

“The Lasting Effects of the Jubilee of Mercy”
Talk to Conclude the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy
November 19, 2016
Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption

Introduction

It was almost a year ago that the designated Holy Doors were opened and dedicated in observance of this Jubilee Year of Mercy. They were closed last week everywhere in the world except at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, where they will be closed tomorrow, marking the end of the Year of Mercy.

The Door of Mercy

The opening of a door for a Jubilee Year has profound symbolic significance: the door of heaven has been reopened for us by the death and Resurrection of Christ, who is himself the door that leads us back to the Father; through him we can regain access to paradise, and even in this world find shelter from the dark and cold of sin and all of its gloomy consequences. But the closing of a door also has profound symbolic significance.

In trying to gather some thoughts together for this talk at the end of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, I thought it would be worthwhile to review what I said eleven months ago in the homily I gave at the Vespers service in the Cathedral to inaugurate the Jubilee Year of Mercy and dedicate the Holy Door there. It was the Third Sunday of Advent, and I made reference to the image the Church presents to us in that liturgical season (soon upon us) of “going out to meet Christ with our lamps burning brightly, an allusion to the parable of the ten virgins in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew: the five wise ones who brought oil for their lamps, and the five foolish who did not.” I noted that the foolish ones arrived late because they had to go out and purchase oil for their lamps, and when they arrived at the wedding feast they found that *the door was locked*. They could not gain admittance; it was too late, and they were left locked outside in the dark; a definitive closure.

What does this refer to? Pope Francis explained it well in a talk he gave last August, in which he also alluded to this parable in Matthew 25. He said:

The Lord offers us many opportunities to save ourselves and to enter through the door of salvation. This door is an opportunity that must not be wasted, because at a certain moment ‘the landlord got up and locked the door’, as mentioned in the Gospel [of St. Matthew]. But if God is good and loves us, why does He close the door ...? Because our life is not a video game or a soap opera; our life is serious and the goal to achieve is important: eternal salvation.

He went on to say that the door to salvation is narrow, but “not because it is oppressive,” but rather because “it asks us to restrict and limit our pride and our fear, to open ourselves with humble and trusting heart to [God], recognizing ourselves as sinners, in need of his forgiveness.” At the same time, though, the door is also open, open to everyone. As he points out: “A door that is narrow, to restrict our pride and our fear. Open, because God welcomes us without distinction. And the salvation that He gives us is an unceasing flow of mercy ... which breaks down every barrier and opens up surprising perspectives of light and peace.”

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The definitive closing of that narrow door is the end of our life in this world. We cannot go back, we cannot repeat our own personal history. We have just this one life. So the real question to ask ourselves as we approach this conclusion to the Jubilee Year of Mercy is, what difference has this Year made in our lives? After all, the very concept of concluding a “Jubilee Year of Mercy” is rather awkward in and of itself: a conclusion to mercy? “Well, we can check that virtue off our list”? No, it doesn’t work that way. There is no point in celebrating a Jubilee Year such as this if it has not made some lasting difference in our lives; indeed, in our eternal lives. I would like, then, to offer some reflections on this.

The Works of Mercy

One benefit I would observe is that many people have, I believe, become more familiar with the works of mercy. The corporal works of mercy are perhaps more widely known, as they are based on that great image of the final judgment found in the other part of chapter 25 of the Gospel of St. Matthew. These, of course, are those good deeds that were performed by the sheep on the king’s right who are welcomed into his kingdom, not knowing that they were doing them for the Lord himself: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, and visiting the imprisoned, with that last one to complete the list of seven, burying the dead (from the Book of Tobit). In the very pragmatic culture in which we live, these are the more obvious, and very concrete. They are seen as actually accomplishing something practical. These are works of mercy that everyone can appreciate, and it is good that this Jubilee Year of Mercy has brought heightened attention to them.

I believe, though, that this Year has also given long-needed attention to the spiritual works of mercy. How many people could have named them before this year? To be honest, I myself would have had to look them up to be sure. Perhaps an intensely pragmatic culture does not so highly value such works as admonishing the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counselling the doubtful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving offenses willingly, comforting the afflicted, and praying for the living and the dead. But as disciples of Jesus Christ, we know that mercy is a package deal. We don’t choose one set of works of mercy over the other because they appeal to us more, much less pick and choose which ones we want to observe and which we can ignore. They all go together; there is no other way to realize the fullness of mercy. There are many people who go about doing good in the world; we Christians do not have a monopoly on carrying out works of mercy and charity. But the way we go about it is different: we look always to the ultimate good of those we serve, their spiritual good, helping them to get through that narrow door to salvation before it closes behind them. We therefore do not limit the good that we do to the physical realm, as if, once someone’s material needs are met, our work is done.

In his first Encyclical, *God Is Love*, Pope Benedict commented on this reality in the context of speaking on what is distinctive about the service that Christ demands of his disciples. I find what he says to be very incisive, and his teaching here has remained very much with me:

Practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ. My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift [*DCE*, 34].

We just endured a tumultuous and troubling election cycle which seemed like it was never going to end. Now, I don't want to go there; I don't think any of us wants to. I'm sure we're all glad we don't have to anymore. I would just observe that this, along with many other such signs of the times, manifest a profound spiritual malaise in our nation, and we as Catholics must be channels of God's peace in the midst of all this. We accomplish that by delivering the full package of mercy.

Mercy, Justice, and Repentance

Another aspect of mercy which has been given much attention this past year is its relationship to justice. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines justice as “the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor,” and with regard to neighbor, states that justice “disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good” (n. 1807). Mercy, though, softens the hard edge of justice in some circumstances when it is applied in absolute terms; mercy looks to the overall good of the person, taking into account such considerations as the possibility of reform.

This lays out for us the path to peace, as the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, teaches us: “Peace is ... the fruit also of love; love goes beyond what justice can achieve. Peace on earth, born of love for one's neighbor, is the sign and effect of the peace of Christ that flows from God the Father” (n. 78). And in one of his sermons (Sermon 92), Pope St. Leo the Great said the following:

The Lord says: Unless your justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven (Mat 5:20). How indeed can justice exceed, unless compassion rises above judgment? What is as right or as worthy as a creature, fashioned in the image and likeness of God, imitating his Creator who, by the remission of sins, brought about the reparation and sanctification of believers? With strict vengeance removed and the cessation of all punishment, the guilty man was restored to innocence, and the end of wickedness became the beginning of virtue. Can anything be more just than this?

So we can see how this works in the justice and mercy of God. Out of justice, we deserved condemnation. But God's mercy accomplish something far greater than was possible with the strict application of justice: our readmission to eternal life with Him. This is precisely what the Church prays in one of the Prefaces for Mass: “In love you created man, in justice you condemned him, but in mercy you redeemed him” (Order of Mass, Common Preface II). And the Letter of St. James tells us: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment” (Jas 2:12-13).

For mercy to work its effect, though, it must first be received by those who seek to extend it. This points to another relationship of mercy to a complementary virtue. We cannot speak of mercy in the authentic sense without its necessary pre-disposition: repentance. Repentance is simply the necessary recognition of our need of mercy. If we do not believe we have offended God, then what point is there to beg God for mercy? But if we recognize that we have sinned, and we are truly contrite, we will sincerely ask God for forgiveness and for help to amend our

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lives, and for the grace to make up for our sins – what in classical parlance we call “reparation.” This is the point Pope Francis was making in his talk that I cited earlier. He underscores that this is *not* something oppressive; on the contrary, it is freeing. We need to restrict our pride and fear, to approach God with a humble and trusting heart, recognizing ourselves as sinners and in need of God’s forgiveness. And he is the first to live it. In his interview that was published in America magazine and other Jesuit publications throughout the world, he was asked, “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” I’m sure you remember it, and remember his answer: “I am a sinner.” This is the necessary starting point.

In order to start out, though, we need to avoid two extremes. This, I believe, is what our Lord was referring to in teaching about that mysterious sin “against the Holy Spirit”:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come [Mat12:22-32].

The only sin that cannot be forgiven is the sin we do not bring to God. This, then, indicates the two extremes we have to avoid: despair – I’m beyond God’s mercy; and presumption – I don’t need God’s mercy because I have nothing for which to repent. The latter is perhaps more of a challenge in our culture. But we all know we have done wrong, so even as we pretend we have not, deep down we are kidding ourselves. And perhaps this contributes to the toxic atmosphere: we project our guilt onto others.

The sin of despair versus good remorse is contrasted in the examples of Judas and Peter: both betrayed our Lord, both felt remorse, but Peter trusted in the mercy of God, and went onto accomplish great things for his Lord. Good remorse versus the sin of presumption is contrasted in what St. Paul refers to as “godly grief” and “worldly grief”: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death” (2 Cor 7:10).

“Misericordes sicut Pater”

Finally, the theme of this Jubilee Year of Mercy has been, “Misericordes sicut Pater” – “merciful as the Father.” This, truly, is the most important and lasting fruit that can come from this Year. Our Lord teaches us repeatedly that the measure with which we measure out will be measured back to us. If we have become more merciful, a mercy which looks more and more like the mercy of God Himself, then, yes, this Year will have made a difference, and will have been worth it.

Let us go back to the idea of the holy door. The dedication of a holy door during a jubilee year is for the sake of gaining the holy year indulgence, that is, the help of God’s grace to move us to perfection so that the debilitating effects of sin – and the punishment due to them – do not remain in us, even when those sins are forgiven. To obtain such an indulgence, though, certain conditions must be observed, all together, namely: sacramental confession and absolution, the reception of Holy Communion, praying for the intentions of the Holy Father, and remaining free from all attachment to sin, including venial sin. It’s that last condition that is the catch! We will benefit from this Jubilee Year to the extent that we more perfectly fulfill this last condition.

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How do we know that we are on the right track? We extend mercy to others to the extent that we are at peace within ourselves. It all comes back to the primacy of God: we must receive God’s love and mercy before we can give it to others. As we are told in the First Letter of St. John: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10-11). And the *Imitation of Christ* tells us:

Above all things, keep peace within yourself, then you will be able to create peace among others. It is better to be peaceful than learned. The passionate man often thinks evil of a good man and easily believes the worst; a good and peaceful man turns all things to good. A man who lives at peace suspects no one. But a man who is tense and agitated by evil is troubled with all kinds of suspicions; he is never at peace with himself, nor does he permit others to be at peace.... You are good at excusing and justifying your own deeds, and yet you will not listen to the excuses of others. It would be more just to accuse yourself and to excuse your brother. If you wish others to put up with you, first put up with them [*Imitation of Christ*, 2 (Office of Readings, Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent)].

Conclusion:

As we conclude this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, let us remember that it is not that God has shown us greater mercy during this Year; rather, the Jubilee has encouraged us to focus on the stream of mercy flowing continually to us from the glorious pierced Heart of our Savior. This year has been a reminder that time is not just a matter of *chronos* – that is, keeping track of the measurement of time as it passes – but rather one of *kairos*, the fullness of time, that perfect timing when the conditions are right for something great to happen. There are moments that should be seized as opportunities. We should not defer the act of extending or receiving mercy, for the moment may pass.

In his talk about the closed door, Pope Francis reminded us that the one way to heaven is Jesus Christ: he opens the door to heaven, and he *is* the door. The Holy Father is insistent: “The Lord ... clearly says: you cannot enter eternal life by any entryway that is not the door – that is not Jesus. He is the door of our life – and not only of eternal life, but also of our daily lives.” And he reminds us, too, that the “world needs Christ more than ever, needs His salvation and His merciful love.” Who will give the world Christ, if not us? He is the answer, and he calls us to share him with others.

As we go forth from this Year of Mercy, then, let us heed the appeal St. Paul made centuries ago and seize the opportunity that is before us:

Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.’ Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation [2 Cor 6:1-2].