

2016 New Years Letter

Merciful as your Heavenly Father is Merciful

A Message for the Journey through the Special Year of Mercy

Diocese of Kyoto

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In the Beginning:

Our Holy Father Francis has proclaimed that a Holy Year of Mercy has started. The motto of the Holy Year is “Merciful as your heavenly Father is Merciful.” Mercy is not simply the attitude of the Father, but we, too, are being called to live a life of mercy as our Father in Heaven is merciful. The Holy Father is encouraging us, not just to make a pilgrimage, but that each individual Catholic practice this in his/her daily life by not being judgmental, by forgiving, by opening our hearts to the weak people in society who have been alienated, and by participating in charitable activities.

In the Diocese of Kyoto for two years now we have considered the poor people whom God has chosen, and we see that this theme of mercy is, indeed, intimately connected with mercy. In the special pastoral letter of November 29, the First Sunday of Advent, “Concerning entering into the Holy Year of Mercy,” I wrote about the important points of the Holy Year. I would like to consider with all of you the significance of this “Mercy of God.”

1. Note: “Compassion” and “affection” are deliberately written in hiragana instead of Chinese characters in the text.
2. Note: The Bull of Indiction to promulgate the Holy Year of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus* (The Face of Compassion) is to be distinguished from the Encyclical “*Dives in Misericordia*” (God of Mercy) promulgated in 1980 by Saint Pope John Paul II.

1. Our Relationship with the God of Mercy

In the sense of personal faith

Pope Francis says that the meaning of this divine mercy is that in spite of the limitations of our sinfulness we are bolstered to new hope by this faith that is the road to oneness with God. (“Bull of Indiction” 2) The Mercy of God, together with poverty, is a theme that distinguishes the special relationship we Christians have with God. God the Creator of the universe purposely created the human being in His own image, pouring out His unlimited love. But even after the sin of Adam and Eve God, untrammled by

this affront, more than ever showed His overwhelming compassion. This is, indeed, is God's affection.

In Exodus we read where God announced to Moses his true nature: "Thus, the Lord passed before him and cried out, 'The Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity, continuing his kindness for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin.'" (Exodus 34 · 6-7) In the Old Testament it is related how, in spite of the tribe of Israel's infidelity to the Covenant, God in His unrelenting patience time and again manifests His affection and compassion. True, under the Covenant God confers "justice and fairness," but at the same time His attitude of compassion and love pervades the history of the relationship with the tribe. (Hosea 2, 21)

Time and again the tribe cries out to God, "Lord, have mercy on us," (Psalms 4,2; 6, 3; 9, 14; 25, 16 etc.) and "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his kindness endures forever." (Ps. 107, 1), they cry giving thanks and praise. We, too, banking on the compassion of God, while petitioning forgiveness, enter into a deep, personal relationship with God.

2. Jesus, the Face of Mercy

In the sense of faith discovering

We discover the mercy of God in our encounter with the Son who was sent by the Father. In the Bull of Indiction entitled "Misericordiae Vultus" (The Merciful Face) promulgating the Holy Year of Mercy Pope Francis says that "Jesus Christ is the merciful face of the Father. We can know the mercy of God by beholding the face of Jesus. As John relates Jesus as saying in Chapter 14, verse 9, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." In word and deed Jesus has manifested the face of the Almighty Father. For the person who has discovered the depth of compassion in Christ it is evident that God is full of mercy. (Eph. 2,4) This God of love can actually be seen in Christ. 2.)

Jesus became incarnate to experience in Himself the misery of humans whom he was about to redeem. Even though the term "Mercy" may not be used in the Gospel, it may be said that Jesus, in all His actions, is the veritable manifestation of God's mercy and as such is not found in any other form. The entire life of Jesus and the ultimate sacrifice of Himself on the Cross, has for its mission and purpose the manifestation of the deep mercy of the Father. During this Holy Year of Mercy let us meditate on the mercy of the Father and Jesus' deeds of compassion as found in the Scriptures.

3. Being merciful as Jesus is

In the sense of being cognizant of Faith

In order to understand to what people Jesus brings the glad tidings of God's merciful heart let us look at the opening phase of His apostolate. (cf. Luke 4, 18-19) They were the poor, people without sustenance, enslaved, with visual handicaps, those oppressed by the injustices in society, and those regarded as sinners. That which we must not overlook is that it expressly states that Jesus had a deep feeling of compassion for these people. The point to be observed is that Jesus did not work these miracles without feeling a deep compassion for the afflicted person. It says explicitly that "Feeling compassion," Jesus healed them. In Greek this "feeling of compassion" carries the meaning of something in the guts of the person, (supurankuna?) (Acts 1,18) where the verb "purankunizomai?" is used. It carries the meaning of something wringing the bowels of the person. In the Iwanami translation we find something like succumbing to a feeling of having ones bowels torn apart. Compassion means fellow feeling for someone who is suffering that moves one from the depths of the soul. Jesus takes the Pharisees to task for their hypocrisy, because they superficially pay tithes in an act of charity, but interiorly lack any sense of compassion. (cf. Luke 11, 41) Compassion cannot come from selfishness or self-satisfaction. Rather it must come from a pure intention. (cf. Matt. 6, 1-4) True mercy comes from an inner compassion of the heart. Let us have mercy on the suffering people and act with a deep sense of compassion.

4. The Merciful High Priest

In the sense of a Christology of Faith

In Hebrews it speaks about the "Merciful and Faithful High Priest" (Heb. 2, 17). On the Feast of the Atonement once a year the high priest would enter into the Holy of Holies in a ceremony to offer sacrifice to God on behalf of the people, for his own sins and for the sins of the people of Israel. But to atone for our sins the sinless Christ offered up Himself as a living, sacred sacrifice on the cross in accord with the will of His Heavenly Father just once and for all. This High Priest is Jesus Christ who "is able to deal patiently with erring sinners, seeing as He Himself is beset with weakness." (Heb. 5, 2) For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned." (Heb. 4, 15) For this reason we have a High Priest who is compassionate. He does not look down on the downtrodden. We who are enveloped in the midst of sin and weakness are calling on Him who is the High Priest, and whom we can call our Brother. Therefore during Lent of this year let us contemplate deeply the mercy shown us in the atonement offered to the Father on the Cross.

5. Become an implement of forgiveness

The Senses of Sacramental Faith

The Holy Father Francis has advised us Christians who have received forgiveness from the Father to manifest the mercy of God as effective symbols in becoming “implements of forgiveness.” (Pastoral letter # 14) How can we who have received redemption from God through the Crucifixion of Christ possibly forget that and be so proud and arrogant toward other people? Before relating the parable of the merciless official He commanded that we have deep mercy and absolutely forgive the offenses of our brethren, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven times.” (Matt. 18, 22) And then, at the conclusion of the parable He added, “Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant, as I dealt with you?” (Matt. 18,33) Through the death of Jesus on the cross our debt, which we could never have relinquished on our own, has been written off. It is obvious that it is only normal that we, who have received such pardon, should forgive those who have offended against us. It will hardly go well in a relationship or society which is founded simply on justice. In forgiving those who have offended us we may well experience pain and loss. Precisely because of this we must not forget that we have received immeasurable mercy from the Father. As Paul admonished us in the words, “Be kind to one another, compassionate, and mutually forgiving, just as God has forgiven you in Christ.” (Eph. 4, 32) In this new covenant we must forgive the sins of others, and witness the grace of God by living a new life. We must become implements of forgiveness, not simply in a passive way by not being judgmental or restraining from taking revenge, but positively by forgiving others and actively doing well for them.

6. Blessed are the merciful.

In the sense of putting Faith into practice

Jesus expressed the blessing of happiness in the form of showing mercy toward others and habitually being enveloped in the grace of God. In the fifth Beatitude of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “Blest are those who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs.” (Matt. 5,7) This does not mean that merciful people will receive mercy, and therefore they will be happy. This is extolling people who are happy because they have received God’s mercy and are making an effort to be merciful. We are merciful because we have already received God’s redemption through Christ, and therefore are enabled to be merciful in return. We are able to strive to become merciful because we have received mercy. God pours out His mercy in even more abundance upon those who are striving to be merciful.

The more we are merciful the more we become like God. The merciful person is

he/she who becomes aware of the plight of people around them, the little people who need their help, and considering these people their neighbor, actively strive to be a neighbor to them. This does not simply mean feeling sorry for the people, but actually and concretely taking action to alleviate their plight. Call to mind that tender and thorough kindness with which the Good Samaritan was moved to show mercy. In the First Letter of John it is written, "I ask you, how can God's love survive in a man who has enough of this world's good yet closes his heart to his brother when he sees him in need?" (1 John 3, 17) Let us strive to see the needs of others in our daily life, and actively be moved to show mercy in abundance.

7. The Joy of the Father of the Prodigal Son

In the saving sense of Faith

Let us recall the parable of the Prodigal Son. (Luke 15, 11ff.) The image of the son who takes his inheritance and goes to a foreign country where he degrades himself, squandering it in debauchery hints of the first man who was created in God's image, but lost his grace. Looking back on the history of mankind we see that in every generation the same pattern evolves. The son who removed himself from the father admits that he no longer deserves to be called a son. In what could the father's joy be founded? The Bible says that, "The father was deeply moved, "He ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him." And, "Although he had been lost he has been found again." And with this he prepared a banquet. By this we can see the depths of the father's love found in the fact that although he believed his son to have been dead, the sacred image of God in the human being is not extinguished, but preserved intact. It was not that he was rejoicing because he had retrieved some possession that he himself had lost, but in the fact that his son, who had lost nothing of his basic goodness, had returned home safely. The love that wells up out of the heart of the Father is illustrated here. (This, indeed, is the merciful God) 6). God the Father cannot help but loving His children. What is more, when a person is least worthy of love that is the time when He pours love all the more into that heart because it is in need of love. ("The God of Mercy" 2) Contrition is the proof that God's limitless love and mercy for man is unending and continually being poured into the heart. We give thanks that we may go back to the God as His children at any time and be assured of His acceptance with joy.

8. Be you perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In the Integrated sense of Faith

As regards justice that supersedes the justice of the Pharisees and scribes, Luke concludes the sermon with the words, "Be compassionate, as your Father is

compassionate.” (Luke 7, 36) But in Matthew it is written, “You must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt. 5,48) What does it mean to be perfect? In the Greek text the verbs for “to complete, “ or “to arrive at completion ,” is used. When Jesus drew His last breath on the cross He said, “Now it is finished.” (John 18, 30) using this word. The noun form is “terusu,” meaning that the objective has been attained. Jesus’ objective was to fulfill the will of the His Father, though offering His life up as the ultimate sacrifice. Therefore, to “to be perfect” does not mean being lily white without any stain of sin. Rather it means to have as ones purpose becoming the image of the creator, which means in order to become worthy of receiving the love of God in all things we strive to make our motives pure, making it our purpose to discern in love, and to this purpose exhaust ourselves in the pursuit of what is within the realm of possibilities. To persevere in loving: this is the justice that supersedes the justice of the Pharisees and scribes. Therefore, Paul says, “Owe no debt to anyone except the debt that binds us the love of one another. He who has loved his neighbor has fulfilled the Law.” (Rom. 13, 8) The Second Vatican Council says,” All Christians are called to live in the accomplishment of Christian love and attain perfection.” (Constitution on the Church 40) All of us must continue to perform acts of love with a pure heart to whatever person and in whatever circumstances.

9. Not to justify oneself

The critical sense of faith

The “poorness of heart” (Matt. 5, 7) that Jesus demands is to put our complete trust in God, to admit our wretchedness and sinfulness, and to be conscious of the fact that we are in need of God’s help. The sin of the Pharisees and scribes was that they proudly considered themselves to be just, and through this narrow-mindedness denied people they considered to be sinners access to God’s salvation. To people with such attitudes Jesus said, ” ‘It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice.’ I have come to call, not the self righteous, but sinners.” (Matt. 9, 13) And he scolded them saying, “If you understood the meaning of the text, ‘It is mercy I demand, and not sacrifice.’ (Hosea 6, 6) you would not have condemned these innocent men.” (Matt. 12, 7) As long as one is insisting on his/her righteousness before God, one cannot be humble and comprehend the mercy of God. That which is pleasing to God is to repent and return to the Father, and not try to proudly uphold ones justification. Human beings are loved by God from the beginning, so there is no need to justify oneself, but rather to admit in ones lowliness and ugliness, that one is unworthy of this mercy.

Pope Francis says that he laments to see that Christians resent and condemn each other. (Bull #14) During this Special Year of Mercy let us reflect on our relationships

with one another, recalling the words of Peter, “All of you should be like-minded, sympathetic, loving toward one another, kindly disposed, and humble.” (I Peter 5, 8) Let all of us reflect on and put into practice these words in our respective communities.

10. Mercy in mutual relationships

Faith in the sense of community

In the prayer for this Special Holy Year we have the passage where it says, “You wish that all who serve you be considerate of the people who are weak, ignorant and wandering in darkness. Would that all who meet these people who serve you come to an understanding of their need for God, and feel the need for love and forgiveness.” This prayer refers to the passage in Hebrews, 2, 17 where it says that Jesus was a model of “a merciful and faithful High Priest before God.” As servants of Christ we are encouraged to take the attitude that the merciful Christ took when, wrapped in the weakness of humanity, He was merciful to the people around Him who were walking in the shadow of ignorance and error. In the same way we pray that those people we meet may feel that before God they are needed, loved by Him, and forgiven. This is the prayer of the Holy Father Francis that hints at his profound humility.

Love seeped in mercy is experienced in fellowship, and is not something that is overbearingly done unilaterally. Although it might appear that one side is aggressive and the other passive, mutual association evolves from this. For instance there is the case where volunteers receive an unexpected joy from the people they are trying to help. In other words, the person who is giving unexpectedly becomes the receiver. In Philippians 2, 1-2 Paul says, “In the name of the encouragement you owe me in Christ, in the name of the solace that love can give, of fellowship in the spirit, compassion, and pity, I beg you: make my joy complete by your unanimity, possessing one love, united in spirit and ideals.” We, too, by extending mercy to people flavor the joy of the merciful God.

11, Being led by the Holy Spirit to forgive people

In the sense of theology of the Holy Spirit

In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Forgive us our sins; we also forgive others.” While asking God to forgive us our sins at the same time we vow to forgive others. In this why we have the words of Jesus, “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate,” (Luke 6, 36); “You must be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. “ (Matt. 5, 48); and “I give you a new commandment: Love one another. Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other.” (John 13, 34) In all three cases the Father and the Son

are given as the model we must follow.

When we confess our sins and ask pardon, as long as we do not open ourselves to the people who have offended us and made our peace with them, the flow of mercy will not reach our hearts. In order to overcome insults and wounds from the offenses that we have received from others the only thing we can do is turn ourselves over to the Holy Spirit. The human being is able to repent, become contrite, and confess his/her sins only under working of the Spirit. As Paul has said, "Since we live by the spirit, let us follow the spirit's lead. Let us never be boastful, challenging, or jealous toward one another." (Gal. 5, 25-26) In order to be mutually merciful in forgiving one another deeply, let us submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit, and receive the fruit of the Spirit with a meek heart. (Gal. 5, 22)

12. Making a pilgrimage of heart with Mary

In the sense of Marian faith

In the Divine Office for Night Prayers we recite the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1, 46-55)

"My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
My spirit finds joy in God my savior,
For He has looked upon His servant in her lowliness;
all ages to come shall call me blessed.
God who is mighty has done great things for me,
holy is His name.
His mercy is from age to age on those who fear Him."

Mary praised God for having mercifully looked upon the lowliness of His servant, giving her the tremendous privilege of becoming the mother of His Son, which was in no way due to her personally.

During this special Year of Mercy let us pray for the gift of faith and humility as Mary had, giving praise to God who is steeped in mercy. Let us make a spiritual pilgrimage giving thanks to God who works strongly in hidden ways in the life of each one of us individually and in all who come in contact with us, holding fast to the hope and faith in the Father who continues his works for mercy here and now, and in the future, proceeding with Mary toward the Son who is the gate of mercy.

Given on January 1, 2016, the Feast of Mary the Mother of God