

MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE CATHOLIC FAITHFUL AND INDEED TO ALL PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY

December 8, 2015 – November 20, 2016

My dear sisters and brothers, fellow citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and all who though not citizens have made this land their home,

Why a Jubilee Year Of Mercy?

Daily, we are confronted by an onslaught of violence, domestic and global – mass bombings, horrific murders, abuse of the innocent, of women and workers. Social media has become the purveyor of a diet of extreme and inhuman behaviour committed by partners, caregivers, and persons whom we expect to provide shelter and security. And the best efforts of the forces of law and order and of civil society seem powerless in the face of this tide of evil. So many elements in our society, human and technological, with great potential for good, seem set on paths of destruction and death. How do we arrest this slide is the question on the lips of everyone. All of us who believe in a merciful God, of whatever denomination, have made the prayer of the psalmist our own; ***“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? ³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;” (Ps.13, 2 – 4a)***

This almost despairing cry forces us to recognize our need for the mercy of God. Our Catholic faith calls us to experience this almost despairing cry as a prayer which will not go unanswered. By divine Providence, Pope Francis has declared the coming year - from December 8th, 2015 to November 20th, 2016, an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, a faithful celebration of which can be the needed antidote for the restoration and healing of our Land. Our brothers and sisters in Islam call on God as the “Beneficent, the Merciful”, and those who worship according to the traditions of Hinduism recognize their need to be merciful and generous to everyone. Other faith traditions present in our land also see justice and mercy as flowing from the Divine. As Archbishop of Port-of-Spain, I would hope that, in understanding and living Mercy, all of us, people of faith and good will can work together to show God’s mercy throughout our land.

We of the Catholic and Christian religion, teach that the mercy of God assumed a human face in the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. During his life on earth, he displayed this divine mercy in his welcome of the poor, the disreputable, the sick and the marginalized. We have only to think of his call of Levi, the tax collector, even as he was engaged in his job of extortion and greed.

Under the merciful gaze of Jesus, Levi became Matthew, a faithful companion of the Lord, an interpreter of the life of this same Jesus in his Gospel. Dare we believe that our abusers and murderers are also being called to a change of life? Jesus himself has made these important statements – “It is not the healthy who need the doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the just, but sinners....What I want is **mercy** not sacrifice.” (Hosea 6,6; Matt. 9,13) Indeed if Mercy resonated in all our hearts, the atrocities which we have witnessed would not have occurred.

Answering the Call of Mercy

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus commands his followers “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful”. (Lk 6:36). This call must resonate in all hearts during this Holy Year. This is the attitude to which our hearts must be converted as we enter into the practices and observances of this Year of Grace. For us to respond more faithfully to this command I offer the following guides for this journey towards lives characterized by Mercy and the peace and hope that true reconciliation and forgiveness bring.

- **Meditate on the Word of God.** There is no shortcut to familiarity with God, except through his Son, Jesus Christ. The New Testament writings reinforce and sharpen the picture of God the Father described in the Hebrew Scriptures, “...God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, maintaining his faithful love to thousands, forgiving fault, crime and sin, yet letting nothing go unchecked...”(Ex 34:6 sq.) It is this God we are called to worship, not the false gods who only call us to selfishness, pleasure and vengeance. The fruit of this meditation must bring us to a recognition of others as our brothers and sisters in the Lord, brothers and sisters of tremendous gifts and talents; but brothers and sisters who may also suffer hurt and pain and who at times are lonely and afraid. They are brothers and sisters who sometimes long for an encouraging word, for a smile of appreciation and who desire to be loved as each one of us desires to be loved.
- **Rediscover the practice of Silence.** In our overstimulated world, the Word of God, the true God, often finds itself drowned out by the other voices of the false gods competing for our attention and our allegiance. These distractions all conspire to have us ignore and finally forget the purpose of our life – happiness with God through obedience to his Will. To regain our direction will require a deliberate cultivation of times and places of silence and quiet, so that we may once again hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling our name.
- **Judge not!** Because our understanding ourselves and of others is limited, all we see are the external acts, not the full range of circumstances nor the motivations that gave birth to the act. Therefore, we must leave judgment to God. We often say, ‘Thank God is God who will judge me and not people’. Accord this same right to others, and we will avoid the words of condemnation that arise so easily from our ignorant self-righteousness and judgmental attitude. Always remember the saying of the older people; “There but for the Grace of God, go !” The

practice of this asceticism of speech will prevent the harm done by gossip and character assassination, now become pastimes of our society, with the resulting damage to people's character, peace of mind, and even of their lives. This is a serious habit that must be eradicated from our lives.

- **Forgive!** We are where we are today because of the Mercy of God. We have received Mercy. We are therefore called to be merciful ourselves – ***Merciful like the Father***. Whatever our experience of our earthly fathers, the Father with the two sons in the parable of St. Luke's Gospel shows us the kind of Father we all have, a Father who understands each one of his children, who waits for the return of the Prodigal, who welcomes each returnee back, no questions asked, because of the joy each returning sinner brings to the Father's heart. I invite each one to reflect on his or her experience of this unconditional love – a Mother, a Grandmother, a Teacher, a Neighbour, a Friend- each of us has had an experience of this unconditional acceptance. Unearth it from under the mound of negativity and rejection that has closed our hearts to acceptance of this forgiving love, so that we may be able to practise this liberating and peace- bringing forgiveness. Here I wish to draw to your attention the frequent examples we have of ordinary people of every age group who forgive the perpetrators of life-altering violence. We are surprised each time we read about these heroes of charity. Go beyond surprise to imitation. It is the only way that will enable us to pray the Our Father – “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” Unless we have made silence, meditation and non-judgmental acceptance part of our daily life, we may find it impossible to pray these words with sincerity.
- **Give!** As a people we used to be known for our generosity, and indeed, this quality returns to the surface in times of crisis when we exercise a generosity that knows no limits. But in our daily lives, we have been contaminated by the culture of individualism and indifference, and compassion, that ability to stand with another in their suffering, has been dampened. We have nothing that we have not received as gift from our Creator. We are therefore expected to be a grateful people, who express their gratitude to the Giver of all Gifts by being compassionate as our Father is compassionate. This compassion has to be expressed in actions and lifestyle, it is not sentimentality.

Active Mercy

We have many well established ways in our tradition of expressing Mercy – the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy offer sure guidelines for this. So in this Year of Mercy, I exhort each one of you to revisit these practices and commit yourselves to them as a concrete expressions of your desire to be as merciful as the Father who lets the sun shine on both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. Being as merciful as the Father entails ***feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty; clothing the naked; welcoming the stranger; healing the sick; visiting the imprisoned and burying the dead***. While we do these things however, Mercy demands that we ask ourselves certain questions: (CCC 2247)

- Why it is that in a land as rich as ours, there are so many who live in the degradation of poverty, depending on the spasmodic generosity of strangers for their daily bread?
- Why is it that so many young families cannot afford decent lodging?
- Why is it that so many of our people cannot access the health services they need or receive the basic medicines necessary for their well-being?
- Why are there so many homeless of all ages and ethnicities on our streets?
- Why are our prisons becoming a growth industry, swallowing the lives of many young people, costing large sums of money, and becoming a school from which the “graduates” emerge more violent and destructive?
- How is it that we have grown accustomed to this state of affairs?

The Sick and Dying

This Year of Mercy offers us an opportunity to participate in those initiatives already begun in an effort to address some of these needs. The **Hospice Movement** offers the dying and their families the possibility of making that great transition with dignity and peacefulness. Many of them depend on the generosity of donors and professionals to carry on their life-giving work. This movement is part of a wider ministry to the dying which any person may be called to do in their own homes or on the streets, sometimes unexpectedly. We can all learn the basics about caring for the sick and the dying so as to be better ministers of God’s mercy, if and when an occasion arises.

There is also **the Hospital Visitation** initiative which calls for volunteers to undertake this consoling ministry to persons who are most vulnerable and who often feel abandoned in their pain and confusion. Healing is not limited to the work of doctors and nurses. The power of a compassionate look, a smile, an affirmation of the worth and dignity of the person suffering from a disfiguring or socially stigmatized condition are as healing and as life-giving as any medication.

Prisoners

There are several initiatives for the care of **prisoners** and former inmates. In addition to the Prison Ministry which is always in need of sensitive and committed volunteers, the Beetham, Belmont initiatives for the support of former prisoners, and the training towards a culture of peace. Even if we judge that we cannot be active members of these groups, we can all suspend the rush to judgment and afford the ex-prisoner who wishes to change his or her life, the courtesy of respectful listening, the offer of a job, the guidance towards persons and places where relevant assistance can be found. Whatever our sin, we, all of us, remain human beings, loved by Almighty God, the Sinless One.

Systems of Violence

Mercy cannot flourish in a society where the very systems and structures that shape the way we interact and participate are themselves destructive. In the Scriptures and prayers of the Church, God's power is best displayed in his readiness to forgive, to be merciful. This is the model on which for the exercise of power by those who hold civil and judicial authority in our society must be based. Sharing as these leaders do in the same humanity as the people they are called to serve, I call on them in this Year of Mercy to take seriously their obligations to practise mercy and justice in the policies they frame and implement. As signatories to international Conventions that have as their purpose the safeguarding of the fundamental rights of all persons, the protection of workers, and of the vulnerable, the eradication of poverty and the promotion of the marginalized, they have agreed to create a state in which care for the common good is the measure of all policy and practice of governance.

It is also our duty as citizens to move out of our apathy and assume more fully our duty as guardians of the good of our nation by making sure we access the information necessary to make informed and wise assessments of prevailing practices. We must assume our responsibility to speak out against attitudes and customs that dehumanize our people. We must correct our understanding of the government as a source of patronage and the law as an agency that we can bend to our whims.

Migrants

We live in a world in flux, **migration** both within and across countries is a daily issue. We have not been spared this problem here in Trinidad and Tobago. We have heard the cries of those who have been deemed illegal immigrants and slated for deportation. Because we island people have always travelled and have the experience of being strangers in a foreign land, I invite you to draw on the memories personal or reported, of what it feels like to be targeted as a stranger or a foreigner. Go beyond the superficial and feel the alienation, the isolation, the suspicion, the fear that is part of being a stranger, and from those memories, look on the faces of the strangers in our midst, an army of "outsiders", who are also our brothers and sisters. How can we make them welcome? Recognize them as full human persons, with names, histories, gifts and talents. They are not merely parasites, bearers of disease, thieves and scamps – they are sons and daughters of God, just as we are. They may even share our faith. Whatever the social reality of these disadvantaged persons, when we stand before the judgment seat of God, we will be asked to give an account of our treatment of these, 'least of Christ's brothers and sisters' and on our response to this will depend our admission to the company of Jesus for eternity. Now, we have the opportunity to recognise them in our company and to treat them as we would treat Christ himself.

Our Common Home

Even as we set ourselves to come to the aid of those who have been caught in the destructive machinery of our systems of so-called development, let us also reflect on our responsibility for the wider creation, the Earth, "our common home" as Pope Francis

so aptly calls it in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*. We have become abusers of the goods of the earth rather than stewards of the riches confided to us.

Look again at our “throwaway culture” which overwhelms the land, sea and air with destructive garbage.

Look again at our hunger for more - more than our share of the goods of this earth. This greed leaves the land stripped, the poor hungry, and our children obese, stunted in mind and body, and incapable of authentic relations.

Look again at our demand for the trappings of wealth – cars, swimming pools, palatial houses, when our brothers and sisters in the same land lack adequate water supply, when our roads have become impassable with traffic, when our houses make family life and relationship impossible.

This Year of Mercy calls us to listen to the cry of the Earth, scarred by fire, dried up by land grabbing and stifled by concrete, of our seas, now become graves of discarded plastic and poisoned fish. Let us not be satisfied to clean the beaches occasionally, let us rather become a people who respect the gift of the land, sea and air, bequeathed to us as a legacy to be handed on to our children. Let us become active stewards of the Earth, which the Creator left to us, to “till and to care for.”

Spiritual Works of Mercy

I wish also to remind you of the Spiritual Works of Mercy, perhaps, this list is less well known, but it is no less important. These require us

To counsel the doubtful; instruct the ignorant; admonish sinners; comfort the afflicted; forgive offences; bear patiently those who do us ill and to pray for the living and the dead. (CCC 2447)

Education

The role of the **educator** is a sacred trust, tasked as he or she is with the vocation of guiding young persons towards discovering the meaning of their lives. I challenge all those responsible for the guidance of teachers and administrators in our schools and places of learning to make this Year a time when we once again invite these professionals to enter more deeply into the purpose of their calling. For too long, teaching has been reduced to an activity for generating income, or in some cases, an opportunity for vicarious self-enhancement at the expense of the students. The education system, in which the Catholic Church plays a great part and knows a great responsibility, cries out for a profound re-evaluation so that it may better respond to the needs of the contemporary student, and attain the purpose for which it exists. As educators, we are called to assist in opening the mind and heart of each student to the riches of the natural and intellectual world, so that they may truly discover their place in God’s creation as well as their eternal destiny. We cannot shirk our responsibility for carrying the work of education forward towards its true vocation. During this Year of Mercy, I would like us to pay more attention to those schools and students most in

need. May the God of wisdom and Mercy help us to truly identify these needs and to effectively address them.

The Family in a Changing World

The **Family** is supposed to be the primary educator of the young, but in the current context where the voice of the parent is drowned out by the electronic babble that proposes alternative values and structures, the Family itself is in need of counsel and support. While there exist in our Archdiocese well established programmes for the support of Family Life, there is need for imaginative and courageous initiatives to respond to the needs of very young parents, those conflicted by seemingly irreconcilable choices and attractions – career versus parenthood, financial independence versus mutual trustful sharing, independence versus lifelong commitment, to name a few. Even before young people consider permanent commitment, there needs to be some preparation for entering into interpersonal and truly intimate relationships. The contemporary world values individualism, self-gratification and personal advancement, qualities that do not prepare one for loyalty to friends, family, spouse or country. Here, Young Adult Formation appropriate to the people who will accept the invitation to be part of these groups would be a great help. We can never start too early.

In these areas as in so many others, I must reiterate Pope Francis' appeal ***to go out to the margins***. If we take the example of Jesus seriously, we cannot be content to remain within our safe enclaves, talking to one another, while there are so many hungry for the Word of the Merciful Christ. Here, I challenge professionals and ordinary persons alike, to devote their talents to the socially disadvantaged – young single mothers, disaffected fathers, schools in areas where more and creative resources are required to respond to the particular needs of the population.

Literacy for Full Participation

The problem of illiteracy remains a severe drawback to human progress in our society, as is the problem of hunger, with the malnutrition that impedes physical and psychical development, information and training in the use of strategies adapted to the learning styles of the various learners in our schools and training centres. No longer do we dare call anybody 'stupid' and so justify our disregard of them. Justice as well as mercy demand that we attend to these persons with the care and attentiveness to which they have a right. This challenge is also applicable to the ministry to our prison population, where the opportunity for recovering lost educational opportunities can be life changing as these persons once again find self- confidence and a feeling of worth. Assistance in obtaining birth certificates, ID cards as well as effective legal aid are some ways in which we can actively assist the illiterate and disadvantaged.

Service of Consolation

Everyone in our society has experienced the pain of loss – through violence, sudden and devastating sickness, sudden, unexplained death, accidents, industrial or vehicular, and those deaths we feel could have been postponed. The reality of our human condition is that death is part of life. For those who believe, it is a door to the fuller life of eternity with God. It is an act of mercy to support the bereaved in their time of grief and mourning. I recognize that a **Ministry of Consolation** is practiced in some parishes, and I would ask that with the appropriate preparation and spiritual guidance, this ministry of comfort become established throughout the Archdiocese. Some sectors of our society have the tradition of Nine Nights as they support those who are bereaved. I would encourage this practice which provides both prayer and fellowship, as well as other tangible assistance.

Justice an Essential Component of Mercy

An intrinsic component of Mercy is **Justice**. Sin is a cancer that destroys the sinner, and we may not in the name of misguided charity, gloss over the sin that is destroying an individual and a community. The example of Jesus is instructive, he does not say that ‘sin is okay’ he admonishes the penitent to “Go and stop sinning.” Sin has consequences for the sinner and his or her relationships, and Justice, and to quote Pope Francis, “...anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price.” So that it is an aspect of mercy to ‘admonish the sinner’ so that he or she may be brought to awareness of the damage that sin wreaks on authentic life, personal, spiritual and societal.

Mercy and Justice must meet in the exercise of the corrective and judicial power of our society, safeguarding us against structures of revenge and retaliation. Hope for the healing of the sinner must be the leaven that transforms our vengefulness into charity if we are to learn to “love like the Father.” This calls for a radical re-evaluation of practices that have become endemic to the exercise of justice – long delays in the hearing of cases which result in persons languishing in Remand Yard for periods longer than the maximum sentence had they been found guilty of the crime for which they were held. It will also be expressed in the wider application of existing laws which allow for the issuing of Certificates of Good Character to reformed former prisoners who qualify, so that they may be able to pursue a new life unencumbered by the history of the penalty paid for petty crimes. A Jubilee Year is marked by forgiveness of debts. Prisoners who have paid their debt to society must be helped to obtain Presidential Pardon to vindicate their changed behaviour. It is the duty of the State to make this grace available to such persons and not to reserve this for exceptional situations.

I appeal to all people of goodwill to extend a genuine, non-judgmental welcome to the repentant sinner, recognizing that each of us is also a sinner, saved by the mercy of God, no more, no less.

I thank and encourage mothers who, following the example of Saint Monica, pray unceasingly for sons and daughters who, in the grip of false gods, have left the path of virtue and are trapped in the slavery of sin. I call on family and friends of such mothers to support them with your friendship and prayers. This too is an act of Mercy.

I exhort my brother priests to always remember that God has the power to soften the hardest heart and when hearts have been softened we must be ready to help all sinners, wherever they may be on their journey, as they make their way back to the Father's embrace.

Another situation in which Mercy and Justice must meet is the matter of homelessness. Given the practices current in our society, as elsewhere in the global economy, where access to housing is treated, not as a fundamental right, but rather as a commodity to be traded for maximum profit, this Year of Mercy offers us an opportunity to address the ways in which these practices impact people. Not only those at the lower income levels of the society, but many young couples who wish to establish families find it impossible to acquire homes because of the way in which the market is structured. The elderly also sometimes find themselves in precarious situations when the owners of properties which they have tenanted for years decide to improve the market value of these holdings, making it impossible for the elderly who live on a pension to meet the new demands.

As has happened in the past, legislation to regulate the unbridled growth of this sector needs to be created and enforced so that landlords and tenants, members of the human family, may work together to ensure that homelessness and inadequate and sub-human living conditions are eradicated. Creative solutions must be found which will safeguard the requirements of both Justice and Mercy, and it is essential that we address this urgent problem.

The Practice of Corruption

I also appeal to all members of our society to address the cancer of **corruption** rampant in all levels of our interactions and relations. Pope Francis describes corruption as “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.” Each one of us is susceptible to this evil, more so as we see that this vicious form of violence offers us power, position and wealth. What we prefer not to see is how corruption destroys the fabric of society, crushes those at the bottom of the social pyramid and diminishes our own humanity. If we are serious about healing our lands, corruption must never be accepted as our usual way of dealing with life and with our brothers and sisters.

Sometimes we try to justify our evil habits by claiming that we are victims of the violence of others, their greed, injustice and oppressive behaviour in the workplace, the family, the systems that structure our society and which block us from accessing what we believe we have a right to receive. Peace has never been the fruit of violence. The seed of peace is **forgiveness**. Difficult as it is for us to look at the wrong done to us, and still say “I forgive the perpetrator”, if we have decided to follow Jesus, we are called to repeat after Him, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” As children of the Beneficent and Merciful God, who have known the blessing of His forgiveness, we have the power and the duty to forgive the ills done to us. The parable of the Ungrateful Servant reminds us of how close forgiveness is to the Father's heart, and how vital it is for our salvation – “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant,

as I had mercy on you?” And as Jesus reports the eternal exclusion of the ruthless servant from the circle of the Father’s love, he concludes, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Mt. 18:33, 35).

Forgiveness is the only route to peace. Seventy times seven, we need to release the bonds by which we prevent ourselves from becoming more like our Father, more like Christ, in a word, more fully human. Unforgiveness is a cancer which destroys our capacity for relationship, makes us hard and cold, and poisons all our interactions. Even worse, it silences the prayer for forgiveness which we need to make daily for our own sins and wrongdoing. It makes us unfit for the company of Christ. And so, in our families, where silence often seals the door to reconciliation, where anger over hurts, perhaps long forgotten, prevents us from taking the first step towards the sister, where disappointment over a child whose choices were not in accord with our values or prejudices shuts the door of welcome – this Year is an opportunity to reopen hearts, to extend the hand of reconciliation so that we can enjoy the peace and joy that can bring us. Let us not wait until we are on our deathbed. Think! Would you be content to die now, holding on to the unforgiveness which currently hardens and haunts your heart?

Special Practices of the Jubilee Year of Mercy

I remind all the Catholic faithful that as we recognize our own need of God’s Mercy and the necessity of being merciful to others. I will open the **Door of Mercy** in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Port-of- Spain, on the 13th December 2015, at the start of the Holy Year. This symbolic crossing of the threshold and entering the House of Mercy is an aid to remind us continually of the journey to be made, a journey from unforgiveness to forgiveness; from self-righteousness to humility; from slavery to sin to the freedom of the children of God. Passing through the Holy Door during this Year will be a declaration of our firm resolve to change our course, to undertake a deep conversion from darkness to Light, so that we may truly spread the joy of the Good News of the Mercy and faithfulness of God. As part of this passage through the Holy Door, we will have the opportunity to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I call on my Brother Priests to be true ministers of the tender mercy of God as they make themselves available, welcoming and non-judgmental in their encounter with the penitent.

I will designate other churches with Holy Doors (the Pro-Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in San Fernando, the ‘big church’ of the South, Santa Rosa in Arima in the East, and St. Joseph’s Church, Scarborough in Tobago). In these Churches too, penitents will have the opportunity to avail themselves of the **Indulgences** granted during this Jubilee. This grace is one of the significant gifts of a Jubilee Year, as it gives us the opportunity to start over, to get in touch once more with the life-giving stream of blessings opened for us since our Baptism into Christ. Each celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation sincerely made does indeed cleanse us of our sins and puts us once again in touch with the ever- faithful God, but there remains with us a certain orientation towards negativity and sinfulness as a result of the effects of these

sins. It is like a patient, who though healed of a viral infection, still feels the lassitude and weakness left by the illness. Drawing on the merits of our brothers and sisters who are already in the presence of God in heaven and who, like a “great cloud of witnesses” stand around us, the Church grants the penitent a complete freeing from the “residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.” This is a great assurance for all those who may feel that the long habit of sin is too difficult to break – the deep and wide Mercy of God is more than enough to set our feet once more on the way of peace.

This Special Jubilee of Mercy comes after the Year of Consecrated Life, and the Year of the Family. This Year is devoted to the conversion of all people of goodwill. Faced with the depth of our need, we will spend the entire Year in activities designed to help us remain on course. We begin with the Church’s Year, in Advent, with the feast of Mary, the Mother of Mercy, whose Immaculate Conception was the preparation of a human being for the Incarnation of Jesus, the Mercy of God in human flesh

As is our custom, during Lent, Missions will be preached in the usual locations, with an emphasis on the Mercy of God. I appeal to my Brother Priests and other ministers of the Word to become so penetrated with an experience of themselves as beneficiaries of God’s mercy that they may speak with enthusiasm and conviction of this grace. During this season Pope Francis asks us to have recourse to the Scriptures as a mirror in which we can gaze ever more intently on the “merciful face of the Father. Many people have adopted the practice of Lectio Divina. I encourage this practice as a fruitful means of conversation with God Who reveals himself to us in the Scriptures. I also encourage priests and religious and deacons, and all who are bound by their vocation in life to the Prayer of the Church to use this Year as an impetus to renewed fervour in this Work of God. I am happy to note that the lay faithful have reclaimed this practice, and I remind all that when we pray this Liturgical Prayer, we are using prayers and Psalms that Jesus himself recited while on earth, and it is with him that we pray this Prayer for all people.

The “**24 Hours for the Lord**”, instituted by Pope Francis, is to be celebrated on Friday and Saturday preceding the Fourth Week of Lent. In this Archdiocese, the manner of celebrating this will be the subject of a subsequent directive.

[A Call to Conversion](#)

During the centuries, there have been many regrettable occurrences in the life and relations of the Church. In all humility, we acknowledge this fact, and I charge the faithful to pray and work so that the face of the Church may once again radiate the joyful welcome of a Mother who cares for all her children. Not only those members of our communities who no longer walk with us, but those members of other communions with whom we share so much, must be the subjects of our intercession for that unity for which Jesus prayed so earnestly on the night before he died, ‘that they may all be one.’ Let us ask the Mother of Mercy to obtain for us the discreet and gentle insight she

displayed at the Wedding at Cana, so that we may see where the needs are, and know how to go beyond ourselves to the One Who alone can restore the wine of our joy.

While some may protest that they do not have the time or ability to undertake any of the works of mercy outlined above, I underline one Spiritual Work of Mercy that is within the reach of everyone. That is to pray for the living and the dead. All of us know quiet, housebound elderly people who pass their days in constant prayer. Indeed, the patron saint of the Missions is Saint Therese of Lisieux, a contemplative sister who died at the age of twenty-four. Like her, we are called to pray, suffer and to work in union with the ongoing sacrificial offering of Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church. During this Year, let us expand the horizons of our heart, and pour out our prayer over the entire cosmos, created by God and loved by Him. Let us pray for the wisdom to once again reverence the whole of God's creation, so that respect and care may once again be the marks of the sons and daughters of God, who accept their training in the school of love.

Finally I encourage you during this Jubilee of Mercy to make yours the practice of frequent Holy Communion. "...gathered around the Lord's table, the table of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, in which He gives us once again His body, makes present the one sacrifice of the Cross. It is in listening to his Word, in nourishing ourselves with his Body and his Blood that He makes us go from being a multitude to being a community, from being strangers to being in communion. The Eucharist is the sacrament of communion, which brings us out from individualism to live together our journey in His footsteps, to confirm our faith in Him.

We ought, therefore, to ask ourselves before the Lord:

- How do I live the Eucharist?
- Do I live it automatically or as a moment of true communion with the Lord?
- Do I live it acknowledging the many brothers and sisters who share this same table?
- What is our experience of our Eucharistic celebrations?

This is extremely important for us because in the Eucharist, "He (Jesus Christ) becomes food, real food that sustains our life even at times when the going is rough, when obstacles slow down our steps. The Lord in the Eucharist makes us follow His path, that of service, of sharing, of giving – and what little we have, what little we are, if shared, becomes wealth, because the power of God, which is that of love, descends into our poverty to transform it." (Homily of Pope Francis, Corpus Christi 2013) *Eucharist is indeed the Font of Mercy*

Conclusion

Pope Paul VI in an address to the United Nations said that the particular expertise that the Church had to offer the world was how to be human. This is a humanity measured on the perfect humanity of Christ, the Face of the Merciful Father. We, members of the Church and followers of Christ have a sacred responsibility to develop this expertise for the welfare of our brothers and sisters and for our own salvation. This Jubilee Year of

Mercy is a special opportunity to gaze once more upon the Image of Christ, our Elder Brother so that we may emerge transformed into the likeness of Him upon whom we gaze. As we look at Christ, we see the Father, Who is my Shepherd, who rejoices over finding the lost sheep, the Prodigal Father, whose embrace, at once paternal and maternal, holds both the wandering son and the sour, cold-hearted elder son. As we look, we see ourselves, invited to return to that haven of peace and love from which only our persistence in sin debars us. Whether we have 'dropped out' of Church, or hide because we feel our deep unworthiness, or we are held back by our attachments and habits of laziness this is the moment to return home. More urgently perhaps, this call to conversion is addressed to the 'good people' who may have become complacent in their virtue. Christ gave his all in response to the Father's love, this Jubilee year challenges us to do no less.

In summary, I invite all people of good will to a deep encounter and intimacy with God, so that we may become 'merciful like the Father', willing to forgive ourselves and others "seventy times seven" so that our nation may truly live up to its name and purpose, a model of harmony and caring after the example of the Trinity.

To the maternal care of Mary the Immaculate Conception, patroness of our restored Cathedral Church, I confide all of you and all the activities of this year. I recommend especially the ancient and well-known prayer which we recite at the end of the Rosary, and which is sung at the end of the Divine Office many times during the year, the Salve Regina, the Hail Holy Queen as a prayer to focus our attention on our programme of conversion during this Jubilee Year.

Prayer

Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope! To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears! Turn, then, O most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

+Joseph Harris
Archbishop; of Port of Spain

21st November 2015
Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.