

We see many examples of neighbours who “fall out”, become enemies and no longer greet or speak with each other; the same is true at times between members of the same family. Instead of both sides seeking reconciliation, there remains bitterness and anger and blame. Of course, forgiveness has to come from both parties. But if we refuse to forgive a neighbour, a brother/sister or an acquaintance, then our unforgiving heart afflicts and punishes us more than it does our enemy. Within our own heart it remains a burden and a pain. We are enchained and refuse to be set free.

But if we have the courage to say “Sorry”, “I forgive you”, then we ourselves are relieved of a burden and we give the other person the chance to be set free as well. This is no more than what God’s word asks of us in Sacred Scripture: “If anyone nurses anger against another, can one then demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for someone like yourself, can one then plead for one’s own sins?” (Sir 28: 3-4). Jesus teaches this very clearly. “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven” (Jn 6: 36-37).

Every time we say the Lord’s Prayer, the Our Father, we promise him that we, in our relations with others, shall imitate his goodness and mercy: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Mt 6: 12). Do we mean what we say? Do we realise the implication for ourselves of these words of the Our Father?

Remember that forgiving is not a feeling within us toward someone who hurt us. Rather, it is a decision of the will, even though our feelings may be quite different. It means not keeping grudges, not seeking revenge, but letting mercy and forgiveness guide our attitudes and actions.

The Lord himself gave us the supreme example. When He was being nailed to the Cross by his enemies, he pleaded with his Father to forgive them, and He even offered an excuse for them: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23: 34).

Mercy is the outcome of love. If we truly love a person, we shall be able to show mercy and to forgive. Forgiving offences and injuries is one of “The Spiritual Works of Mercy”.

In this Year of Mercy we are urged to be merciful and forgiving in our personal lives in imitation of the Lord’s goodness to us. As members of the Church we are obliged to do that, for, as Pope Francis wrote: “The Church feels the urgent need to proclaim God’s mercy. Her life is authentic and credible only when she becomes a convincing herald of mercy” (Mis. Vultus, 25).

We turn to Mary whom we greet as “Mother of Mercy” for she more than anyone else experienced the mercy of God.

Jesus, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

The 7 Spiritual

Works of Mercy

To counsel the doubtful
To instruct the ignorant
To admonish the sinner
To comfort the sorrowful
To forgive all injuries
To bear wrongs patiently
To pray for the living and the dead

The 7 Corporal Works of Mercy

To feed the hungry
To give drink to the thirsty
To clothe the naked
To shelter the homeless
To visit the sick
To visit the imprisoned
To bury the dead

