



## Pastoral Letter for the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy

THEME: JESUS CHRIST IS THE FACE OF MERCY

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

When Pope Francis issued the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus* on April 11 2015, he outlined the purpose and the ways this Jubilee of Mercy is to be celebrated. Observing the principle of subsidiarity, the Holy Father wants particular churches to celebrate the Jubilee in their own unique circumstances. There are, however, things that need to be celebrated in common to express the communion of the entire Church as one. We in the Archdiocese of Benin City intend to appropriate the Universal celebrations and also adapt the celebrations to meet our local needs. Therefore, in line with Universal norm we intend to open the Door of Mercy on the December 13, 2015 and invite the faithful to embark on a pilgrimage through the Door of Mercy in order to experience the Face of Mercy and also to gain the Indulgences assigned to the Jubilee Year.

The Celebration will begin with a seminar to educate all the faithful concerning the celebration of the Jubilee Year. On December 12, there shall be a pilgrimage to our Marian Shrine to ask our Lady to accompany us in this Jubilee of Mercy. On the Saturday before Divine Mercy Sunday, the entire faithful of our Archdiocese will be on pilgrimage to the Divine Mercy Shrine to seek the graces that flows from the Divine Heart of Jesus Christ. Throughout the year there shall be various celebrations to bring the Mercy of the Father to all categories of persons in our Archdiocese.

### 2. THE PURPOSE OF THE JUBILEE YEAR:

Pope Francis explained the reason why he wants the entire Church to celebrate this Jubilee year. He says it is to enable all of us gaze more attentively on the mercy of God so that we may become more effective signs of the Father's action in our lives (see MV, no. 3). What this means is that the Jubilee year is to assist everyone of us,; bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, and the laity to become more effective instruments of mercy. The theme chosen for the celebration is itself very instructive; Merciful like the Father. Jesus is the one who shows us the face of the Merciful Father. In the words and actions of Jesus Christ we see the Face of the Merciful Father (see MV, no. 1) When we

gaze on the Face of the Mercy in the person of Jesus Christ we become merciful like Jesus Christ.

In Christ, we find that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven because of his mercy. The Holy Father underscores this point when he states: When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive. I will have the joy of opening the Holy Door on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. On that day, the Holy Door will become a Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instils hope (MV, no. 3).

### 3. CELEBRATING THE JUBILEE YEAR IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF BENIN CITY:

We have judged it expedient to constitute a committee of priests, consecrated persons and the laity to organise the celebration in our particular Church.

This committee has our mandate to invite societies and parishes to celebrate the Jubilee Year. They are to always work in consultation with us. They have outlined a detailed program for the celebration of the Jubilee Year in our Archdiocese. A website has been created especially for the celebration of the Jubilee in our Archdiocese. We, therefore, call on all the faithful to regularly visit this website (<http://www.cabconline.net>).

The website will be updated frequently with the various activities of the celebrations in our Archdiocese. These activities will require the active participation of all the faithful. The Jubilee of Mercy is to be celebrated in such a way that there will be no faithful in our local Church that would not have had the opportunity to receive the graces of the Jubilee year.

During this Jubilee year we call on all faithful in our Archdiocese to seek the Face of the Merciful Father in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We hereby decree that all parish priests and assistant parish priests make themselves more readily available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. After every week day Masses the priests are to be available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation for at least 30minutes. During the Lenten season, there shall be exchange of confessional. We mandate the Deans to organise this and communicate to us two weeks before the time they may fix for this event. It must take place before the Holy Week begins.

### 4. GOD'S MERCY MANIFESTED IN HIS FORGIVENESS OF SINS:

God's greatness is most manifest in His forgiveness of sin the Roman Pontiff tells us:

It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way'. Saint Thomas Aquinas' words show that God's mercy, rather than being a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence. For this reason the liturgy, in one of its most ancient collects, leads us to pray: 'O God, who reveal your power above all in your mercy and forgiveness ... 'Throughout the history of humanity, God will always be the One who is present, close, provident, holy, and merciful.'" (MV, no. 6).

We as Christians are invited to also reflect the face of the merciful Father in our dealing with our brothers and sisters. We are to exercise our authority most often in forgiving rather in punishment. In our Archdiocese we intend to celebrate a Mass of Reconciliation whereby all those who feel they have been hurt or have hurt others will have the opportunity to seek forgiveness and to receive forgiveness. Consequently, all societies that have had challenges among themselves (e.g., conflicts that may have resulted in mutual animosity among the group) or with competent authority will have the opportunity to be fully reconciled publicly with the Church. This Jubilee year of Mercy, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, should help all of us to know Christ more and if we have made mistakes in the past to seek forgiveness. Nobody, has our authority to demonise or insult any group, no matter what such a group or individual may have done in the past. This is the Year of Mercy and we by virtue of our authority extends the hand of fellowship to all groups and individuals. We extend the hand of forgiveness, and not the hand of sanction or punishment. We want all of us to see the Merciful Face of God in Christ who died for us all that we might be saved. We all should be able to sing the refrain of Psalm 36 "For his mercy endures forever." (MV, no. 7). We want his mercy to endure in our local church here in this ancient city of Benin. A city that is known for its pre-colonial development, its hospitality and its receptive disposition in welcoming missionaries even when some other African communities were still hesitant. Very often in our society we judge others based on prejudices and these prejudices are sometimes based on historical and mutual suspicions among different ethnic groups. We must rediscover our common source of brotherhood, which is our baptism. Baptism should be a stronger bond than ethnic bond or ties. We also know that when we humans judge others we often make mistakes, because we do not see as Christ sees. The Holy Father emphasises this importance of knowing the limitation of our judgement of others. He therefore urged all of us to refrain from condemning others:

The Lord Jesus shows us the steps of the pilgrimage to attain our goal: 'Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back' (Lk 6:37-38). The Lord asks us above all *not to judge* and *not to condemn*. If anyone wishes to avoid God's judgement, he should not make himself the judge of his brother or sister. Human beings, whenever they judge, look no farther than

the surface, whereas the Father looks into the very depths of the soul. How much harm words do when they are motivated by feelings of jealousy and envy! To speak ill of others puts them in a bad light, undermines their reputation and leaves them prey to the whims of gossip. To refrain from judgement and condemnation means, in a positive sense, to know how to accept the good in every person and to spare him any suffering that might be caused by our partial judgment, our presumption to know everything about him. But this is still not sufficient to express mercy. Jesus asks us also to forgive and to give. To be instruments of mercy because it was we who first received mercy from God. To be generous with others, knowing that God showers his goodness upon us with immense generosity. (MV, no. 14).

#### 5. THE PILGRIMAGE THROUGH THE HOLY DOOR AT THE CATHEDRAL:

The Holy Father reminds us that the practice of pilgrimage has a special place in the Christian Tradition. Pilgrimage, in a sense represents, the journey each of us make in life. Life, therefore, is a pilgrimage.

We are all on a journey to our Merciful Father. Consequently, Pope Francis has mandated that the Door of Mercy be opened in every Cathedral Church. The faithful are to pass through this door of mercy in a pilgrimage. The prayer of the Holy Father is that this pilgrimage becomes an impetus to conversion:

The practice of *pilgrimage* has a special place in the Holy Year, because it represents the journey each of us makes in this life. Life itself is a pilgrimage, and the human being is a *viator*, a pilgrim travelling along the road, making his way to the desired destination. Similarly, to reach the Holy Door in Rome or in any other place in the world, everyone, each according to his or her ability, will have to make a pilgrimage.

This will be a sign that mercy is also a goal to reach and requires dedication and sacrifice. May pilgrimage be an impetus to conversion: by crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God's mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us." (MV, no. 14).

In order to fulfil this mandate of the Holy Father, we have mandated the Archdiocesan Jubilee committee to organise a roaster for parish pilgrimage through the Holy Door at Holy Cross Cathedral Benin City. During these pilgrimages through the Holy Door there will be opportunity for the faithful to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. All priests who work or reside in our Archdiocese must join the faithful in these pilgrimage. We expect parish priests to accompany their parishioners during the scheduled time for their pilgrimage.

#### 6. THE CORPORAL AND SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY:

The Jubilee Year is to also help draw our attention to the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy*. In the words of the Holy Father:

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. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these *corporal works of mercy*: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the *spiritual works of mercy*: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead. (MV, no. 15).

On our part we shall celebrate the Jubilee of prisoners, whereby we will visit the prisoners and let them know that the Merciful Christ is ready to forgive and welcome them back home like he did to the prodigal son (Lk 15); We shall also celebrate Jubilee for Widows, the elderly, the sick and physically challenged. These celebrations are to remind all of us that the most vulnerable in our society have to be cared for because they are also children of the merciful Father. Our socio-economic conditions do not alter our relationship with God. God loves us whether we are poor or rich, whether we are sick or healthy.

The endemic nature of corruption, secret societies, criminal groups and their impact is also of great concern to the Church. We in Nigeria have suffered a lot as a result of corruption. Money designated for the poor are misappropriated and very often those who perpetuated these acts do not face justice. The Holy Father states that corruption is a grave sin because it damages the society and frustrates the hope of the people. Elaborating further on corruption the Roman Pontiff says:

This [corruption] festering wound is a grave sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance, because it threatens the very foundations of personal and social life. Corruption prevents us from looking to the future with hope, because its tyrannical greed shatters the plans of the weak and tramples upon the poorest of the poor. It is an evil that embeds itself into the actions of everyday life and spreads, causing great public scandal. Corruption is a sinful hardening of the heart that replaces God with the illusion that money is a form of power. It is a work of darkness, fed by suspicion and intrigue. *Corruptio optimi pessima*, saint Gregory the Great said with good reason, affirming that no one can think himself immune from this temptation. If we want to drive it out from personal and social life, we need prudence, vigilance, loyalty, transparency, together with the courage to denounce any wrongdoing. If it is not combated openly, sooner or later everyone will become an accomplice to it, and it will end up destroying our very existence. (MV, no. 19).

The Pope therefore appeals to these persons to change their way of lives. We therefore call on all those who hold political offices and those who are entrusted with resources meant for the common good to judiciously administer these goods for the intended purposes. In a special way we call on Catholic Politicians to ensure that their Catholic faith permeate all their political decisions. In the words of the Holy Father we urged these persons:

May the message of mercy reach everyone, and may no one be indifferent to the call to experience mercy. I direct this invitation to conversion even more fervently to those whose behaviour distances them from the grace of God. I particularly have in mind men and women belonging to criminal organizations of any kind. For their own good, I beg them to change their lives. I ask them this in the name of the Son of God who, though rejecting sin, never rejected the sinner. Do not fall into the terrible trap of thinking that life depends on money and that, in comparison with money, anything else is devoid of value or dignity. This is nothing but an illusion! We cannot take money with us into the life beyond. Money does not bring us happiness. Violence inflicted for the sake of amassing riches soaked in blood makes one neither powerful nor immortal. Everyone, sooner or later, will be subject to God's judgment, from which no one can escape. (MV, no. 19).

#### 7. THE MISSIONARIES OF MERCY:

The Holy Father has made it clear that during this Jubilee year all the faithful should be able to have easy access to priests with the faculty to remit censures that were hitherto reserved to certain authorities. During this Jubilee year all priests have been granted the faculty to remit the censure of excommunication that a faithful incurs as a result of the crime and sin of abortion. In addition, Pope Francis will also be sending out *Missionaries of Mercy* to whom he will grant the faculty to remit all censures reserved to the Holy See. These priests will be the living sign of the Merciful Father's willingness to welcome back any sinner (see MV, no. 18). We look forward to receiving these *Missionaries of Mercy* in our Archdiocese. We will also make our priests available for the reception of such faculties from the Holy Father.

#### 8. CONCLUSION:

Dearly beloved in the Lord, as we celebrate this Jubilee Year of Mercy, it is our prayer that we all will truly become as merciful as the Father. We can attain this state if we allow the most perfect of all God's creature assist us. Mary is the Queen of Mercy because she gave birth to Christ who has come to show us the Face of the Merciful Father. We, therefore, urge all Catholics in our Archdiocese to be close to Mary the mother of Christ. To seek refuge in her who is the refuge of sinners and ask her to show us the way of Mercy. We entrust you all to the maternal care of our Mother Mary.

Given this day 8 December 2015 the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary at our  
Chancery

+ Most Rev. Augustine Obiora Akubeze,  
Catholic Archbishop of Benin City.