

HOLY YEAR OF MERCY

TIME OF GRACE AND CONVERSION

BY FATHER NORMAN LANGENBRUNNER



When Pope Francis announced his intention to call for an Extraordinary Jubilee, he said, “It shall be a Holy Year of Mercy,” a time for animating “a new stage in the journey of the Church on its mission to bring to every person the Gospel of mercy.”

He decreed this Holy Year should begin on December 8, 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. It is Pope Francis’ hope that “the whole Church will find in this Jubilee the joy needed to rediscover and make fruitful the mercy of God.” The Holy Year will conclude on November 20, 2016, the Sunday dedicated to Jesus Christ as King of the Universe.

DEDICATED TO MERCY

Pope Francis’ dedication to promoting the concept of God’s mercy is reflected in his personal motto: *Miserando atque Eligendo*. Although it doesn’t translate easily into English, the gist is clear: lowly but chosen through God’s mercy. The Latin expression comes from a sermon



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by Venerable Bede (673–735) commenting on Jesus’ decision to call Matthew the tax collector to be an apostle.

Pope Francis’ many acts of mercy shown to strangers—at risk of his own life as Father Jorge Bergoglio, SJ, superior of Jesuits in Argentina—underscore his sense of mercy and compassion. Only recently have stories emerged about his efforts to save dozens of people who were on the enemies list of the Argentine military junta during the “Dirty War” of the late 1970s and early 1980s. One rescued man said, “I’ve always wondered if Bergoglio was fully aware of the risks he took. I don’t know if anyone else would have saved me without knowing me at all.”

CALLING THE CHURCH TO MERCY

Pope Francis’ emphasis on mercy continues the call for mercy issued by other recent popes. Pope John XXIII addressed the assembly at the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, saying: “Nowadays the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy



rather than that of severity.” In his encyclical, *The Mercy of God (Dives in Misericordia)*, Pope John Paul II described “a heartfelt appeal by the Church to mercy, which humanity and the modern world need so much” (2). Pope Francis’ exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)* was animated by his focus on mercy, reiterating his oft-spoken reminder, “God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy” (3).

Awareness of divine mercy, however, isn’t new to God’s people. Examples are found throughout the biblical story of salvation. God intervenes for a number of women who are childless, such as Abraham’s wife, Sarah, and Samuel’s mother, Hannah. Yahweh forgives his people’s rebellion as they wander the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. The prophets and psalms consistently offer the message of divine mercy. The gospel of mercy is reflected in the miracles Jesus performed and parables he taught. The God of the Scriptures is a God of mercy.

AS WE RECEIVE, SO MUST WE GIVE

In the document *The Face of Mercy (Misericordiae Vultus)*, Pope Francis formally announced the Holy Year of Mercy. He



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proclaimed the multiple dimensions of the concept, writing that “we need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy...the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity.” He fleshes out its meaning: mercy is the “ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us,...the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness” (2).

Jesus both demonstrated mercy and demanded it of his followers. Pope Francis points to the miracles Jesus worked,

the relationships he formed, the parables he taught. His mercy prompted him to feed the hungry crowds; restore a son to his grieving mother; and speak of the lost sheep, the lost coins, and the welcome shown the prodigal son. In the parable of the servant who refused to imitate the master who forgave him a debt, Jesus made it clear that mercy is the criterion for all his followers: “Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?” (Matthew 18:33).

Pope Francis develops the obligation: “[W]e are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown us. Pardoning offenses becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for



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us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. At times how hard it seems to forgive! And yet pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully.... Above all, let us listen to the words of Jesus who made mercy an ideal of life and a criterion for the credibility of our faith: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy’ (Matthew 5:7): the beatitude to which we should particularly aspire in this Holy Year” (MV 9).

To be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful (see Luke 6:36) is a solemn goal not just for the Jubilee Year but for our lifelong journey. “In this Holy Year,” Pope Francis wrote, “we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society.... May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism!” (MV 15). His remarks echo Vatican II’s most challenging social constitution, *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*.

GOD IS MERCIFUL AND JUST

In 2012, just a year before the election of Pope Francis, Cardinal Walter Kasper of Germany published *Mercy—The Essence of the Gospel and the Key of Christian Life* about what he calls “a crucially relevant, but forgotten topic.” He is critical of the



“Let us be renewed by God’s mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives, too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.”

—Pope Francis, *Easter Urbi et Orbi* message, March 31, 2013

failure of theologians to reflect upon and develop the Church’s message of mercy. This neglect, he says, has allowed mercy to become *pseudomercy*, in some manner divorced from “a trace of trembling before God, who is holy, and trembling before his justice and his

judgment...the gospel teaches the justification of the sinner, but not the justification of the sin.”



Pope Francis struck a similar note at the conclusion of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family in October 2014 when he cautioned

against two mindsets: (1) “hostile inflexibility” in which a person closes himself from change and the surprises of God and (2) “a destructive tendency to goodness” in which a person, in the name of a deceptive mercy, binds wounds without treating them, the temptation of “do-gooders.”

At question here is the relationship between God’s mercy and God’s justice. God’s mercy isn’t the freedom to sin. God’s justice isn’t the unbending imposition of condemnation and punishment. Somewhere between lies the truth where divine justice and mercy cooperate to achieve what’s truly loving for sinful humanity.

While some fear our focus on God’s mercy will undermine the Church’s

ROOTS OF MERCY

Our ancestors in the faith looked for words that would capture the generosity, compassion, and benevolence of God. Two of the most often-used words in the Old Testament are *racham* and *hesed*. Both can be translated into English as “mercy,” but the connotation of each isn’t apparent in translation.

- **RACHAM:** This Hebrew verb means “to fondle, be compassionate, show mercy.” The nouns (*racham* or *rechem*) deriving from that root can mean “womb.” All three words suggest tenderness aroused by encountering one who is weak, hurting, in need of help. When the Israelites entered into covenant with Yahweh, they recognized that divine intervention came to them through Yahweh’s initiative and without any merit on their part. God treated them as a mother treats her baby—moved by love and affection for one who is helpless.
- **HESED:** This Hebrew noun means “mercy, kindness, or pity.” It derives from the Hebrew verb *chasad*, “to bow,” which may be related to *chanan*, “to stoop in kindness.” Scholar, archeologist, rabbi Nelson Glueck (1900–1971) argued that *hesed*, though commonly rendered in English as “mercy,” connotes fidelity and loyalty. He saw it as the quality that binds two parties in a covenant. Though some scholars dispute his contention, none can doubt that Psalm 136 celebrates the lasting fidelity of Yahweh’s mercy: “Praise the LORD, for he is good; for his mercy endures forever” (1).
- **ELEOS:** When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, editors used the Greek *eleos* for both *racham* and *hesed*. *Eleos* is the word used for “mercy” in the New Testament. Many Catholics are familiar with the refrain, “Kyrie, eleison”—“Lord, have mercy.”

The Greek *eleos* was translated into Latin as *misericordia*, which literally means “miserable heart” or “having a heart for those in misery.” Mercy means being sensitive to and responding to the brokenness in others.

This excursion into language helps us discover the depth of meaning inside the concept of divine mercy. God’s mercy is the love-motivated response to those in need—the poor, the broken, the repentant, those souls on the margins of society and Church.

DIG DEEPER

When have you experienced God’s mercy and forgiveness?

•
How willing are you to show mercy to others?

•
How can you become an agent of God’s mercy during this jubilee year?





understanding of God's justice, theologians respond that God's justice shouldn't be thought of as divine eagerness to punish sinners. Even Jonathan Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741) held out hope for the sinners' conversion. Mercy should be seen as the initial and prevailing opportunity God offers the fallen. God's judgment cannot be ignored or erased from biblical faith.

Cardinal Kasper explains that the message of God's mercy isn't a message of cheap grace: "God expects us to do what is right and just.... For this reason, mercy does not stand in opposition to the message of justice. In his mercy, God rather holds back his justified wrath.... Divine mercy grants sinners a period of grace and desires their conversion. Mercy is ultimately grace for conversion."

SEEK GOD'S MERCY

A Jubilee Year includes a number of customs, such as granting indulgences, making pilgrimages to holy shrines, ceremonial opening of the Holy Door (the northern entrance to St. Peter's Basilica, which is cemented shut except when a Jubilee



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WORKS OF MERCY

Pope Francis proposes an ambitious Holy Year agenda that stems from the very heart of mercy: "It is my burning desire that, during this 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 let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy.... 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 offenses, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead" (MV 15).

Year is observed), and encouragement to receive the sacrament of reconciliation.

The prophetic and gospel message of centuries ago still today echoes God's special dispensation: "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:13).

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