



GOD THE FATHER OF MERCIES

A Pastoral Letter to God's People of the Diocese of Bathurst

*Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
Opening of the Jubilee of Mercy
8th December 2015*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Earlier this year, at midday on Saturday 20th June, the Angelus bells rang out in every parish of the Diocese of Bathurst, as we began the celebrations marking 150 years of our local church.

The Angelus was a wonderful prayer to begin with. It recalls us to the moment of Mary's yes when she conceived Jesus. It recalls a new beginning in human history: when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt amongst us: a moment of mercy. "The tender mercy of our God in which the rising sun has come to visit us." (*Luke 1:78*)

The celebrations which began that weekend will continue until October - November 2016, when we commemorate the events of the arrival of our first Bishop, Matthew Quinn; and our first community of Mercy Sisters, led by Mother Ignatius Croke.

This observance of our sesquicentenary will also, from today, be linked to a worldwide observance of the Jubilee of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis. That Jubilee will begin today, 8th December, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception; and close on the Feast of Christ the King Sunday, 20th November 2016.

God's mercy is always available when we turn to him. The Pope has announced this Year of Mercy because, as he says "at times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may

become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives." He tells us that this is a special time for the Church: "when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective." (*The Face of Mercy, 3*).

In this year's pastoral letter, I invite you to reflect with me on the life of our local church - past, present and future - in the light of God's mercy.

Merciful like the Father

The motto chosen by Pope Francis for this Jubilee is taken from chapter 6 of the Gospel According to Luke: "Be merciful as your Father is merciful." (*Lk 6:36*) Mercy is not only an action of the Father: it is a way of knowing who his true children are.

The passage of scripture in which these words appear (*Lk 6: 20-37*) contains a clear and radical description by Jesus of what his true followers look like. *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly.*

For many Christians, for all of us at times, that call is a step too far. We can be nice, we can be good - at least to those who will be nice and good in return. But Jesus offers us something more, if we would say yes and follow him. He invites us to discover the reality of mercy, what St. John Paul II called "the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer" (*Rich in Mercy, 15*). We discover mercy, not by dreaming about it, but in receiving and living it.

The Works of Mercy

Pope Francis has said that it is his “burning desire” for the Christian faithful to rediscover the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. “It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy.” (*The Face of Mercy*, 15)

The Church has traditionally listed seven spiritual and seven corporal (“bodily”) works of mercy. They are plainly expressed and easy to understand. This year, we need to reflect together on how well our local church, as communities of love and service, does these works: where we are doing them: where we could do more, and what that would look like.

And let’s each one of us ask himself or herself the same questions, reflecting prayerfully on the scriptures suggested for each work in the following lists.

The Corporal Works of Mercy

1. To feed the hungry. (Matthew 25:35; James 2:14-17)
2. To give drink to the thirsty. (Matthew 25:35; 10:42)
3. To clothe the naked. (Matthew 25:36; Job 24:7-10))
4. To welcome the stranger. (Matthew 25:35; Genesis 18:1-8)
5. To visit the sick. (Matthew 25:36; Sirach 7:35)
6. To visit prisoners. (Matthew 25:35; Hebrews 13:3)
7. To bury the dead. (Tobit 1:17; 12:12; Sirach 38:16)

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

1. To counsel the doubtful. (Proverbs 11:14; Sirach 37:13-15)
2. To instruct the ignorant. (Acts 8:30-31; 1 Peter 3:15)
3. To admonish sinners. (Matthew 18:15-17; James 5:19)
4. To comfort the afflicted. (Isaiah 40; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5)
5. To forgive offences willingly. (Matthew 5:38-46; Luke 23:34)
6. To bear wrongs patiently. (1 Corinthians 13:4,7; Matthew 18: 21-22)
7. To pray for the living and the dead. (Matthew 6:5-15; 2 Maccabees 12:39-46)



The Calling of St. Matthew by Caravaggio

The motto of Pope Francis (*Miserando atque Eligendo*) is taken from a passage from the venerable Bede, on the Feast of Matthew: *Jesus therefore sees the tax collector, and since he sees by having mercy and by choosing, he says to him, 'follow me'.*

On the Feast of St. Matthew in 1953, the young Jorge Bergoglio experienced, at the age of 17, the loving presence of God in his life. Following confession, he felt his heart touched and he sensed the descent of the Mercy of God, who with a gaze of tender love, called him to religious life.

God, the Father of mercies...

The title of this Letter comes from the words of absolution that the priest prays over the penitent in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. They are beautiful words to read, but much more beautiful to hear when they are spoken to you in this Sacrament:

*God, the Father of mercies
through the death and resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and **I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.***

Pope Francis has asked that Reconciliation (sometimes called Confession, or Penance) be placed at the centre of our observance of this Jubilee, that bishops celebrate it with their people and that they and all confessors be authentic signs of the Father's mercy.

Recently, he has especially invited those who have been involved in abortions to find God's mercy in the Sacrament and ensured that all priests will be able to bring penitents back into full communion with the Church. I join with the Pope in his invitation and take the opportunity to remind you that, in Australia, priests already have the faculty to absolve all sins and, in cases of abortion, lift excommunications.

I have asked our priests to talk more about the Sacrament of Reconciliation and help people to understand it better. I have also asked them to consult with their pastoral councils and parishioners about whether the Sacrament needs to be available at different times to make it more accessible.

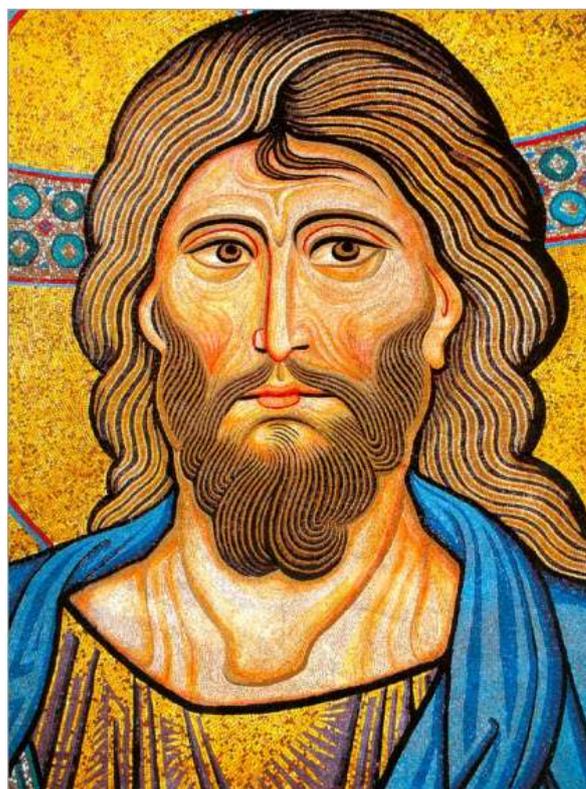
For many Catholics in our Diocese, even those who attend Mass regularly, this Sacrament has dropped out of their lives. Everyone has his or her reasons for that. For some, it is simply never getting around to it. For some, it's not believing that they need it. For some, particularly if they have been away from it for a while, there's shyness or even anxiety about approaching the priest. For others, bad experiences with this Sacrament or with a priest in the past, can tragically still be a barrier today.

All I can do is invite you again to discover the peace that this Sacrament can bring. God is always ready to forgive us the moment we turn to him - and to speak to our hearts about where we need forgiveness. God's grace and mercy are always working in the world, but in the sacraments, we see, hear, taste, touch or smell him at work. As members of his Church, we know that we do not accept and live the mercy of God as individuals, but in belonging to one another in Christ.

The story of the Sacrament of Reconciliation has unfolded along with changes in the world and in the Church. The historical record is scant and we know that formal practices in the life of the early Church, who expected Christ to return very soon, took time to develop. The Epistle of James and *The Shepherd* of Hermas both point to the forgiveness of sins after Baptism involving not just God and the sinner, but the community of the Church.

The first clear shape of the Sacrament of Penance emerges for us in the 3rd century. How were the churches to deal with the situation of Christians who, in the face of persecution, renounced their beliefs and left?

These communities had to work through what to do when some of these people had a change of heart and wanted to return.



This also applied to those whose sins of murder or adultery had separated them from the fellowship of believers.

A common practice became established for those who had committed major, public sins and now wanted to return to the Church. The first step was the change of heart that acknowledged the wrong and wanted to turn away from it. Second, was the open declaration of this to the community gathered around the Bishop. Third, undergoing a period of public prayer, almsgiving, fasting and other penances. And fourth, again within the assembly presided over by the Bishop, the pronouncement of forgiveness and re-admittance to the Eucharistic table.

These practices have gone through many changes through the centuries to today. Now, we have private confession of sins to the priest, which he may not disclose to anyone. Reconciliation now is not a once in a lifetime event, reserved for serious sins, but something that can be repeated many times, in the slow work of continuing conversion of a Christian life. Penances, no longer severe, are now carried out after absolution, rather than before.

There is not time here to tell the long and interesting history of the Sacrament. Catholics over 50 have seen it change in our lifetime. It has had many twists and turns, it has been misunderstood and misused, but has retained those same four elements we can see in its earliest shape: 1. *Contrition*; 2. *Confession*; 3. *Penance*; and 4. *Absolution*. And our reflection on the early days of the Sacrament helps us see more clearly its communal character, which later practice may have obscured, and more recently we have attempted to recapture.

Most importantly, it remains a reminder that we rely on the mercy of God and walk in that mercy together.

May the observance of this Year of Mercy and our Sesquicentennial celebrations enrich each other as our local church seeks to become *Merciful like the Father*.

+ *Michael McKenna*
Bishop of Bathurst



Important Dates of the Jubilee of Mercy

8th December 2015:	Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception; Opening of the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica
13th December 2015:	Opening of the Doors of Mercy of the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. John and The Immaculate Conception Church, Carcoar
10th February 2016:	Ash Wednesday; Sending forth of the Missionaries of Mercy
4th - 5th March 2016:	"24 Hours for the Lord"
3rd April 2016:	Divine Mercy Sunday
26th - 31st July 2016:	World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy" Mt 5:7
13th November 2016:	Closing of the Doors of Mercy in the Catholic Diocese of Bathurst
20th November 2016:	Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe; Closing of the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica and the conclusion of the Jubilee of Mercy.

