

Jubilee Year of Mercy – Opening the Door of Mercy – Cathedral, Portland,
December 8, 2015 – Feast of the Immaculate Conception –
Gen 3:9-15,20; Eph 1:3-6,11-12; Lk 1:26-38

It was in April of this year that Pope Francis announced that he was calling this Jubilee Year of Mercy. As we have come to know with Pope Francis, he often makes his decisions in ways different than what had been done previously. That is surely the case here as well. Holy Years usually correspond to the calendar. They occur every 25 years. But Pope Francis has called this Jubilee Year in accord with a theme: Mercy, God's mercy. He has seen a need in our world for an appreciation of mercy. Pope Francis wants us to be able to see it as "the beating heart of the Gospel". It is the central reason that Jesus Christ became "the face of the Father's mercy". God wants us to experience his mercy, his compassion in our lives and to bring it into the lives of others. Pope Francis is convinced that our world needs to reflect on this theme and bring it to life. With the tragic events we witness daily I am sure we can all agree.

He has chosen a motto for the year. It is "Merciful like the Father". As we gather this evening here in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception on the very feast of the same name we are very much in the presence of the mercy of God. Why else did the Angel Gabriel appear to Mary? The angel asked her to be the mother of God's Son. Mary's acceptance of this request changed history. It brought God's message of mercy into our world in the very person of Jesus. What did he come to do? To open the doors of heaven. To reconcile humankind with a God who wants his love to spread in the world. The break which occurred with Adam and Eve is overcome in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He came to bring mercy. He showed us mercy. He lived mercy. The mercy he showed us is forgiveness, it is love, it is encouragement, it is compassion.

The motto for the year reminds us that Mercy begins with God. Mercy is not just an act of forgiveness for those who have done wrong. It is a way of life that is manifested in the compassion, love, and joy we see that God has for all creation, and most especially for us as his children. Hopefully we will spend the months of this year reflecting on what this means to us. We will take the opportunity to deepen within ourselves our own appreciation of the mercy of God in our lives. In our world today it is difficult to see that we may sin, that we may offend one another. Sin is often explained away as something unhealthy. It causes guilt. To know the mercy of God, we must begin with confronting our own human condition and acknowledge that there is sin in our lives. Pope Francis encourages our honest acceptance of ourselves as he tells us that it takes courage to admit our need for forgiveness. He tells us, “Each of us has burdensome things within ourselves. We are all sinners!” But, for the Pope, that is precisely why he wants this year. He wants to bring us closer to the “mercy of God who never tires of forgiving, never tires of waiting for us”.

To be merciful like the Father we must first know that mercy. We must first experience what Good News Jesus came to bring. Our ability to live out the motto of the Jubilee, to be “Merciful like the Father”, is dependent on our accepting God's superabundant love and mercy that he pours out on us. Once we are nourished with God's mercy and allow his merciful love to transform us, we are better able to show others this merciful love. That is the other part of this Jubilee Year. Pope Francis is calling us to show mercy as we have experienced it from God.

“How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God,” he wrote. “May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the kingdom of God is already present in our midst.”

All through the year we will be looking at ways in which that is accomplished. The principal way is, of course, through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, those ways in which we acknowledge the human and sacred worth of each person we encounter.

This evening, however, to begin this year, we have opened a door which will take on new significance during this Jubilee Year. This Door of Mercy will be open throughout the Holy Year of Mercy for pilgrims to enter our Cathedral, which is a house of mercy, in this year and all years. God dwells here in his sacraments and in his Word. He can be found in his body, the Church, when we come together to worship here. That Church, God's holy people exists to glorify him and to lead others to a merciful encounter with God.

You may well be asking, "What is a Door of Mercy for?" Each day we pass through many doors: in our homes, our automobiles, our places of work and recreation. Most of the time we are simply passing through, in and out, without even thinking about the door. A Holy Door is different. Rather than just simply passing through this door, it exists to help us "pass over," to experience the grace of conversion, a significant change in the direction of our lives. During this Holy Year of Mercy God invites us not simply to pass through a door, but to "pass-over" from sin to mercy, from darkness to light, from isolation to communion with God and his Church. When we "pass-over" this threshold, we encounter Jesus Christ who is the merciful face of the Father. Just as when we turn the door knob in order to enter the door of a house or a room, when we enter the Holy Door it is Christ's hand that we take, he leads us. It is his voice we hear, inviting us to be "Merciful like the Father."

With our action of opening the door we begin this Jubilee Year. Pope Francis has given us a gift in this Jubilee Year of Mercy, to remind us that our loving Father looks upon us with mercy each day. He sent Jesus among us to bring us that message and to help us to be instruments of mercy for others. As we gather on this Feast of the Immaculate Conception we pray, through the intercession of Mary, that she, whose acceptance of God's will for her, made it possible for us to see Jesus, "the face of the Father's mercy", may show us the way to receive mercy and to live it.