

What to Do as the Year of Mercy Comes to an End

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Pope Francis declared an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy for the Universal Church beginning on December 8th, 2015 and ending on November 20th, 2016. It's outside of the normal cycle of Jubilee Years that occur every 25 years, and it draws our attention to how, as baptized Christians, we are all called reflect the goodness of God in our lives. The goodness of God begins with mercy, so we are all called to become agents of mercy.

The Year of Mercy goes back to ancient times (Leviticus 25). The Jews were to celebrate a Year of Mercy every fifty years. This was a special time of forgiveness during which slaves would be freed and debts would be forgiven. It was a reminder of the mercy and forgiveness which are at the heart of the providence of God. When he announced the special Year of Mercy, Pope Francis said, "Let us not forget that God forgives and God forgives always. Let us never tire of asking for forgiveness." So, this Year of Mercy has been, and is, a special time for us to forgive and to be forgiven.

The Year of Mercy is an invitation for all of us to become what we are called to be as Disciples of Christ – people of mercy and love. Jesus made it clear that mercy and love are virtues that are at the very heart of the Christian vocation. The imitation of Christ can never be complete without the practice of mercy. Jesus' parables about the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (Luke 15:1-10) are clear examples of the mercy and love of God. Throughout the gospels we see Jesus applying the mercy of God to real-life situations. The Woman at the Well, the Women Caught in Adultery, and the Good Thief on the Cross are just a few examples. They demonstrate that our God is a God of mercy and love, a God of second chances.

God wants us to be people of mercy and forgiveness because he created us in his image and, as people created in his image, we are to reflect the mercy and forgiveness that he has extended to us. We must see others as God sees each of us - as infinitely valuable. No matter what we have done, no matter where we have been, no matter how late we experience conversion, we are all precious in his sight. He wants nothing more than for us to respond to his offer of infinite self-giving love and mercy, so that he can forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life.

I love the way Henry Nouwen said it in this book entitled *The Life of the Beloved*: “From all eternity, long before you were born and became a part of history, you existed in God’s heart. Long before your parents admired you or your friends acknowledged your gifts or your teachers, colleagues and employers encouraged you, you were already chosen. The eyes of love had seen you as precious, as of infinite beauty, as of eternal value.”

This is how Christian author, Max Lacado, describes the love and mercy of God: “God loves you just the way we are. If you think his love for you would be stronger if your faith were, you’re wrong. If you think his love would be deeper if your thoughts were, wrong again. Don’t confuse God’s love with the love of people. The love of people often increases with performance and decreases with mistakes. Not so with God’s love.” God loves us just the way we are, but he refuses to leave us like that. He wants more for us. He wants us to become just like Jesus, because he knows that is what’s best for us.

God wants only the very best for us, and his love never ceases, never. Though we spurn him, ignore him, reject him, disobey him, deny him and betray him, he never changes. Our evil cannot diminish his love. Our goodness cannot increase it. Our faith does not earn it any more than our stupidity jeopardizes it. God doesn’t love us less if we fail and more if we succeed. **Who we are, and who we can become, are more important to God than anything we’ve done.**

We must all realize that our future is not determined by our past. Our future is not determined by what we used to be. Our future is not determined by what we used to do. Instead, your future and my future is determined by who Jesus Christ is and what he can and will do. Jesus Christ is the same today and yesterday. There is no secret, what God can do, what he’s done for others he’ll do for you and me. So great is God’s mercy that it is almost inexpressible. God’s mercy knows no limit. There is none who is beyond his saving power. His mercy reaches to the highest mountain and flows to the lowest valley.

During this Year of Mercy, we are called to ask for mercy as well as practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. How do we do this? Together, as his Church, we get alongside those who are hurting the most in whatever way we can: To feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to provide shelter for the homeless, healing for the wounded, a caring presence for the dying and comfort and support for the bereaved. And we do this because the One we follow said clearly and unequivocally that in as much as we did these things for the least of our brothers and sisters, we did them for him.

Jesus said: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Matthew 24:35) In other words, “The world may be falling apart around you, but having faith in me will save you.” We live in a broken world, just turn on the news and you will hear all about it. We live in a world where there is suffering, pain and sorrow. We live in a world where many people would rather seek revenge than extend forgiveness and mercy. No matter what happens and how bad things seem, just remember this: When it all comes to an end, there will only be one thing that matters. When it all comes to an end, there will be Christ.

And so there is no need for us to be afraid. Our God is a God of second chances. We have each been given a second chance, and we have nothing to fear, if we will only place our hope and trust in him. Even in our suffering and pain we have nothing to fear because our hope is this: Whatever the future may hold, God can be trusted to see us through.

In the meantime, we must demonstrate our faith and faithfulness by loving and serving as Jesus has taught us, and by reflecting his love and mercy in our lives. Through Jesus, we know that it’s never too late. If our God is a God of second chances, then we must become people of second chances. God has shown us his face. He has shared our life so that we might share His. Each of us has been given a second chance, and now it’s our turn to extend that second chance to others.

As this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy comes to a close, Jesus invites each of us to trust in him, to reflect his goodness and to teach others to trust in him. The power we possess is from Jesus Himself. So, let us all continue to pray for his mercy and extend his mercy to others. Let us continue to pray and for the conversion of sinners, for peace in the world, and for our newly elected leaders!

If we have not lived up to our Christian calling, if we have not reflected the love and the mercy of God in our lives during the Year of Mercy, it’s not too late. So, contact that person who needs your forgiveness today. You’ll be glad you did.