



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

November 2015

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In his commentary on the Gospel of St. John, St. Augustine presents the account of the woman who has been caught in the act of committing adultery. The Pharisees bring her to Jesus and state that the Law of Moses commands that we stone such a woman. Jesus responds, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." We are told that they all went away beginning with the elders until Jesus was left alone with the woman. Jesus offers the woman forgiveness rather than condemnation and tells her to sin no more. In his description of this moment, St. Augustine, writing in Latin, states that *misera* (misery) encountered *misericordia* (mercy); the woman was in misery because of her sin and Jesus offered her mercy. (Io. Ev. tract 33, 5) In the word *misericordia* we find the meeting of *misera* (misery) with *cor* (heart) which symbolizes love. In this union of words we find a definition – mercy is offering love to those in misery. We see this most perfectly expressed in Jesus who offers love and mercy to the sinner. To quote Bishop Robert Barron, "Mercy is what love looks like when it turns towards the sinner." (Father Barron on Love – wordonfire.org)

In the spring of this year Pope Francis announced a Jubilee Year of Mercy that would begin on December 8, 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and conclude on November 20, 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. In his letter announcing this Jubilee (*Misericordiae Vultus*), Pope Francis states, "the time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters. Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope." (MV, 10) In considering how our diocese will celebrate this Jubilee Year, I have taken these words to heart. We will focus on the basics rather than innovation. So our pastoral plan for the coming year will focus on some of the recommendations found in Pope Francis' letter.

A significant focus will be the Sacrament of Reconciliation which is a sacrament very dear to Pope Francis. "Let us place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands. For every penitent it will be a source of true interior peace." (MV, 17) In order to help all of us grow in our appreciation of the powerful sacrament of God's love and mercy, I am asking that you celebrate this sacrament with greater regularity and even consider going to confession on a monthly basis during the Year of Mercy. I have also asked the priests of our diocese to offer more opportunities to celebrate this sacrament of mercy in our parishes. In addition to their regular times for confession, once a week each parish will have an evening "Prayer Hour for Mercy" throughout the Jubilee Year. There would be Eucharistic Adoration and the opportunity to go to confession. Since it is in the evening, families could also attend and spend some time in

prayer together. This will be an opportunity to receive mercy, but also to pray for all of those throughout our diocese in need of God's mercy, especially those who may feel they cannot be forgiven. We may also consider inviting those who feel far from God and the Church to this holy hour; a simple invitation may be all that it takes.

To mark this Jubilee Year the Holy Door will be opened in St. Peter's Basilica, along with the other major basilicas of the city. Pope Francis has asked that a Holy Door of Mercy be opened in every cathedral throughout the world. Pilgrims are invited to enter through the Holy Door as a sign of repentance and a desire to renew and recommit to their faith. A Holy Door will be created in our cathedral and I invite you to come and receive the special graces that are associated with this pilgrimage. Pope Francis has announced that a plenary indulgence will be granted to those who enter the door and fulfill certain spiritual conditions. In order to fully appreciate the nature of this indulgence, Pope Francis states, "In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God forgives our sins, which he truly blots out; and yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act. But the mercy of God is stronger than even this. It becomes *indulgence* on the part of the Father who, through the Bride of Christ, His Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin." (MV, 22) To gain this "indulgence" the Holy Father asks that after passing through the Holy Door of Mercy, the pilgrim also celebrates the Sacrament of Reconciliation, attends Mass, makes a Profession of Faith and reflects on the gift of God's mercy. Even those who are deceased, imprisoned, and the homebound, will be able to gain the merits of this Indulgence. (**Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis According to Which an Indulgence is Granted to the Faithful on the Occasion of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy**, September 1, 2015). I invite you to make a pilgrimage to our beautiful cathedral throughout the Jubilee Year where daily Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are offered.

Pope Francis also encourages us to rediscover the richness of the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. The Corporal Works of Mercy are acts in which we meet a person's material or physical needs (feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead). The Spiritual Works of Mercy are acts of compassion in which we respond to a person's emotional or spiritual needs (counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, pray for the living and the dead). Pope Francis states, "It is my burning desire that, during the Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty and to let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy." (MV, 15) He also has granted the Jubilee Indulgence to anyone who performs one of these Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. "Each time that one of the faithful personally performs one or more of these actions, he or she shall surely obtain the Jubilee Indulgence." (**Letter on Jubilee of Mercy Indulgence**) I encourage you to focus on a different Work of Mercy each month during the Jubilee Year as a sign of your commitment to live by mercy.

We have also written a special diocesan prayer that will be offered at each Mass in all of our parishes during the Jubilee Year of Mercy. The prayer card will have an image of the Statue of the Sacred Heart that is in front of our Diocesan Catholic Centre. The scripture verse, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28)

will be found under this image of Jesus with his open arms. I encourage you to take a card home with you to also pray individually or as a family.

My dear friends, it is my hope that this Jubilee Year of Mercy will be a time of healing grace for our diocese. Pope Francis has often referred to the Church as a field hospital ready to treat the casualties of war. Our faith teaches us that we have an enemy who is always engaging in spiritual warfare and this often creates misery in our world and in our own personal lives. We are wounded by sin and need God's healing mercy. I pray that we will all draw closer to Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He makes God's love and mercy present to us each day and gives us the tools for spiritual battle. We may be wounded but we can always be healed in God's love. Pope Francis states, "The Church's first truth is the love of Christ. The Church makes herself servant of this love and mediates it to all people, a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of oneself. Consequently, whenever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy." (MV12) It is my hope and prayer that throughout this Jubilee Year of Mercy people will find in our parishes, diocese and in each one of us, an "oasis of mercy". In being transformed by mercy, may we become witnesses of mercy by bringing healing and hope to the world.

I wish to conclude with one last quote from Pope Francis which expresses what I believe this year will be all about. "In this Jubilee Year, let us allow God to surprise us. He never tires of throwing open the doors of his heart and repeats that he loves us and wants to share his love with us. The Church feels the urgent need to proclaim God's mercy. She knows that her primary task, especially at a moment full of great hope and signs of contradiction, is to introduce everyone to the great mystery of God's mercy by contemplating the face of Christ." (MV, 25) During this Jubilee Year of Mercy let us all contemplate the loving face of Christ, for mercy is what love looks like when it turns toward the sinner.

May Mary the Mother of Mercy intercede for us.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Gerard Bergie".

Most Reverend Gerard Bergie, D.D.

Bishop of St. Catharines