



Archdiocese of Winnipeg

Office of the Archbishop

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ of the Archdiocese of Winnipeg:

It is with great joy that we welcome the Holy Year of Mercy, recently announced by Pope Francis. We have just completed a wonderful Anniversary Year in the Archdiocese of Winnipeg, a year in which we gave thanks for the 100 years of faith present in our community and a year where we re-dedicated ourselves to *Proclaiming Christ Always* in our cities, towns, schools and indigenous communities. The Holy Father has now given the Universal Church this gift of a Jubilee Year of Mercy. For us in the Archdiocese of Winnipeg it is a privileged moment to grow in faith together, to move forward from our Centennial Year and to deepen our conversion to Christ so that our Proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will be given new strength and dedication.

Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, invites the People of God to open their hearts so as to experience the closeness of the Father to each of us. He invites us to wake up to the tenderness and mercy of God which is “almost tangible” in our lives, and by so doing our faith will be strengthened. Inspired by the many stories of the mercy of God found in the Gospel of Luke, we are asked to live our lives this year, in the light of Scripture where Jesus says: “*Be merciful even as the Father is merciful*” (Luke 6:36). The Holy Year of Mercy begins on the eve of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 2015, and concludes on the Solemnity of Christ the King of the Universe, November 20, 2016. Beginning with our Lady’s Feast, we have the example of Mary’s own experience of mercy. In the Magnificat she proclaims that God *looks with favor on his lowly servant* and has *mercy on those who fear him in every generation* (Luke 1: 46-55). And concluding with the Solemnity of Christ the King, we see in Jesus the very living face of the Father of Mercy.

Pope Francis has emphasized three areas of pastoral focus for the Universal Church during this Holy Year of Mercy. I have outlined each of these with examples of actions for individuals and communities.

Sacrament of Reconciliation

Both in the announcement of the Holy Year of Mercy and in his many homilies, Pope Francis places a special emphasis on the Sacrament of Reconciliation during this Jubilee Year. He reminds us that through the confession of our sins within the context of this Sacrament of spiritual healing, we draw near to the Father with trust to have the certainty of forgiveness. To open our hearts to the mercy of the Father, we must not neglect to emphasize this important Sacrament which reveals the richness of God’s mercy to all who approach him with a sincere heart. Indeed, the very desire to confess our sins, the transformation of the heart itself, is a grace from God and is not something that we do through our own efforts alone.

In announcing the Holy Year of Mercy, Pope Francis uses two Scriptural motifs to explain the mercy of God in the lives of sinners. In the story of the sinful woman in the house of the Pharisee, we witness the great love of this woman for Jesus as she wipes his feet with her hair (Lk 7:36-50). Yet, this self-abasement was precipitated by her experience of Jesus' mercy towards her when she came to him with a truly repentant heart. She knows that God not only forgives but he forgets her sins and she is welcomed home. She deeply experiences the true freedom of forgiveness and approaches Jesus with much gratitude and love. A new life has now begun for her. The Pharisee on the other hand, is incapable of coming to Jesus with a repentant heart. He only shows a formal hospitality to Jesus by inviting him to lunch. He does not experience God's forgiveness in his life nor does he show gratitude or love. Nothing changes for him, there is no new beginning,

The 2nd scriptural motif is the Story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:17-24). Here we see how God's love precedes our sins, just as the father waits in love for his son to return. He accepts the boy back home unconditionally and builds him up again into the true dignity of a son. God's mercy is waiting for us regardless of who we are and what we have done. He wants us, through the help of his grace, to begin again with the dignity of his sons and daughters. The message is clear: we must never tire of asking for God's mercy, for God's mercy is shown in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. It never ends and this is what gives us Hope!

The Sacrament of Reconciliation allows us, in a tangible way, to experience God's mercy towards us as his children. We can often see ourselves within the context of these two great Biblical stories.

Pope Francis has also made the Sacrament of Confession a means of working towards unity between Rome and the St. Pius X Society. Although this community, which was founded by Archbishop Lefebvre, is not in union with the Holy Father, Pope Francis has established that those who go to a priest of the St. Pius X Society for the Sacrament of Confession, during this Jubilee Year of Mercy, shall validly and licitly receive absolution of their sins.

Actions of Mercy

- 1) Each of us is challenged to begin anew or perhaps for the first time in our lives, the regular practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation throughout the year. Each good Sacramental Confession is a moment of conversion to Christ and a way to encourage us to be merciful towards others.
- 2) Pastors are to re-dedicate themselves to explaining this Sacrament throughout this year and to examine creatively how to make it available more readily for the people of God within the modern context in which we live.
- 3) There will also be a need to explain the meaning and importance of the Sacrament of the Sick and to explore ways whereby this Sacrament maybe celebrated within our communities.
- 4) For the Holy Season of Lent, we as an archdiocese, will be called upon to explore creative ways to live out the discipline of Lent together, as a community of faith; ways which will emphasize the healing nature of the Church – a reflection of the Father's mercy.

The Jubilee Indulgence and the Holy Door

In the past year our Centennial celebration incorporated the special blessing of a Jubilee Indulgence under certain spiritual conditions. The Holy Year of Mercy, instituted throughout the Universal Church, contains an even greater Grace, namely the Plenary Indulgence which only the Holy Father can grant. Put simply, a Plenary Indulgence remits all temporal punishment due our sins after our sins have been forgiven. When we sin in a serious way, there remains lingering effects of our sins both on ourselves and on others including an attachment to the things of this world over our attachment to the Kingdom. If we do not atone in some way for these effects due to our sins in this life, then we will in Purgatory. Through our lived faith in Christ, our prayers, the Eucharist, our good works and sacrifices, we make atonement for these effects of our sins we call temporal punishments. A Plenary Indulgence, which can be received once per day, is a special Grace given to the Church, which allows for the removal of this temporal punishment due our sins. The Plenary Indulgence can also be applied to the Souls in Purgatory, through our prayers, as they are joined to us through Baptism and we can offer our prayers and spiritual works for their benefit.

During this Holy Year of Mercy, it is Pope Francis' desire that all members of the People of God, experience the Grace of this Holy Year through the Plenary Indulgence. It is important to remember that we receive the Plenary Indulgence while being in a state of grace ourselves. This is accomplished by having made a good confession of our sins and receiving Holy Communion on or close to the date of our desire to receive the indulgence. During this Holy Year, the grace of the Plenary Indulgence is attached to making pilgrimages through the Holy Doors during the Jubilee of Mercy. In doing so we are required to make a Profession of Faith, pray for the intentions of the Holy Father and for the intentions that he bears for the good of the Church and the whole world and recite an Our Father and Hail Mary.

In the Archdiocese of Winnipeg, St. Mary's Cathedral will feature a Holy Door of Mercy as will dedicated parish churches in each of the three rural deaneries. The Holy Doors are to be blessed and inaugurated on the Third Sunday of Advent this year. The Plenary Indulgence is also attached to three shrines in the city of Winnipeg.

We have many First Nation communities within the archdiocese. To make the Jubilee Year of Mercy as accessible as possible, each pastor doing First Nations Ministry is to find the best way possible for their people to avail themselves of the Holy Year Indulgence. It might mean in some communities that the church building located on the reserves be dedicated in this way.

The Holy Father has stressed that for the sick and the elderly who are shut-ins, they too can live the Jubilee of Mercy by offering up their sicknesses and sufferings in union with Jesus for the good of others. The reception of Holy Communion or participating in communal prayer with others along with the required prayers for the Plenary Indulgence are means of participating in this Grace. Each chapel in our Catholic Health Institutions may also be dedicated as if it were a Holy Door.

For those in prison, a way too is provided to participate in this Holy Year of Mercy. Each prison chapel is dedicated as a Holy Door with the same conditions for the Plenary Indulgence. Indeed, Pope Francis stresses, that among many prisoners, a deep realization of their sins has become evident and a sincere desire to re-enter society is the hope of many hearts. With a deep openness to the Father of Mercy, inmates may direct their thoughts and prayers to the Father each time they cross the doorway into their cells as a ways of spiritually entering the Holy Door during this Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Actions of Mercy

- 1) Pastors are to encourage their people to seek holiness this year and to participate in the spiritual practices of the Holy year such as pilgrimages and the desire for the grace of the Jubilee Indulgence.
- 2) Parishioners are encouraged to make pilgrimages to the various Doors of Mercy mandated in the Archdiocese of Winnipeg: St. Mary's Cathedral, Notre Dame Parish in Selkirk, St. Augustine's Parish in Brandon and St. Viator's Parish in Dauphin.
- 3) Parishioners are also encouraged to visit the following Shrines in the City of Winnipeg: St. Gianna Beretta Molla Parish and Shrine, Blessed Bishop Velychkovsky Martry's Shrine at St. Joseph's Ukrainian Catholic Church and the Shrine of the Divine Mercy at St. Andrew Bobola Parish in St. Boniface.
- 4) The reading and study of *Misericordiae Vultus* (The Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy), found at www.im.va is to be encouraged within communities so as to understand the theology and pastoral approach of the Holy Father

Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy

The Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy, often forgotten by Catholics today, are important practical actions that we can undertake for others in need. Through these actions, which are a means by which we can be Christ to others, the Father's Mercy and love can be made tangible. To live and practice these Spiritual or Corporal works means nothing less than living a merciful life; "*Be merciful as your Father in Heaven is merciful.*" I would draw your attention to the Holy Year of Mercy pamphlet which explains the Spiritual and Corporate Works of Mercy These have been made available to each parishioner through the parishes. There is great creative energy in each of our parish communities as well as in our Catholic Schools and College that can be applied to these works of mercy. I encourage discernment at the local level as to how these works can be applied in whole or in part. Attention should be paid to their practical application as well as to the capacity of each community. Each of us must strive to live a merciful life ourselves and in our families, by paying heed to these special works of mercy. Pope Francis has decreed that the Plenary Indulgence also be attached to these Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy when done in the state of grace with the usual spiritual conditions.

Actions of Mercy

- 1) Pastors are encouraged to make the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy known in their parish communities so that discussion, discernment and practical action can take place according to the capacity of each community.
- 2) During this Year of Mercy, a link with our Centennial theme of *Proclaiming Christ Always* should be made relative to reaching out to those who have fallen away from the practice of their faith. God's mercy provides hope to those who may be experiencing alienation from the Church. The ongoing work of reconciliation with indigenous peoples must continue.
- 3) School principals are to encourage a pedagogy of the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy in their schools and to encourage practical applications of these principles for their students.
- 4) Permanent Deacons are encouraged to discern ways by which their Diaconal Ministry can best be explained within the local church and how the Jubilee of Mercy has a particular connection to the Permanent Diaconate.
- 5) The Divine Mercy devotion should be encouraged in our communities during this Holy Year.
- 6) During this Holy Year of Mercy, the Holy Father is encouraging us to re-ignite our sensitivity towards the sanctity of human life, particularly as it applies to abortion, physician assisted suicide and euthanasia. We have, as a society, become complacent in this matter. The Holy Year of Mercy is an opportune time to re-dedicate our prayers and our actions on behalf of the sanctity of human life and to move from indifference to caring and having mercy for the weakest among us. I would encourage support of pro-life ministry within the archdiocese such as raising awareness of these issues, participating in the Walk for Life in the spring and the National Week for Life and the Family.
- 7) A reading and study of the Gospel of Luke would be very appropriate during this Holy Year of Mercy as it focuses on the love of Christ for the poor.

Conclusion

The Holy Year of Mercy begins, as has been stated, on December 8, 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. This also marks the 50th Anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. This great Ecumenical Council was an event of immense historical and pastoral importance. We continue to live in its light and be inspired by its wisdom today. The Council was a movement of the Holy Spirit bringing new life into the Church; it was a time of going back to the roots of our faith, *ressourcement*, and a time of bringing the Church up to date, *aggiornamento*. But it was also a time for reconsidering the mercy of God. At the opening of the Second Vatican Council, St. Pope John XXIII stated: "*Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity....The Catholic Church, as she holds high the torch of Catholic truth at this Ecumenical Council, wants to show herself a loving mother to all, patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness towards her separated children*" (Gaudet Mater Ecclesia, 1962).

Pope Francis has taken up this theme of mercy and compassion in his plans for the Holy Year of Mercy. He often compares the Church to a "*Field Hospital*" where, even though resources and personnel are often lacking and the wounded seem endless, the Church continues to bring a message of hope, healing and practical action to help those in need. All of the Actions of Mercy I have suggested above, and all those initiatives which will be brought forward during the Holy Year of Mercy within the archdiocese, must in some way connect with the idea of bringing healing to our lives and the lives of others.

Mercy is the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely in the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life." (Misericordiae Vultus #2).

May God Bless and keep all of you during this Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard Gagnon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

✦Richard Gagnon
Archbishop of Winnipeg