



God's Mercy Runs to Meet Us

Pastoral Letter

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A. Introduction: Merciful like the Father

Jesus is the face of the Father's mercy and love. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus taught that God's ways toward sinners and the "lost" were different from the harsh ways of the Pharisees and other leaders at the time. Jesus' acts of compassion and his teachings of the Father's mercy are the "beating heart of the Gospel."¹

At the beginning of his fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke, the evangelist writes that the Pharisees are complaining that Jesus is a friend of sinners and is eating with them. Jesus responds to their gripes by sharing three stories — the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and then the lost (or prodigal) son. When what was lost is found, Jesus tells us that God and all of heaven rejoices.²

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the longest of the three narratives and in it we see a clear difference between the ways of the Father and of the world. The father in the parable has two sons. The younger son has decided that he wants to make his life without his father, and so he demands his inheritance as if his father were already dead. This is a metaphor for sin, which is when we try to live our life without God. We take all the gifts God has given us, and we resolve to use them for our own benefit and enjoyment without much thought about others' needs.

The younger son is looking for freedom; but the drama of the young man is that the more he distances himself from the father, the more his situation deteriorates. Like every human being, he longed for happiness but he settled for fun. He eventually runs out of money and begins to feel the humiliation of his circumstances. Without resources or real friends, he has been reduced to taking care of pigs. His situation was deplorable, as he had to beg for food while he was feeding the pigs, unclean animals in the Jewish religion. He eventually comes to his senses and longs to be back at his father's farm. He knows he is unworthy to be treated as a son, but would gladly work as a farm hand. He sets out to return home, practicing his lines like a young man waiting to go to confession.

Then comes the most beautiful part of the parable. The father has been waiting and searching the horizon for his younger son, hoping some day to welcome him home. When he spies his boy far off, the father is filled with compassion and races to hug him. Our repentance often walks along slowly but **God's mercy runs to meet us**. The father receives his lost son with such special affection and in a very public way by embracing and kissing him. Before his son has a chance to offer explanations, excuses or promises, he is received as a son. The father exchanges the son's rags for fine clothes, puts sandals on his feet and a ring on his finger.³ He forgives him, rejoices, and resolves immediately to host a feast celebrating his son's return.

All of us need to know how much God loves us and wants to embrace and forgive us. In the parable, the father represents our God who is able not only to satisfy the son's hunger but also restore his dignity. The older son represents the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees who often place the law and harsh judgment above the demands of love. When he returns from the fields and inquires about the music and festivities, he learns that his father is celebrating his brother's return. He refuses to enter the house for the celebration. The father sees the prodigal son with love and compassion and rejoices because he was dead and has now returned to life. The reaction of the older son is anger; he is not capable of seeing anything but his brother's sin. He feels cheated, and complains that his father has never thrown a party for him and his friends despite his loyalty and faithfulness.

Just as the father goes out to embrace the prodigal son and bring him home, he also searches for the elder son to teach him to be merciful. The father loves and forgives both sons and wants them to live in peace and harmony. The father rejoices over the conversion of the younger son and hopes for the conversion of the older, hard-working, responsible son who finds it so difficult to pardon his brother. The father explains to his elder son that he has always been with him and that all that he has remains his inheritance, but that his brother was *lost* and his return is worth rejoicing. The father is unconcerned about his property and his honor. He is concerned only about his sons.

The parable defines very well the mercy of God and the mission of Jesus who has come to call sinners. A better name for the story would be the “Parable of the Merciful Father” because the main message is about the father’s forgiving love, not the younger son’s sin. It demonstrates the connection between repentance and joy — the joy of the repentant sinner who experiences God’s loving forgiveness and also the joy that God feels in our return.

In our lives as Jesus’ disciples, we also are called to two progressions illustrated by the parable. First, we are invited to “come to our senses” like the younger son if we have chosen to separate ourselves from the love of our Heavenly Father and take the steps toward being reconciled with God.

Second, during this Year of Mercy, we are also summoned to change the way we view other sinners and all those in need of mercy. Instead of seeing them like the older brother or the Pharisees did, we are invited to look at them with the eyes of the Merciful Father and to imitate God’s mercy in our outreach to them.

That is why Pope Francis has chosen the theme *Merciful Like the Father* for this Jubilee Year of Mercy.⁴ Sin, though tragic because it leads to a separation from God and others, is not the end of the story because repentance leads to new life. When we see sinners and all those who are “lost,” let us always try to lead them to this joyful path of reconciliation with the Father and the happy road to restoration within our family of faith.

This Pastoral Letter will explain how we can put into practice a life of mercy and forgiveness and the many opportunities during this Jubilee to grow in joy and become *Merciful Like the Father*.

B. The Jubilee of Mercy

In the past three decades, Pope Saint John Paul II, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have established holy years to emphasize particular important aspects of our Christian faith and life that they believe need to be better appreciated and practiced. Saint John Paul II inaugurated years that focused on our Redemption (1983), Mary (1987), Jesus Christ (1997), the Holy Spirit (1998), God the Father (1999), the Incarnation (2000), the Rosary (2002-2003), and the Eucharist (2004-2005). Pope Benedict then convoked holy years dedicated to Saint Paul (2008-2009), the Priesthood (2009-2010) and the Christian Faith (2012-2013). Pope Francis has announced the Year of Consecrated Life (2014-2016) and now the Jubilee Year of Mercy (2015-2016).

Jubilee years are a special type of holy year. When Jesus inaugurated his public ministry, he announced a Jubilee year of grace.⁵ During a Jubilee, slaves and indentured servants were to be set free, debts were to be forgiven, the fields should lay fallow and the mercy of God would be made manifest. Similarly, our Year of Mercy is also about the forgiveness of debts and a time to focus on the social teaching of the Church which, as Blessed Pope Paul VI stated so clearly, is a component of evangelization.

Pope Francis

Teaching the world about God’s mercy has been central to Pope Francis’ ministry throughout his life. He has often stated, “Mercy is the Lord’s most powerful message!”⁶ He wants all of our words and gestures to express God’s compassion, tenderness and forgiveness for all.

In the papal document announcing the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis describes the reason for his great convocation to the Holy Year by starting with the state of our world: “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.”⁷ What is striking about all of the

Jubilee and Sabbath laws in the Scriptures is the way in which worship and giving of offerings are intimately connected with acts of justice, compassion, and mercy.

Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis has expressed this connection in concrete ways: by visiting the sick and imprisoned, sheltering the homeless around the Vatican, and by calling the Church to go to the peripheries, where God's love and mercy are most needed. He has often surprised people with his profound gestures of love and mercy, such as when he washed the feet of the prisoners on Holy Thursday or when he kissed Vinicio Riva, whose face is severely disfigured due to a congenital disease.⁸

Tenderness is central to expressions of mercy and compassion. Pope Francis wrote in his announcement of the Jubilee that "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love."⁹

Pope Francis believes that now is the time to grow in expressions of mercy, writing: "It is the favorable time to heal wounds, a time not to be weary of meeting all those who are waiting to see and to touch with their hands the signs of the closeness of God, a time to offer everyone the way of forgiveness and reconciliation."¹⁰

By practicing mercy, Pope Francis believes we can rediscover the mission of the Church. He wrote: "The Church, in this time of great historical change, is called to offer more evident signs of God's presence and closeness. This is not the time to be distracted; on the contrary, we need to be vigilant and to reawaken in ourselves the capacity to see what is essential. This is a time for the Church to rediscover the meaning of the mission entrusted to her by the Lord on the day of Easter: to be a sign and an instrument of the Father's mercy (cf. Jn 20:21-23)."¹¹

During this Jubilee, Pope Francis wants each of us to experience God's mercy in a profound way as we receive it and then share it. He desires that we "experience strongly within ourselves the joy of having been found by Jesus, the Good Shepherd who has come in search of us because we were lost. A Jubilee to receive the warmth of his love when he bears us upon his shoulders and brings us back to the Father's house. A year in which to be touched by the Lord Jesus and to be transformed by his mercy, so that we may become witnesses to mercy."¹²

Rediscover Mercy

The Jubilee Year of Mercy began on December 8, 2015 (the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception) and will close on November 20, 2016 (the Solemnity of Christ the King). During these 349 days, Pope Francis is asking us to overcome any indifference toward the poor and suffering, to recognize the needs of those around us, and to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. On this Divine Mercy Sunday, we are now one-third through this celebration of the Jubilee.

When we see with the eyes of mercy, we open the doors of our hearts. We can no longer be indifferent and focused only on our own challenges. We open doors and serve others who desire to encounter God's mercy.

For each of us, The Year of Mercy involves gratefully embracing God's mercy in our lives and then sharing it with others. God's Mercy is always greater than any sin. There are no limits on the love of God who is always ready to forgive.

In his first public sermon at the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus connected God's mercy with the idea of a Jubilee Year. In reading from the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus stated, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me and has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a jubilee year of the Lord."¹³

During this Jubilee of Mercy, Jesus similarly wants to free us and forgive us from anything that keeps us from God. That message deserves to be proclaimed throughout this year by all of us and we are commissioned to announce it to everyone we encounter.

This Year of Mercy is our Jubilee that affords us the opportunity to live the social Gospel of the Church more intensely, preaching and practicing the works of mercy, fostering the Gospel values in our society, promoting the

dignity of every human person from conception to natural death, the importance of family, the common good of society, and the centrality of reconciliation and forgiveness.

How Jesus Describes Mercy

Jesus teaches us many things about mercy through his actions and parables.

First, Jesus taught us that proclaiming the Gospel to the poor is his first pastoral priority. When Jesus announced the Jubilee year in the fourth chapter of Luke, he described his mission as announcing the good news to the poor, liberating captives and giving sight to the blind. This provides us, as Jesus' disciples, a template for our task in the Year of Mercy. In setting our individual actions and, collectively, our pastoral priorities and plans and strategies of evangelization, let us also prioritize the sharing of the Gospel with the poor.¹⁴

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis issues the following challenge: "I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessings, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care."¹⁵

Second, Jesus explains that mercy comes from God, who is our merciful Father. As we learned in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, after welcoming home a child who was lost and forgiving him or her, the Father rejoices. Mercy brings joy to both the reconciled sinner and to God.

Third, Jesus affirms that **he** is the face of the merciful Father. He is the Good Shepherd who takes the first action to seek out and find those who are lost. As we learn in his first meeting with Matthew, the tax collector who became one of the Apostles, Jesus seeks to be with us who are sinners and helps lead us back to the Father. He looked on Saint Matthew with mercy and chose him for a great mission.¹⁶ He wants to do the same for us. When he saw a large and hungry crowd, Jesus felt compassion and fed them.¹⁷ When the sick were brought to him, he healed them.¹⁸ When the widow expressed her grief that her son died, Jesus raised him from the dead.¹⁹ When a public sinner like the woman caught in adultery was brought to him, he taught that those without sin should condemn her first, and then when they all left, he forgave her and told her to sin no more.²⁰ Jesus was sent to reconcile us to the Father.

Fourth, Jesus wants us to know that his true disciple is the one who practices mercy. In the beautiful Parable of the Good Samaritan, after the priest and the Levite pass by the beaten and dying man, Jesus tells us of the Samaritan who overcomes prejudice and existing cultural norms to care for the wounded man. The true neighbor is the one who shows mercy. Jesus ends the parable by saying: "Go and do likewise."²¹ As committed followers of Jesus, we must strive to be a face of mercy, an ambassador of the merciful Father. We must practice mercy within our families, parishes and communities. Often, we can be so quick to criticize, to be cynical and to complain. We must practice mercy with those closest to us and be people of reconciliation in a world of such polarization.

Fifth, Jesus taught us that the Father's mercy and forgiveness are limitless and that we, likewise, should forgive repeatedly. Saint Peter asked him how often he should forgive and Jesus replied "seventy times seven" times.²² Jesus then told Saint Peter the parable of how the king had mercy on a servant who couldn't repay his debts, forgiving him of what he owed. The servant then didn't do likewise to a fellow servant who was in his debt. The king was furious, asking him, "Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant, in the same way that I had mercy on you?"²³

Sixth, Jesus promises us that mercy and forgiveness will be ours if we practice it. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."²⁴ In the Our Father, he taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses (debts), as we forgive those who have trespassed against us (debtors)."²⁵ After teaching us that famous prayer, he taught those with him very directly that, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."²⁶

The world is hungry for mercy. One sign of that is the growth of the Divine Mercy devotion, which we mark in a special way today, Divine Mercy Sunday. This devotion started in the last century in Poland and has now been embraced by Catholics all over the world. If you have not yet practiced this devotion, this would be a good year to

begin. At 3 p.m. each afternoon, we can join ourselves mentally to Jesus' mercy on the cross in an "Hour of Mercy." We can recite the Chaplet of Divine Mercy each day to unite ourselves to Jesus' mercy in reparation of our sins and the sins of the whole world. CatholicTV and Catholic Radio 1060am and many other media apostolates pray the Chaplet at 3 p.m. We can also place an image of Divine Mercy in our homes and gaze on it as we pray, "Jesus, I Trust in You."

As we reflect on pastoral priorities in the Archdiocese of Boston, it is important that we reflect on how God's mercy is one of the most attractive attributes of the Church. When we are able to communicate a spirit of outreach, hospitality and mercy, we hope that people who currently feel alienated might become instead attracted to our parish communities and trust that they will be welcomed.

The extreme individualism of our culture isolates people and promotes choices and options that are self-destructive and alienating. Solidarity and community are the antidotes to so many of our social problems, and disciples of the Lord Jesus must be the initiators. As our pastoral plan states, we desire that all Catholics in our archdiocese will truly become "Disciples in Mission."²⁷ Our life of personal prayer and reflection, combined with receiving God's mercy and grace, can be central aspects of the process of conversion to be the people of mercy God is asking us to be.

C. Living mercy: The corporal and spiritual works of mercy

When speaking to Catholic school students, I often explain that the Church exists to teach them about God, teach them about why each of us is here, and teach us what God is asking us to do with our lives.

God has given us answers to life's biggest questions through Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and Divine Revelation, especially through sending his Son, Jesus into the world just over 2,000 years ago. Jesus answered questions for us such as what is God like? What truly makes us happy? What actions please God? What must we do to inherit eternal life?

These are all important questions. To the scribes of Jesus' time, one of the biggest questions was, "what commandment is the most important?" Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."²⁸

This led to additional questions such as *whom* does God want me to love (who is my neighbor) and *how* does God want us to love?

In response to the question of whom to love, Jesus answers by telling us the story of the Good Samaritan. To understand it fully, we need to understand the poor relationship between the Jews and Samaritans at that time. For Jesus' audience, the words 'good' and 'Samaritan' would never appear in the same sentence. The parable begins by telling us of a Jewish man who was mugged and left for dead. It then tells us that at least two Jews (a priest and a Levite) passed him without doing anything to help him. Then a foreigner, a Samaritan, comes by. The Samaritan man sees the wounded Jewish man and is moved to compassion. He administers first aid, takes him to a hotel, pays for his food and lodging, and then offers to return and pay for any other expenses. Jesus concludes the story by stating that we are called to be neighbors to everyone and that the "neighbor is the one that shows mercy."²⁹

Jesus also answers the question of *how* God wants us to love in the Gospel of Matthew. The Church later named these the corporal works of mercy. Jesus taught, "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me."³⁰

Jesus is telling us that one of the principal ways in which we serve and love God is to perform these acts of mercy. For centuries, the Church has taught the corporal and spiritual works of mercy as ways to put mercy into practice.

A Year of Mercy is a trial run to make God's mercy visible in the world. To take care of each other, forgive each other, and help each other to practice the works of mercy with each other. Look at the Good Samaritan and look at his willingness to forgive and make sacrifices for a stranger. When we imitate him, the Church teaches that we will live a good life, a happy life, and lead a life full of meaning that will make a difference and prepare us for eternal happiness

where we hope to hear the words Jesus shared in Matthew 25: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”³¹

In the Catholic Church we are very good about trying to help people in their physical needs. Within the Archdiocese of Boston, we have many excellent ministries focused on living the corporal works of mercy. Parishioners are very involved in feeding the hungry, providing clothes and shelter, visiting the sick and prisoners. This is an inspiring part of how we witness to living our Catholic faith and it is why we are involved in the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services, health care, orphanages, meal centers, food pantries, shelters and cemeteries. It is my fervent hope that, during this Jubilee year, every parish or collaborative will discover new ways of reaching out to those in need. Perhaps this will mean re-activating Saint Vincent de Paul Societies, or opening food pantries or shelters where assistance is most needed.

Corporal Works of Mercy

Feed the hungry
Give drink to the thirsty
Shelter the homeless
Clothe the naked
Care for the sick
Visit the imprisoned
Bury the dead

During this Year of Mercy, our task is to bring liberation to those who are oppressed and captive. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, some of the worst forms of oppression and captivity are the addictions that destroy peoples’ lives: heroin, alcohol, and pornography. Drug overdose is the leading cause of accidental deaths in the U.S., with 47,000 lethal overdoses last year; in Massachusetts there are almost three times as many deaths from overdoses as from automobile accidents. We feel an urgent need to find solutions since the negative impact is far reaching, leading to the eventual breakdown of families, friendships, neighborhoods and communities. As a work of mercy, we must offer help, support and comfort to those who have formed an addiction to prescription pain killers or illegal drugs. We encourage our Catholic community to inform our sisters and brothers who are impacted by addiction to turn to our faith community for support, counsel and compassion. Many people feel hopeless in the face of this terrible epidemic. Let us become a spiritual field hospital for these families. We must remind them that God’s mercy can break the chains of addiction and lead to a healthy, fruitful life.

In addition to corporal works of mercy, we practice spiritual works of mercy that come from various scriptural passages. Jesus gave physical sight to a few, but spiritual sight to many. He did not release anyone from physical prisons, but freed many from spiritual captivity. Pope Francis is always reminding us to practice spiritual works of mercy by living as missionary disciples, going out to teach the world about God’s love and mercy, and responding to others’ spiritual needs.

So many of our neighbors here in our area are starving for spiritual food and are immersed in the darkness of religious illiteracy. Our people urgently need faith formation. They seek longingly for hope and meaning — in their families, their work, their social and political lives — just as the hungry seek for bread. They may be traveling past our churches; indeed, they may be sitting just outside the doors. All we need to do is reach

Spiritual Works of Mercy

To admonish the sinner (correct those who need correction)
To instruct the ignorant (teach the faith to others)
To counsel the doubtful (give advice to those who need it)
To comfort the sorrowful (give comfort to those who suffer)
To bear wrongs patiently (be patient with others)
To forgive all injuries (to forgive others who hurt you)
To pray for the living and the dead (to pray for everyone who needs our prayers)

out to them with a word or gesture to assure them that we want to help them with their spiritual and physical needs. Christ is the light of the world, and our task is to bring that light to those who are suffering in darkness.

Together as one Catholic family, we can do more to teach about God and the way he invites us to live, to mercifully correct those who need correction, to give advice to those who need it, to give comfort to those who suffer, to be patient with others, to forgive those who hurt us and to pray for everyone that needs our prayers. Forgiving others is one of the actions of mercy that I’d most encourage this year.

Pope Francis wrote about the connection of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy and this Jubilee year. “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... We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged."³²

D. The Year of Mercy in the Archdiocese of Boston

For all those in our Catholic community in the Archdiocese of Boston, I would like to recommend seven actions for this Jubilee Year of Mercy.

1. Read about God's mercy

So many people in our area live hectic and busy lives. It can be tough to slow down, sit in silence and contemplate the mysteries and messages of God. Please make a priority in your prayer time this year to grow in your knowledge of God's merciful and personal love for you. Ask God to help you grow in an appreciation for his mercy and to make you aware of ways to practice it. Thank God sincerely in your heart for the gift of mercy he has offered to you.

The Scriptures are the primary sources of our understanding of God's mercy. The parables of mercy, some of which I have mentioned already, are a great place to start if we want to ponder the mystery of God's mercy toward us. Jesus often taught with images and stories that would illustrate important messages, and more often than not, his teaching was focused on the tender and merciful love of the Father. Rediscover mercy by rediscovering the beauty of Christ's teaching in Sacred Scripture.

Other resources developed for the Year of Mercy may be helpful to you. Pope Francis' document, *The Face of Mercy*, is available online and in book format.³³ Our Sunday Visitor has published in English all the materials developed by the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization for the Year of Mercy.³⁴ Dynamic Catholic also has a wonderful book called *Beautiful Mercy*, which is great for small group discussions.³⁵

2. Receive God's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation

As part of our local celebration of the Jubilee year, we participated in an initiative of Pope Francis, entitled *24 Hours for the Lord*. Priests heard confessions for 24 hours straight in a dozen parishes throughout the Archdiocese, and the turnout was impressive. Many of the priests who participated in this event have shared their admiration for those who returned to the Sacrament of Reconciliation after years of being away. Their faith and trust in God's mercy was palpable, and an inspiration to our priests who are called to be ministers of mercy. Each confession is an encounter with the merciful Lord who, like the loving father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, runs out to meet us and rejoices when we return to him.

Many Catholics have been away from this beautiful sacrament for months, years and, in some cases, decades. If we have been away for a long time, like the younger son in the parable, it is now time to "come to our senses" and to realize that we will be better off to be with our Father who loves us.

During this Year of Mercy, let us resolve to make it a more frequent habit. As my Dad used to say, "When it's time to get a haircut, it's time to go to confession."

3. Grant mercy to those who have hurt you

We have all been hurt. Pain can cause a hardened heart, making it difficult to forgive. We can view those who have hurt us like the elder brother sees his younger brother in the parable.

Nevertheless, God asks us to forgive — even seventy-times-seven times, which represents infinity. Forgiving others makes us more like God. In granting mercy like our Heavenly Father does to us, we initiate reconciliation and spark joy, not just for those forgiven but also for ourselves and for all those affected.

In prayer, ask the Father of Mercy whom might you forgive during this holy year — particularly family members and formerly close friends. Who has made mistakes earlier in life that have embarrassed themselves and embarrassed our

families? Whom have we written off? Who is suffering with the guilt and other consequences of their actions that hurt us?

After coming up with a list, share it with God in your prayer. Ask him to help you to show them mercy and to forgive them their trespasses. We want to be “merciful as the father is merciful” not “hardened as the older brother is hardened.” Remember that when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to forgive us our sins, *just as* we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. It is one of the most dangerous petitions we will ever pray, but it is central to a life of grace in Jesus Christ.

4. Bring others to receive God’s mercy this year

As mentioned at the beginning of this Pastoral Letter, Jesus responded to the complaints of the Pharisees and scribes that he was spending time with tax collectors and sinners by sharing three stories — the parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Prodigal (Lost) Son. It is interesting that instead of just one story, Jesus chose to illustrate his central message three times. When something or someone is lost, the protagonist energetically searches for it and when it is found, heaven rejoices!

Heaven rejoices when anyone returns to be reconciled with our merciful Father. Jesus sought out sinners with the purpose of reconciling them to God. As his followers, we are called to do the same. If we do, we can spark a heavenly celebration. We can also witness the joy of a brother or sister when they are reconciled and healed.

One special and beautiful ministry of reconciliation that we have in the Archdiocese of Boston is Project Rachel. It is a confidential ministry of hope and healing for women and men who have suffered the death of a child through abortion. A central focus of Project Rachel is the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a privileged place of encounter with God’s mercy and the source of healing. Retreats and counseling services are available to support the healing process.³⁶

Too often there are individuals, including some who have participated in abortion, that mistakenly believe that God could never forgive them. There is no sin that is greater than God’s love. If you know someone who might believe they are beyond forgiveness, please reach out to them in the name of God, the Church and in my name and ask them to contact a nearby parish or shrine. If a friend would prefer to speak with priests specifically trained to talk with people of their specific situation, please call the Project Rachel hotline at 508-651-3100 or our the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center staff at 617-254-0100 and we will help them.

During this Year of Mercy, please invite someone to come with you to the Sacrament of Confession or to attend an event where confessions will be offered, like at a retreat or a spiritual conference. Sometimes the witness of a fellow Catholic is more effective in convincing someone to return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation than a well-crafted homily or teaching. Let us ask God in prayer to help us identify the people in our life that he would like to meet in that sacrament of mercy, and then to give us the courage and the words to extend the invitation. We can become agents in God’s search-and-rescue efforts for our relatives, friends, co-workers and neighbors.

5. Make a pilgrimage to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross this year, enter through the Holy Door and receive the Jubilee Indulgence

Pope Francis has written that, “The practice of a pilgrimage has always had a special place in a Jubilee Year, because it is a metaphor for the journey each of us makes in this life. Life itself is a pilgrimage, and the human being is a pilgrim traveling along the road, making his way to the desired destination.”³⁷

Pope Francis wants each of us to embark on a pilgrimage this year and, knowing that not everyone could journey to Rome to the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul, he took steps to encourage local pilgrimages. He authorized that every diocesan cathedral in the world become a pilgrimage destination with a Holy Door of Mercy. The Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston’s South End, therefore, is one of the Jubilee’s official pilgrimage locations. We hope that you will visit at least once, but perhaps many times, before the Feast of Christ the King in November.

While at the Cathedral, please begin your visit by pausing to pray outside the Holy Door, which is located at the side door of the church on Union Park Street. As the banners there remind us, Jesus is the door who leads us to the merciful embrace of the Father. The purpose of any door is to separate two locations, and going through a Holy

Door is meant to symbolize the transition from one place to another. Passing through the Holy Door symbolizes the active step toward embracing, receiving and extending God's loving mercy and welcome.

Passing through the Holy Door at the Cathedral also is part of the process for receiving a plenary indulgence, one of the special graces available during Jubilee years. God's forgiveness knows no bounds. As Pope Francis writes, "It becomes indulgence on the part of the Father who, through the Bride of Christ, 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."³⁸

The U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults describes an indulgence in this way: "Every sin has consequences. It disrupts our communion with God and the Church, weakens our ability to resist temptation, and hurts others. The necessity of healing these consequences, once the sin itself has been forgiven, is called temporal punishment. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other works of charity can take away entirely or diminish this temporal punishment. Because of the fullness of redemption obtained for us by Christ, the Church attaches to certain prayers and actions an indulgence or pardon, that is, the full or partial remission of temporal punishment due to sin. Christ, acting through the Church, brings about the healing of the consequences of sin when an individual uses such a prayer or engages in such an action."³⁹

Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone in the Archdiocese of Boston took the opportunity offered by God in his Divine Mercy through the Church during this Holy Year to receive this special indulgence? The Cathedral is a beautiful place to pray. In addition to the Holy Door, admire the colorful stained glass windows of the Cathedral and pray in front of the window of Mary, the Mother of Mercy, who holds the broken chains of sin and death in her hands. Go to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and venerate the relic of the Holy Cross, upon which our Savior stretched his arms in an embrace of mercy and a sacrifice of love. Pray in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, the source and summit of our life as Christ's followers and members of his body, the Church.

To gain the plenary indulgence before the end of the Jubilee year on November 20, 2016, most of us will make a pilgrimage to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in order to pass through the Holy Door. In addition to performing this indulgenced act, we are reminded that we must also fulfill the following conditions to obtain the plenary indulgence:

- Sacramentally confess one's sins
- Participate in the celebration of, and receive, the Holy Eucharist with a reflection on mercy and to recite the Profession of Faith
- Pray for the intentions of Pope Francis.

It is encouraged that Communion be received, the prayer for the intention of the Holy Father, and the profession of faith be said on the same day. A single sacramental confession can suffice for several plenary indulgences received soon thereafter.

For those who are unable to make even a local pilgrimage to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross' Holy Door, Pope Francis has decreed that there are other ways to receive the Jubilee Indulgence.

- *For the sick, the elderly and those confined to their homes* — You can receive the Jubilee Indulgence by living with faith and joyful hope during your trials, by receiving Communion or attending the Holy Mass and community prayer, and even through the participating in Mass through television;
- *For the imprisoned* — You can receive the Jubilee Indulgence by directing your thought and prayer to the Merciful Father each time you cross the threshold of your cell and of the prison chapel, signifying the passage through the Holy Door;
- *For the deceased* — The Holy Father reminds us that we may gain the Jubilee Indulgence not only for ourselves, but for the deceased as well. He states: "...as we remember them in the Eucharistic celebration, thus we can, in the great mystery of the Communion of Saints, pray for them, that the merciful Face of the Father free them of every remnant of fault and strongly embrace them in the unending beatitude." So after receiving the plenary indulgence for ourselves, please return to the Cathedral to bring this great gift of mercy to your loved ones.

6. Practice each of the works of mercy at least once

A great way to celebrate this Jubilee Year of Mercy with young people is to perform each of the works of mercy with them. This can also be a good activity for youth groups, young adults, adult small groups, and also parishes.

There are many ways to live these works of mercy and I encourage people to be creative and showing the merciful love of God through various expressions of caring for others. Our Archdiocesan website has good resources to assist us in living the works of mercy, as well as a list of local opportunities to serve the poor and those in need. You can visit that website at BostonCatholic.org/yearofmercy

Corporal Works of Mercy

- *Feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty* - Give funds to food pantries or meal centers. Organize a food drive. Pray for those who are hungry during grace at meals. Bring a meal to a homeless person that you often pass by. Join your parish's Saint Vincent de Paul Society, or begin one, if your parish does not currently have this wonderful outreach ministry.
- *Shelter the homeless* - Get involved in the work to care for refugees. Support shelters in your area through gifts of time or treasure. Take in an elderly family member or friend in need. Volunteer at a crisis pregnancy center such as Pregnancy Help in Boston.
- *Clothe the naked* - Make clothing donations to thrift stores. Organize a drive to send sport uniforms to poor countries. Sacrifice the purchase of new clothing and donate what you would have spent to agencies that provide clothing.
- *Care for the sick* - Visit family members and friends who are ill. Pray for the sick individually by name. Make meals for people who are facing difficult situations, perhaps due to the care of a sick loved one.
- *Visit the imprisoned* - Support prison ministry or join a team that visits prisons. Ask prison chaplains about someone that might appreciate receiving regular letters or a personal visit. Support Catholic media ministries that bring the teachings of the Church to the incarcerated.
- *Bury the dead* - Help Catholics get their plans in order (particularly if their next of kin is not a person of faith). Attend wakes and funerals. Pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet and Rosary with and for people who are near death. Visit cemeteries and offer prayers and Masses for those who have died.

Spiritual Works of Mercy

- *Admonish the sinner (correct those who need correction)* - Kindly speak up, with charity, against sinful and unjust practices in the culture. Love the sinner, hate the sin.
- *Instruct the ignorant (teach the faith to others)* - Hand on the faith to kids and grandkids through instruction and witness. Sign up to teach RCIA, confirmation, youth group or religious education at your parish. Encourage others to listen to Catholic programming on radio and television and to read Catholic publications.
- *Counsel the doubtful (give advice to those who need it)* - Have a heart for those who are struggling, confused or depressed. Help those looking for jobs and facing big decisions.
- *Comfort the sorrowful (give comfort to those who suffer)* - Call or visit friends in difficult situations or who may be lonely. Make meals or care packages. Write an encouraging note to someone in need of support.
- *Bear wrongs patiently (be patient with others)* - Practice loving patience with family members and co-workers. Hold your tongue or don't honk your horn.
- *Forgive all injuries (to forgive others who hurt you.)* - Pray for all those who have hurt you. Invite estranged family members to gatherings. Don't speak ill of others
- *Pray for the living and the dead (to pray for everyone who needs our prayers)* - Keep a list of people who need prayers close at hand. Have Masses celebrated for those in need or departed friends and family. Obtain an indulgence this year for family members or friends who have died.

It is important to mention that so much of our work at our parishes and Archdiocesan central ministries are directed to performing the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Your financial support of parish offertory collections and the Archdiocesan Catholic Appeal furthers all the works of mercy done in the name of our Catholic Community.

7. Recite the Jubilee of Mercy prayer

Pope Francis has written a beautiful prayer for the Jubilee and asked the entire Church to pray it. Please do so with your family members or guests during family meals, particularly on Sundays. Pause each week and meditate on a sentence or two of the prayer to grow more deeply into the mercy that Jesus himself demonstrated.

*Lord Jesus Christ,
you have taught us to be merciful like the heavenly Father,
and have told us that whoever sees you sees Him.
Show us your face and we will be saved.
Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew from being enslaved by money;
the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things;
made Peter weep after his betrayal,
and assured Paradise to the repentant thief.
Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us,
the words that you spoke to the Samaritan woman:
“If you knew the gift of God!”
You are the visible face of the invisible Father,
of the God who manifests his power above all by forgiveness and mercy:
let the Church be your visible face in the world, its Lord risen and glorified.
You willed that your ministers would also be clothed in weakness
in order that they may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error:
let everyone who approaches them feel sought after, loved, and forgiven by God.
Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us with its anointing,
so that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace from the Lord,
and your Church, with renewed enthusiasm, may bring good news to the poor,
proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed,
and restore sight to the blind.
We ask this through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy,
you who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever.
Amen.*

Additional opportunities and activities are available on the Archdiocese of Boston website, BostonCatholic.org/yearofmercy.

E. Conclusions

This Jubilee Year of Mercy is a tremendous opportunity to express gratitude to God for his mercy, to receive his mercy directly in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and through the Jubilee Indulgence, to invite others to reconcile with God, and to perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

Please resolve to perform the seven activities I outlined above and schedule them so that you make them a priority this year. In doing these activities, you will grow closer to our Heavenly Father and become one of his missionaries of mercy to a world in such need for it. Mercy is the beating heart of the Gospel. God’s mercy has always and will continue to transform the world.

My prayer is that we will all become more like Christ during this Jubilee year, that we will become people of mercy, who reveal God’s love and mercy to everyone we meet. May God grant us the grace and strength to become merciful like the Father, whose heart is filled with love for us and for all those most in need of his mercy.

¹ *Misericordiae Vultus* “The Face of Mercy,” 12.

² Luke 15: 1-32.

³ A few years ago I wrote a book in Portuguese that I entitled: *Anel e Sandalias* (“*Ring and Sandals*”). In the preface of the book I reflect on the fact that the ring and the sandals symbolize my vocation as a bishop and as a Capuchin Franciscan friar. Like the prodigal son, I do not merit this great generosity of the Father, who despite all of my limitations and failings has put Franciscan sandals on my feet and a bishop’s ring on my finger.

⁴ Based on Luke 6:36, “Be merciful, just as your Father in merciful.”

⁵ Luke 4: 16-21.

⁶ Pope Francis, Homily, *Holy Mass in the Parish of St. Anna in the Vatican*, 17 March 2013.

⁷ *Misericordiae Vultus* “The Face of Mercy,” 15.

⁸ Wedeman, “Meet the disfigured man whose embrace with Pope Francis warmed hearts,”

<http://www.cnn.com/2013/11/26/world/europe/pope-francis-disfigured-man/>, 27 November 2013.

⁹ *Misericordiae Vultus* (“The Face of Mercy”), 10.

¹⁰ *Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Celebration of First Vespers of the Second Sunday of Easter or Divine Mercy Sunday*. Saturday, 11 April 2015.

¹¹ *Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Celebration of First Vespers of the Second Sunday of Easter or Divine Mercy Sunday*. Saturday, 11 April 2015.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Luke 4: 18-19.

¹⁴ Luke 4: 16-21.

¹⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 200.

¹⁶ Matthew 9: 9-13.

¹⁷ Matthew 15:37.

¹⁸ Matthew 14:14.

¹⁹ Luke 7:15.

²⁰ John 8: 1-11.

²¹ Luke 10: 25-37.

²² John 18: 21-22.

²³ John 18: 23-33.

²⁴ Matthew 5:7.

²⁵ Matthew 6:12.

²⁶ Matthew 6:14-15.

²⁷ Learn more at DisciplesInMission.com.

²⁸ Mt. 22:37-39.

²⁹ Luke 10:30-37.

³⁰ Matthew 25: 33-46.

³¹ Matthew 25: 34.

³² *Misericordiae Vultus* (“The Face of Mercy”) 15.

³³ See: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html.

³⁴ See: Osv.com/Shop/ParishResources/YearofMercy.aspx.

³⁵ See: DynamicCatholic.com/year-of-mercy/#mercy_book.

³⁶ See: ProjectRachelBoston.com

³⁷ *Misericordiae Vultus* (“The Face of Mercy”), 14.

³⁸ *Misericordiae Vultus* (“The Face of Mercy”), 22.

³⁹ *U.S. Catechism for Adults*. Paragraph 244.