

Mercy in Action!

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Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has invited the whole Church to celebrate a “Jubilee Year of Mercy.” This is not just another in a string of “themed years” that the Catholic Church has celebrated recently (like the “Year of Faith” or the “Year for Priests” or the “Year of St. Paul”). Rather, it is a “Holy Year,” with special opportunities for receiving and sharing God’s mercy and grace. Holy Years are normally celebrated every 25 years, but they may also be called in “Extraordinary” cases, as Pope Francis has done this year. Moreover, the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem has been asked to make some special efforts to promote and participate in this Jubilee Year.

The Holy Year of Mercy began on Dec. 8, 2015 (the 50th Anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council) and continues until Nov. 20, 2016 (the end of the liturgical year, on the Feast of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe). It involves many different symbols and possible actions, such as going to confession more often, making a Pilgrimage to a “Holy Door” in the Cathedrals and Basilicas in Rome or in any local diocese, and practicing the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy more regularly. Pope Francis has also chosen a motto for us to live by this year: “Merciful like the Father,” based on the words of Jesus: “Be merciful as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

To learn all about this Jubilee Year, I encourage all Knights and Ladies to read *Misericordiae Vultus*, the letter by Pope Francis, the official “Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.” It is easy to read, only about 12 pages long, and freely available on the Vatican website: <http://www.im.va/content/gdm/en/giubileo/bolla.html>

In the coming months, various members and friends of our Equestrian Order from all nine Areas/Dioceses in our Western Lieutenancy will write some brief reflections on the various Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. Some of these articles will focus on mercy-in-action in our local contexts, while others will highlight something from the perspective of the Holy Land.

In this first article, let me give you some initial observations and overall considerations.

What is “Mercy”? Look in a dictionary and you will probably find several different definitions, ranging from the religious to the juridical, from feelings to actions. But basically, there are two main aspects of mercy: first, the **forgiveness of sins**, and second, **compassion in action!** Hopefully, we can all pay attention to both of these throughout this Jubilee Year. 2

The Glossary to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines “**Mercy**” as follows: “The loving kindness, compassion, or forbearance shown to one who offends (e.g., the mercy of God to us sinners).” In other words, God is merciful in forgiving us. A separate entry of the Glossary then also defines “**Works of Mercy**” as follows: “Charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbors in their bodily and spiritual needs. The spiritual works of mercy include instructing, advising, consoling, comforting, forgiving, and patiently forbearing. Corporal works of mercy include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, sheltering the homeless, and burying the dead.”

We should also remember that mercy, just like any other theological topic, involves **both giving and receiving**, and it includes both God and our fellow humans. In other words, God wants to show divine mercy to all people by forgiving our sins, and so we must ask God for forgiveness, both in our private prayer and through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. On the other hand, we must also be willing to forgive others, not just in our thoughts and prayers, but in words and actions as well. Recall how Jesus clearly teaches us that giving and receiving forgiveness are linked together: “If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions” (Matt 6:14-15 NAB). He makes this link even more explicit in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:23-35).

The aspects of giving and receiving apply also to the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. In this Holy Year, much of our focus might be on how we will show mercy-in-action to others: by volunteering in a soup kitchen, contributing to a clothing drive, instructing or advising others, comforting or consoling people in their various needs. Yet are we also humble enough to receive the merciful actions of others? Do we allow people to show mercy-in-action toward us, not just in letting someone visit us if we are sick or comfort us in our sorrows, but maybe also in allowing others to instruct us when we don’t understand something, to advise us when we are confused, or even to admonish us when we are sinning?

To conclude, let me again encourage all of you to read the letter by Pope Francis, *Misericordiae*

Vultus (<http://www.im.va/content/gdm/en/giubileo/bolla.html>), to participate in any Year of Mercy initiatives of the Equestrian Order (pilgrimages, prayers, ecumenical and inter-religious services), and to reflect on how you can practice “Mercy-in-Action” during this Jubilee Year, both in receiving and in giving: by asking for God’s forgiveness and by offering forgiveness to others; by generously doing some Works of Mercy to help those in need and by humbly accepting the Works of Mercy that others may offer to us. In all that we do this year, let us strive to become more “Merciful like the Father”!