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Mercy – Reawakening us for New Life: Mary Reynolds rsm

The Call to new life is a clarion call to hope. As we conclude the Year of Consecrated Life, we are encouraged *to embrace the future with hope* and as we embark on the Jubilee Year of Mercy Pope Francis proclaims: *Mercy is the force that reawakens us for new life and instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope.*

In dedicating 2015 as the year of Consecrated Life, Francis expressed three aims:
To remember the past with gratitude,
To live the present passionately,
To embrace the future with hope

Within this context, he invited all who witness the good news of God's love and compassion to 'Wake up the World'.

Remembering the past with gratitude is a good place to start- why? Because it helps us to recall as the chosen people of old did that *'the Lord your God cared for you all along the way, as you travelled through the wilderness, just as a father cares for his child. Now he has brought you to this place'* (Deut. 1:31)

On first glance, *'this place'* may not be exactly where we might have hoped to arrive. The dwindling numbers and ageing profile of religious are facts well known to us, not to mention our dented confidence in our relevance and influence in society. In short, one might say that rather than finding ourselves in the *'promised land'*, we are more likely to experience where we are as a place and time of crisis so why should we recall this story with gratitude. [Timothy Radcliffe OP](#) reminds us that it is exactly in and through crisis that we are renewed. The story of salvation is peppered with events such as the fall, the flood, the exile, the destruction of the temple. The most terrifying crisis of the passion and death of Christ is at the very heart of our hope.

There are few who would deny that our church and indeed our society too is in crisis at many levels. It is therefore salutary for us to remember the role Religious Life played in Church and society at several times of crisis. The desert fathers and mothers were the ones who challenged a church, adopting the extravagant ways and life styles of the lords and kings and slipping into compromise to remember their obligations to the poor. St. Benedict responded to the crisis at the end of the Latin Roman Empire when Catholic civilisation seemed finished, the mendicant friars brought to birth a new charism in the Church of the 13th century that responded to the new needs of the cities; the divisions and confusion that followed on the

Reformation and the individualism that marked the Renaissance were responded to by the Jesuits and the Ursulines. The aftermath of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution saw a spotlight shone on the great divide between the rich and poor; the suffering and exclusion of the masses gave rise to the apostolic congregations of which most of us are members.

Recalling that crisis leads to rebirth is a cause for gratitude but it calls us to ask: 'What is trying to be born?' What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from the heart of Religious Life today?

John Philip Newell in his recently published book [Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings, the Rebirthing of God](#) states '*The walls of Western Christianity are collapsing. In many parts of the West the collapse can be described as seismic. There are three main responses or reactions to the collapse. The first is to deny that it is happening, the second is to frantically try to shore up the foundations of the old thing, and the third is to ask what is trying to be born. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?*

I suggest that the new energy struggling to be born is **compassion**. Our world is hurting, our Church is hurting, our society with its myriad scars and abuses is hurting and all long for healing and renewed life. How can we hear with a deepened receptivity and proclaim with a new conviction '*I have come that they may have life and have it to the full*'.

[Brother Philip Pinto](#), recent Congregational Leader of The Christian Brothers asks: *What do I notice happening in the world that is changing the way I live my life?* I would like to change that question slightly: *What do I notice happening in the world that is changing attitudes and perceptions of the Christian message?* I believe that both the example and the teachings of Pope Francis, who gives greater priority to the work of compassion than to the defence of doctrine, are making a major contribution to this change; that they are a key to the rebirth we desire, and that they give us good reason to embrace the future with hope. Now more than two years after his papacy began, Francis, the pontiff with the common touch and the tolerant embrace is an inspiration to both the spiritual and secular worlds, a global celebrity to those who admire his warmth and a champion to those who share his concerns about climate change, social justice, poverty and more.

It is for this reason that I would like to concentrate on the call of Pope Francis to embrace the Future with Hope. I believe that he has not only called us to this but that in this proclamation of the **Jubilee Year of Mercy** he has actually provided us with the roadmap.

Pope Francis' Bull of Indiction or announcement of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy has 5 Movements.

In the **first movement**, we are invited to ponder the great mystery of Mercy and to enter into it in this very special year.

In the **second movement**, invites us to centre ourselves in the God of Mercy.

The **third movement** calls the church, as the universal sacrament of salvation, to take up the mission of mercy and compassion entrusted to it by Christ.

The **fourth movement** sets out the practical ways in which we can live a life of Mercy and compassion.

The **fifth movement** holds out to us models to inspire us in our lives of Mercy

First movement

Francis himself learned that recognising our own need for Mercy is an absolutely necessary step before we can dare to be compassionate as the Father is.

When asked by a journalist, who is Jorge Bergoglio, he replied *I am a sinner: I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.*” And he repeated: *“I am the one who is looked upon by the Lord. I always felt my motto, Miserando atque Eligendo [By Having Mercy and by choosing Him], was very true for me.”*

What he is referring to here is the Call of Matthew, as recounted in the Gospel and captured in art by Caravaggio. The calling of Matthew is presented within the context of mercy. Passing by the tax collector’s booth, Jesus looked intently at Matthew. It was a look full of mercy that forgave the sins of that man, a sinner and a tax collector, whom Jesus chose – against the hesitation of the disciples – to become one of the Twelve

So Francis continues: *‘that finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze.’* According to many, including Paul Vallely who wrote about Francis’ life in *Untying the Knots*, Francis does have a huge understanding of his need for the Mercy of God. Part of the reason is because of how as a Provincial he handled the Dirty War situation in Argentina that led to the arrest of two fellow Jesuit priests, who were subsequently imprisoned and tortured. Vallely accepts that the two Jesuit priests were placed in jeopardy by their then superior's decision to withdraw from them the protection of the Jesuit order as part of a row over the way that the gospels should be taught.

The time Francis spent in Germany, having been sent there by his Superior after his time as Provincial, afforded him a graced moment of insight and the mercy of God in his regard.

When asked in the conclave if he accepted the vote to become pope, he replied not with the traditional *‘Accepto’* but the words: *‘I am a great sinner, trusting in the mercy and patience of God in suffering, I accept’.*

So the first invitation is to constantly contemplate the mystery of Mercy and to recognise our own need for Mercy. Francis, almost in a litany of praise leads us into the heart of the mystery, calling it a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace and proclaiming that our salvation depends on it.

Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity.

Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us.

Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life.

Mercy: the bridge that connects God and humankind, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

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.

The Door of Mercy

Symbol can be a powerful support in helping us to move deeper into mystery and so the symbol of the Door of Mercy is very powerful. The Holy Door was opened at St. Peter's in Rome on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. On that day, the Holy Door became a '*Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instills hope*'. This privilege was extended to churches and shrines around the world, including Mercy International Centre, so that grace-filled moments would be available to many, as people discover a path to conversion.

In passing, let us note the strong symbolism of crossing over or crossing a threshold in Bible stories. The first explicit crossing was when Abram crossed over the Euphrates River into Canaan to accept God's gift of the Promised Land. Moses crossed over the Red Sea, ending the enslavement of the Israelites and Joshua crossed the Jordan to reclaim the land.

Even the choice of the date of 8 December for the commencement of the Jubilee Year was significant because of its rich meaning in the recent history of the Church. In fact, the Holy Door was opened on the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive. Now, fifty years on, we are invited again into lands of new awareness and hope, bringing with us the wisdom distilled from our lived experience.

We could indeed make the following words of the invitation our prayer:

With these sentiments of gratitude for everything we have received, and with a sense of responsibility for the task that lies ahead, we shall cross the threshold of the Holy Door fully confident that the strength of the Risen Lord, who constantly supports us on our pilgrim way, will sustain us. May the Holy Spirit, who guides the steps of

believers in cooperating with the work of salvation wrought by Christ, lead the way and support us so that we may contemplate the face of mercy.

Second Movement:

The second movement invites us to **centre ourselves in the God of Mercy**. Pope Francis chooses 3 paths to lead us into this centering.

- Experience God as **Patient and merciful**.
- Recognize that the God of Mercy is our constant companion in every event of life.
- Ponder the wonderful revelation of Divine Love in its fullness as expressed in the very core Jesus' Mission

God as Patient and Merciful

The God of Mercy is a God that meets us in our poverty rather than our plenty, a God who finds easier access in our vulnerability than in our strength. In a special way the Psalms bring to this the fore *'He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy' (Ps 103:3-4).*

This merciful God brings freedom to the captives as another psalm, in an even more explicit way, attests *'He executes justice for the oppressed; he gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. (Ps 146:7-8)*

In Psalm 147 the Psalmist proclaims: *'He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds ...The Lord lifts up the downtrodden, he casts the wicket to the ground.'*

In short, the mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a 'visceral' love or as the Hebrew word *'rachamin'* captures it – the womb love of God. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, expresses itself like the love of a mother for her child, it is full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy.

2. In the second path to centering ourselves in the God of Mercy, we are called to recognize that the God of Mercy is our constant companion in every event of life and at all times.

'For his mercy endures forever': This is the refrain that repeats after each verse in Psalm 136 as it narrates the history of God's revelation. Mercy renders God's history with Israel a history of salvation. To repeat continually 'for his mercy endures forever', as the psalm does, seems to break through the dimensions of space and time, inserting everything into the eternal mystery of love.

The challenge for us is to take up the refrain in our daily lives by praying these words of praise: 'for his mercy endures forever'.

How might we adopt this psalm to God's merciful action in our lives?

When we were faced with our own diminishment and loss of influence- 'His mercy endures forever'

When public scrutiny finds us wanting.

'His mercy endures forever'

When we wander through the wilderness of confusion and uncertainty.

'His mercy endures forever'

Thomas Merton captures this sentiment in one of his wonderful prayers:

I will trust you always. Even though I may seem to be lost in the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are always with me and you will never leave me to face my peril alone.

Before his Passion, Jesus prayed with this psalm of mercy. While he was instituting the Eucharist as an everlasting memorial of himself and his paschal sacrifice, he symbolically placed this supreme act of revelation in the light of God's mercy. Within the very same context of mercy, Jesus entered upon his passion and death, conscious of the great mystery of love that he would consummate on the Cross.

3. The third pathway into our centering in the God of Mercy is to ponder the wonderful revelation of Divine Love in its fullness as expressed in the very core of Jesus' Mission.

The signs Jesus worked, especially in favour of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion.

- Jesus, seeing the crowds of people who followed him, realized that they were tired and exhausted, lost and without a guide, and he felt deep compassion for them (cf. *Mt 9:36*). On the basis of this compassionate love he healed the sick who were presented to him (cf. *Mt 14:14*), and with just a few loaves of bread and fish he satisfied the hunger of the enormous crowd (cf. *Mt 15:37*).

What moved Jesus in all situations was nothing other than mercy, with which he read the hearts of those he encountered and responded to their deepest need:

- When he came upon the widow of Nain taking her son out for burial, he felt great compassion for the immense suffering of this grieving mother, and he gave back her son by raising him from the dead (cf. *Lk 7:15*).
- After freeing the demoniac in the country of the Gerasenes, Jesus entrusted him with this mission: '*Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you*'. (*Mk 5:19*).

In the parables devoted to mercy, Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy. We know these parables well, three in particular: the lost

sheep, the lost coin, and the father with two sons (cf. *Lk 15:1-32*). In these parables, God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he pardons. In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon.

In ways one is reminded of Francis himself, who prioritizes compassion over dogma much as Jesus promised compassion over law.

3rd Movement:

The third movement calls the church, as the universal sacrament of salvation, to take up the mission of mercy and compassion entrusted to it by Christ. The call is captured in the motto of the Jubilee Year itself - the command to show Mercy as Mercy is shown to us- through offering forgiveness and by being the witnesses and channels of Mercy to all without exception.

This theme is introduced to us by reference to Peter's question about how many times it is necessary to forgive, Jesus says: 'I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven times' (*Mt 18:22*). He then goes on to tell the parable of the 'ruthless servant', who, called by his master to return a huge amount, begs him on his knees for mercy. His master cancels his debt. But he then meets a fellow servant who owes him a few cents and he too begs on his knees for mercy, but the first servant refuses his request and throws him into jail. When the master hears of the matter, he becomes infuriated and, summoning the first servant back to him, says, '*Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?*' (*Mt 18:33*). Jesus concludes: '*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart*' (*Mt 18:35*).

This parable contains a profound teaching for all of us - to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us, it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves

Pope Francis then reminds us that Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life and of our lives as public witnesses to the love and compassion of God.

The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. He makes what may seem a strange statement: '*Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy*'. He goes on to point out that the temptation, on the one hand, to focus exclusively on justice made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step. But the Church needs to go beyond and strive for a higher and more important goal i.e. Mercy.

Then he speaks of the practice of mercy waning in the wider culture. Sadly, he says that in some cases the word seems to have dropped out of use. But he cautions that without a witness to mercy, life becomes fruitless and sterile, as if sequestered in a

barren desert. He quotes John Paul II in his second Encyclical, [*Dives in Misericordia*](#), who highlighted the fact that we had forgotten the theme of mercy in today's cultural milieu: *'The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of Mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of 'mercy' seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it (cf. Gen 1:28). This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy...*

In the context of these two realities Pope Francis says: *'The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters'*. He appeals to those with leadership roles in the church *'to bring the healing power of God's grace to everyone in need, to stay close to the marginalized and to be shepherds living with the smell of the sheep.*

He then reminds us that the Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, to everyone without exception – He says *'the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them.'* He says *'that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity'*. He sees the church as a field hospital after battle healing the wounds. Wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.

Fourth Movement

The fourth movement sets out the practical ways in which we can live a life of Mercy and compassion.

We are called above all to be a credible witness to mercy, professing it and living it; what Francis often refers to as **mercy-ing**.

Among the practices suggested are meditation, pilgrimage as a symbol of conversion that encompasses living non judgmentally, forgiving and giving outreach especially to those on the margins of society, renewed commitment to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, a particular focus on those who are entrapped in new forms of slavery, a return to the sacrament of reconciliation and to the 'fast' of Lent as presented by Isaiah and a mercy that extends beyond the boundaries of Christianity

Pope Francis, then in a very practical way outlines essential elements of this conversion to which we are called:

1. Meditation on the Word of God – silence, contemplation

Speaking of meditation he says: *We want to live this Jubilee Year in light of the Lord's words: Merciful like the Father. The Evangelist reminds us of the teaching of Jesus who says, 'Be merciful just as your Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36). It is a programme of life as demanding as it is rich with joy and peace. Jesus' command is directed to anyone willing to listen to his voice (cf. Lk 6:27). In order to be capable of mercy, therefore, we must first of all dispose ourselves to listen to the Word of God. This means rediscovering the value of silence in order to meditate on the Word that comes to us. In this way, it will be possible to contemplate God's mercy and adopt it as our lifestyle.*

2. The practice of *pilgrimage* - symbol of conversion

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 pilgrim travelling along the road, making his/her way to the desired destination. Crossing the threshold of the Holy Door or the Door of Mercy symbolically represents the pilgrimage journey and the conversion to which it calls us. The Pope's own prayerful wish captures this wonderfully: *'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'.*

Elements of conversion

Judge not

The God of Mercy asks us above all not to judge and not to condemn:

'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).

Human beings, whenever they judge, look no farther than the surface, whereas the Father looks into the very depths of the soul. The Pope himself has given us a supreme witness to this. He has, for example, caused more than raised eyebrows by his endless exhortations to embrace - and not to judge - people such as the divorced and remarried, gays and lesbians, and those who, in good conscience, practice contraception. The human race is extraordinarily diverse in so many ways: gender,

ethnicity, race, class, religion, nationality, sexuality, philosophy, and lifestyle. The areas in which we differ are endless. But judgmental attitudes and discrimination on the basis of difference are the enemies of true peace and respectful, compassionate relationships. The psychiatrist and writer [Eric Berne](#) captured the disempowerment of a focus on difference: *'The moment a little boy is concerned with which is a jay and which is a sparrow, he can no longer see the birds or hear them sing.'*

Forgive and Give

But not judging 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.

The practice of mercy requires that we forgive those who have hurt us, even in terrible ways. 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 and mercifully. Let us therefore heed the apostle's exhortation and a maxim very dear to the heart of Catherine McAuley: *'Do not let the sun go down on your anger'* (Eph 4:26).

Without mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation, there can be no healing, for either the victim or perpetrator. By refusing to show mercy and pardon to those who have attacked or abused us, we - whether a nation, an institution, a particular group or a single individual - can too easily end up clinging to our wounds with pride and a false sense of righteousness. The only way to heal these wrongdoings is by letting go of them.

Among those who learned the secret of letting go of anger, wrath and revenge as a necessary condition for happiness was [Nelson Mandela](#). He learned, during his 27 years in prison, that unless we forgive and let go of bitterness we voluntarily waste our lives lost in the past. After he was freed he invited the man who was his jailer on Robben Island to be a VIP at his inauguration. Percy Yutar, who wanted him to be put to death, was invited to a special lunch and they later became friends. That is how a man who began as an angry young terrorist matured into a great world leader. It was his capacity to forgive that made him so.

Outreach to those on the fringes of society

In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates. How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today! How many are the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich! During this Jubilee, we will be called even more to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the

oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care. Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! The Pope prays: *'May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference.'*

Among those that Pope Francis has particularly highlighted on the fringes are migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East and even though there is opposition to his plea, he continues to demand that Europe and North America throw open their doors to them. That includes us!

The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

Let us listen to the passionate call of Pope Francis to embrace and undertake the Corporal and Spiritual works 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. 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'.

We know that this is the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt 25:31-45*). Moreover, we will be asked

- if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness;
- if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty;
- if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted;
- if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence;
- if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer.

In each of these 'little ones, the least of his brothers and sisters' Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled... to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us. Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: *'as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love.*

Bringing good tidings to the afflicted and enslaved

A special concern of Pope Francis is what he often refers to as new forms of slavery – among them being the trafficking of people, especially of women and children. Introducing this concern he refers to the writings of Luke who tells us that Jesus, on the Sabbath, went back to Nazareth and, as was his custom, entered the synagogue. They called upon him to read the Scripture and to comment on it. The passage was from the Book of Isaiah where it is written: *'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to those in captivity; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Is 61:1-2)*

The Pope emphasizes the proclamation of the *'year of the Lord's favour'* or the year of the Lord's **mercy**. *'This Jubilee Year of Mercy will bring to the fore the richness of Jesus' mission echoed in the words of the prophet: to bring a word and gesture of consolation to the poor, to proclaim liberty to those bound by new forms of slavery in modern society, to restore sight to those who can see no more because they are caught up in themselves, to restore dignity to all those from whom it has been robbed'.*

Of special concern to the Pope are those in captivity who face lifelong prison sentences and particularly those condemned to capital punishment. He insists that prisons and other correctional facilities should be transformed into centres of rehabilitation instead of those that merely impose punishment.

Sacrament of Reconciliation and the 'fast 'of Lent

The Pope draws special attention to the season of Lent during this Jubilee Year and reminds us that it should be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy. He quotes the prophet Micah and encourages us to make them our own: *'You, O Lord, are a God who takes away iniquity and pardons sin, which does not hold your anger forever, but are pleased to show mercy. You, Lord, will return to us and have pity on your people. You will trample down our sins and toss them into the depths of the sea' (cf. 7:18-19).*

He also recommends the pages of the prophet Isaiah and advises that they can also be meditated upon concretely during this season of prayer, fasting, and works of charity: *'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own*

flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, here I am. If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make you strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not' (58:6-11).

The initiative of "24 Hours for the Lord," to be celebrated on the Friday and Saturday preceding the Fourth Week of Lent, is a special time for the celebration of the sacrament the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The Pope reminds us that this is the opportune moment to change our lives! Whatever it is that imprisons us, the God of Mercy, wants to free. The most difficult prison we impose upon ourselves through our own blindness – the blindness of not wanting to change, the imprisonment of not wanting to be disturbed.

The poet W. H. Auden, writing in 1948, when the world was still recovering from the catastrophe of world war 11, observed

We would rather be ruined than changed.

We would rather die in our dread

Than climb the cross of the moment

And let our illusions die

Social Sin

Pope Francis speaks not only of personal sin but of our part in social sin as well. He speaks of social sin being so widespread in our world today and says – *'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'.*

- One of the wrongdoings he highlights is what he calls *'the economy that kills'* and he urges us not to collude with it and to work for major reforms in this regard including the application of greater regulations on free markets. One such comment that illustrates this exhortation is *'Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.*
- In his encyclical [Laudato Si'](#) he clearly holds that the cause of climate change is closely linked with irresponsible human activity and he calls us to take responsibility for earth's ecology as God's creation and for the care of our common home.

A Jubilee also entails the granting of *indulgences*. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God forgives our sins, which he truly blots out; and yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act. But the mercy of God is stronger even than this. It becomes *indulgence* on the part of the Father who, through his Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.

Pope Francis prays: *Let us live this Jubilee intensely, begging the Father to forgive our sins and to bathe us in his merciful 'indulgence'.*

Islam & Jews

A magnanimous wish of Francis for the Jubilee Year of Mercy is that the year will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God and he prays that *'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'.*

It is especially noteworthy that in those troubled times for our Jewish and Islamic brethren, Pope Francis asks us to give them a special inclusion in the Jubilee of Mercy. He believes that the Roman church has no choice but to engage in dialogue with Christians who reject certain of its dogmas, with people of other faiths who don't believe in Jesus Christ, with those who do not believe in God, and even with those who are the church's sworn enemies. He says: *'There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. Israel was the first to receive this revelation which continues in history as the source of an inexhaustible richness meant to be shared with all mankind. As we have seen, the pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy, because they narrate the works that the Lord performed in favour of his people at the most trying moments of their history'. Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are 'Merciful and Kind'. This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe that no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open'.*

His wish is that that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions and with other noble religious traditions and that it will open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; that it will eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination.

5th Movement

In this final movement the Pope recommends us to draw inspiration from Mary the Mother of Mercy and from holy men and women who devoted their lives to the service of Mercy

Mary, Mother of Mercy

He prays *'that the sweetness of Mary's countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness'*.

Mary treasured divine mercy in her heart. Her hymn of praise, sung at the threshold of the home of Elizabeth, was dedicated to the mercy of God which extends from "generation to generation" (Lk 1:50).

He encourages us to address her in the words of the *Salve Regina*, a prayer ever ancient and ever new, so that she may never tire of turning her merciful eyes upon us, and make us worthy to contemplate the face of mercy, her Son Jesus.

Saints who made Mercy their mission

Our prayer also extends to the saints and blessed ones who made divine mercy their mission in life. The Pope particularly names the great apostle of mercy, Saint Faustina Kowalska. We may like to think of our own foundress in this regard and I know that Catherine McAuley will hold a special place for many of us. May she, who was called to enter the depths of divine mercy, intercede for us and obtain for us the grace of living and walking always according to the mercy of God and with an unwavering trust in his love.

Conclusion

What better way to end than in the words of Pope Francis himself: *'In this Jubilee Year, let us allow God to surprise us. He never tires of casting open the doors of his heart and of repeating that he loves us and wants to share his love with us.'*

From the heart of the Trinity, from the depths of the mystery of God, the great river of mercy wells up and overflows unceasingly. It is a spring that will never run dry, no matter how many people draw from it. Every time someone is in need, he or she can approach it, because the mercy of God never ends. The profundity of the mystery surrounding it is as inexhaustible as the richness which springs up from it. May we never tire of extending mercy, and be ever patient in offering compassion and comfort'.

Presentation given by Mary Reynolds rsm, Executive Director of Mercy International Association (MIA) on 30 January 2016 in her home diocese, linking the end of the Year of Consecrated Life with the Year of Mercy. E: director@mercyinternational.ie
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