

## Pastoral Letter

### To the Priests, Religious, Lay Faithful and People of Good Will in the Archdiocese of Goa and Daman

*(Approved English version of the Pastoral Letter No. CP-Past/229/2015 written originally  
in Konkani language)*

#### YEAR OF MERCY

My Dear Sisters and Brothers,

In this Jubilee Year dedicated to Mercy, I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and address to you this special Pastoral Letter.

1. When the fullness of time had come, God's only Son, Jesus Christ, took human form and was born of a woman (*cf. Gal 4: 4*), bringing to humankind God's boundless love and immeasurable mercy. Jesus Christ entered his Paschal Mystery in the context of this unfathomable mercy, so that it may remain with us till the end of times. In reality, the Paschal Mystery comprises the entire life of Jesus, right from his birth till the descent of the Holy Spirit. This is the Christ-Event. During the Last Supper, Jesus commanded his Apostles to celebrate his Paschal Mystery, so that, by this celebration, God's mercy could be always present to humankind, making us all its beneficiaries (*cf. Lk 22: 14-20*). Besides this Thanksgiving Sacrifice, the depth of God's mercy can be experienced in the Sacrament of Reconciliation instituted by Jesus (*cf. Jn 20: 21-22*). The Church has always been making God's Mercy present to the faithful through this Sacrament. The Holy Father calls us to reflect on this gracious Mercy of God, make it an integral part of our Christian life and witness to it wherever we go.

#### **The Merciful God and the Year of Mercy**

2. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, the Holy Father will solemnly inaugurate the Year of Mercy which he has already announced. There are special reasons for choosing this particular date. First, on this day the Catholic Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This unique Conception signals a fundamental moment of God's merciful intervention in human history. Secondly, this same date marks the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. The Holy Father has announced that this Jubilee of Forgiveness should be celebrated in the Cathedral of each diocese. Keeping this in mind, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, the Third Sunday of Advent, in the presence of representatives from our parishes, I will open a special "Holy Door" in our Cathedral. The Jubilee will end on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, when the Church will celebrate the Solemnity of Jesus Christ, the Universal King. On that day the Holy Father will close the Jubilee Door of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. On the previous Sunday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, along with all the other Bishops in their respective dioceses, I will close the Holy Door of our Cathedral through a special rite.

3. In the past, those who sinned against God and committed wrongs were not easily forgiven. The History of Salvation and also the history of humankind are witnesses to this. On the contrary, people were punished, to make reparation for the mistakes and offences they had committed. The punishment had to be proportionate to the wrongs committed. The law of retaliation – "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" (*Mt 5: 38*) – was the order of the day. This thinking was done away with by Jesus Christ, who came into this world with God's love and forgiveness. He embraced humankind, opening to all the doors of God's forgiveness and mercy. Jesus demonstrated this not only by his words, but also by his deeds. While dying on the Cross, he forgave those who were clamouring for his death and even the thief who was crucified by his side, thus opening the doors of heaven to sinners.

4. For this precise reason, God's mercy obtained for us by Jesus Christ through his Paschal Mystery is an example and model for all, especially for his followers. The Lord is "merciful and gracious, slow

to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (*Ex 34: 6*). This truth is revealed to us in the Paschal Mystery. Our God does not curse humankind nor does he use punishment as a means to judge people. He is our loving Heavenly Father, a God who is generous and kind. Because we are his children, Jesus calls us to forgive and show mercy just like our Heavenly Father. “Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful” (*Lk 6: 36*). The Church continues with this teaching of Jesus in the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, encouraging us to practise it in our day-to-day life.

5. Therefore, the Holy Father has chosen the theme, ***Merciful like the Father***, for this Jubilee Year of Mercy. This theme and the logo emanating from it inspire us to imbibe the merciful attitude of the Father in our Christian lives. This will prompt us not to condemn others, but to love and forgive them. Down the history of the Church, God’s chosen ministers would show this unfathomable mercy towards those who sin, bringing them back to God and uniting them to the Mystical Body of Christ. Two such outstanding God’s ministers were born in Goa and witnessed powerfully to God’s mercy, both in Goa and in other places. They are St. Joseph Vaz, the Patron of our Archdiocese, and Venerable Fr. Agnelo de Souza, a member of Pilar Society, for whose beatification the Church in Goa is praying earnestly.

6. St. Joseph Vaz exercised his priestly ministry in Kanara for four years and, for another twenty four, he spent himself for God’s Kingdom in Sri Lanka, till his death. Wherever he went, he celebrated the Sacraments devoutly, particularly the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As often as possible, he would approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation before the celebration of the Eucharist and thereby prepare himself for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.<sup>1</sup> He was thus a powerful messenger of God’s mercy. And because of this, many could experience through him the love and the mercy of Jesus.

7. The Venerable Fr. Agnelo was also a great minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Wherever he worked – be it in the parishes of Sanvordem or Siroda or in Rachol Seminary as well as in the parish of Kumta, in Karnataka – it is said that he gave a very prominent place to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As a Spiritual Director in Rachol Seminary, he was known to help resolve the problems of conscience of seminarians as well as of priests, with great wisdom. As some witnesses testify, Fr. Agnelo had the gift of knowledge, whereby he knew the penitent and his or her sins, even before they were disclosed to him.<sup>2</sup> He considered himself as a humble instrument in the merciful and powerful hands of God. Precisely because of this great humility, even hardened sinners used to open up their consciences to him without any reservations and go back consoled. Both these great heroes of the Goan soil propagated God’s mercy and were witnesses to the same through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In today’s world they are a great inspiration for us to be witnesses of mercy.

### **Witnesses of Mercy**

8. The living standard of most families today has gone up – be it in business, social, financial, academic or other fields. Families today have more opportunities to enjoy, celebrate and travel, as compared to the families of yester years. This being so, relationships should have been more loving between husband and wife, more understanding between parents and children, more patient between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and more caring between parents and children and other elders in the family. But are they really so? Or are we rather witnessing a harsher language, a greater lack of forgiveness and a general environment of hatred in our families? “His mercy endures forever” — these words from Psalm 136 challenge every family in this Year of Mercy to live more consciously under the merciful gaze of the Father (*cf. MV 7*).<sup>3</sup>

9. The wages of labourers are being regularly revised in our times; the number of people using modern gadgets, like cars, computers, mobiles, etc. has proportionately increased. Beautiful houses are being built. The number of those living in cities, with well furnished flats, has increased. People have become richer. On the other hand, cheating and looting too have increased; disputes due to wealth and court cases due to property matters are going on for years; animosities among relatives and unforgiving attitudes seem to have become common; few attempts are being made to dialogue with

those who have fallen apart or are caught up in misunderstandings. We seem to have become hard-hearted and our Christian identity is known by our names more than by our deeds. In this Year of Mercy, recalling the text of the Opening Prayer of the 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time — “O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy” — the Holy Father reminds us that God’s mercy and forgiveness are more powerful than all the above mentioned material and worldly strengths (*cf. MV 6*).

10. In our parishes we have the Small Christian Communities which have their meetings in homes. Some people, however, for this or that reason, have difficulty in holding such meetings in their house. This becomes an easy excuse, even for others, to shift these meetings to the nearby Cross or Chapel. In this way, the people of that neighbourhood miss a great opportunity to grant and receive forgiveness, to make peace and to show mercy. The Statement of the Diocesan Synod 2002 reminds us that Small Christian Communities are a wonderful means to exercise pastoral care and promote deep fellowship among the faithful (*cf. SDS 81*). Tax collector Matthew had many enemies because of his profession. They looked down on him as a public sinner. Jesus, on the contrary, looks at Matthew with merciful love, enters his house, forgives his sins and takes him as one of his own. Be it at our Small Christian Community meetings or otherwise, we are being called during this Year of Mercy to look at our neighbours and others with eyes of mercy, overlook their shortcomings and embrace them in our hearts (*cf. MV 8*).

11. Consecrated Life and Priesthood are God’s gifts to the Church and society, offered for their good and at their service. If the religious are a sign of God’s love in this world, the priests are living instruments carrying forward the work of the Church. Both religious and priests strive to witness to their call by their words, deeds and life-style. The Archdiocese of Goa has been a fertile soil for many vocations to priesthood and religious life. Those who have answered the call are doing commendable work in various places in the Archdiocese and elsewhere, to build the Kingdom of God. But they are also human. In the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians, “... we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor. 4: 7). Owing to this, there are at times misunderstandings among priests working in parishes, in other diocesan institutions as well as in the communities of the religious. Sometimes even serious conflicts arise between priests and parishioners. Let us remember that ‘God is love’ (1 Jn 4: 8,16). This love has become visible and tangible in Jesus’ entire life. The Holy Father tells us that, with our eyes fixed on Jesus and on his merciful gaze, we should learn to experience the love of the Most Holy Trinity and to foster among us – priests and religious along with the faithful - the kind of relationships that Jesus nurtured with the people of his time. In doing so, he reminds us that we shall become instruments of God’s mercy to the sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick and the suffering (*cf. MV 8*).

12. Being a brittle clay jar myself, it is possible that I too may have hurt my brother priests, be it while taking a difficult decision or even due to my own shortcoming or weakness. I take this opportunity to ask their forgiveness; if they still have something against me, I humbly ask that we may sit across the table and try and sort out unresolved matters.

13. In our parishes, we have the faithful joining different Parish Associations or Units of Diocesan Bodies, according to their spirituality and charism. This gives them an opportunity to get involved in different parish activities and to grow in that particular spirituality. Their involvement brings growth in their lives as well as in the life of the parish. But we also observe sometimes that there is back-biting, criticism and a crab mentality among the members of the different Associations and Units of Diocesan Bodies. In his Letter on the Year of Mercy, the Holy Father reminds us that it is necessary to bear one another’s weaknesses and to be merciful to each other. He says that mercy is the force that awakens us to a new way of living (*cf. MV 10*).

### **Year of Mercy and the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

14. In this Year of Mercy, the Holy Father pays special attention to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Slowly but surely, the celebration and the recognition of the importance of this Sacrament are decreasing in our lives. Also, we do not find many priests easily available in the confessionals. The confessionals are not even seen in some of our Churches. In this connection, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in his Post-Synodal Exhortation “*Sacramentum Caritatis*”<sup>4</sup> writes: “All priests should dedicate themselves with generosity, commitment and competency to administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this regard, it is important that the confessionals should be clearly visible expressions of the importance of this sacrament.” Pondering on this reflection, I would like to make a few suggestions:

- i) As far as possible, be it in the sacristy or in the corridor or even in a small room, let there be one or more confessionals. We should try to make use of the confessional or of a similar facility for a worthy celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, not only during the Year of Mercy but also later on;
- ii) There was a custom in our churches to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation on the day preceding the First Friday of the month. We need to revive this custom, especially where it has been discontinued;
- iii) In addition to this, every Saturday and during the novenas of the parish feasts, pastors should be available for confessions and thus show their concern for the spiritual welfare of their flock;
- iv) As the opportunity arises, a day could be fixed for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the parishes. Priests from the deanery or religious communities could be invited. The date of such celebrations could be made known on the Parish Bulletin or displayed on the Notice Board.

15. We have chosen the See Cathedral at Old Goa as a privileged place for the faithful to obtain indulgences during this Year of Mercy, as per the mind of the Holy Father. Besides the Cathedral, indulgences can be obtained also in four other Churches of the Archdiocese. They are St. Jerome’s Church, Mapusa, in North Goa; Holy Spirit Church, Margão and Church of Our Lady of the Poor, Tilamola in South Goa and the Church of the Holy Name, Daman Praça, in the Mission of Daman. These Churches have been given this privilege to make it possible chiefly for the sick, the weak, the elderly and those who have difficulties in travelling to hold pilgrimages and offer prayers, sacrifices and alms and thus derive genuine benefit from this Year to Mercy.

16. The Season of Lent is a season of grace and mercy. The Holy Father has presented us with some valuable points to help us organize meaningful spiritual Lenten programmes during the Year of Mercy (*cf. MV 16 and 17*). It is fitting that we should adopt them:

- i) On the Friday and Saturday prior to the Fourth Sunday of Lent let there be a continuous 24-hour Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament;
- ii) The ministers of the Sacrament of Reconciliation should try to be images of God’s love and mercy.
- iii) The Holy Father will nominate “Missionaries of Mercy” to forgive reserved sins during the season of Lent. These Missionaries of Mercy are called to preach the Word of God, focusing on God’s compassion and love (*cf. MV 18*).

17. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2016, in the Year of Mercy itself, we will celebrate the Divine Mercy Sunday. This year we have an added reason to celebrate this feast – established by St. John Paul II on the Second Sunday of Easter — with greater devotion and enthusiasm. If the celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday is to be really meaningful, we need to experience forgiveness and grant forgiveness during the coming Season of Lent.

#### **Year of Mercy and Acts of Mercy**

18. In order to make this Year of Mercy truly fruitful and efficacious, the Holy Father reminds us to put into practice the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy which we were taught in our catechism

classes. In this context, I would like to propose fourteen acts of mercy, more in consonance with our life-situation, which we could put into practice:

- i) *To feed the hungry*: to make sacrifices and contribute generously towards the Mission of Daman.
- ii) *To give drink to the thirsty*: to sponsor, financially and educationally, poor students in the hostels of Nagar Haveli (Mission of Daman).
- iii) *To clothe the naked*: to provide school uniforms, text books or even free tuitions to the students studying in rural areas of Goa.
- iv) *To welcome the strangers*: to stop complaining about migrants and their children and to help them in whatever way we can.
- v) *To heal the sick*: to visit the sick and the lonely and to take care of their social and other needs.
- vi) *To visit the imprisoned*: to visit those confined to hospitals, homes for the aged, their own homes and other places and also to visit those in prison.
- vii) *To bury the dead*: to help, even monetarily, in the funeral services of persons without means.
- viii) *To counsel the doubtful*: to guide those who have gone astray from the true path of life, especially those who cohabit without celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage, those who live an adulterous life and those who do not live according to the teachings of the Church.
- ix) *To instruct the ignorant*: to give fraternal advice to and work actively for youngsters who are victims of drug abuse, men and women who have become alcoholics and those who, due to the vice of gambling, have destroyed their families.
- x) *To admonish sinners*: to establish positive and cordial relationships with those who have left the Church and are preaching against the Catholic faith and to forgive them from the heart.
- xi) *To comfort the afflicted*: to endeavour to heal neighbourly relationships broken over issues like footpaths, waterways, movements of animals, etc.
- xii) *To forgive offences*: to conscientize people to preserve the beauty of nature, be it plants or trees, wild birds or beasts, beaches, rivers, lakes or springs, mountains and fields, to dispose garbage properly and to conserve the environment.
- xiii) *To bear wrongs patiently*: to show forbearance in face of the wrongs perpetrated by office colleagues or unjust and taunting remarks passed by peers.
- xiv) *To pray for the living and dead*: to pray for the people and groups who persecute and even execute Christians, priests and religious; also to pray sometimes for all those who departed from this world.

19. Lastly, I thank our Triune God for the gift of this Year of Mercy and I sincerely desire that everyone may experience God's compassion in its fullness. Let us be images and witnesses of his mercy through our words and deeds. May the Year of Mercy be an inspiration for us to bring our society — which seems to be drifting away from God — back to Him, by being witnesses of his compassion.

I earnestly pray that our Triune God may bless you all and fill your life with compassion.

Archbishop's House, Panjim, Goa, Feast of St. Andrew, November 30, 2015.

(+ Filipe Neri Ferrão)  
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<sup>1</sup> Cosme Costa, *Life and Achievements of Blessed Joseph Vaz*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Goa: Pilar Publications, 2014), 76 & 91.

<sup>2</sup> Sergio Mascarenhas, *A True Man of God: Venerable Fr. Agnelo de Souza*, (Pilar: Xaverian Publications Society, 2013), 83.

<sup>3</sup> *Misericordiae Vultus*, Papal Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Benedictus XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), 21.