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A Jubilee Year of Mercy

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“Jesus Christ,” says Pope Francis, “is the face of the Father’s mercy.” And mercy, he tells us, “reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity.” With this in mind, our Holy Father has proclaimed an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy for the universal Church. This jubilee year, which began on December 8, 2015, will be a special time of grace for the entire Church, a time to contemplate and receive more fervently the mercy of God, and a time to share that mercy with others.

“Mercy,” Pope Francis tells us, “is the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us.” We are all sinners, and we cannot save ourselves from sin or death. But God can do these things, and he does. He has no need to forgive us, or save us, or heal us, and we don’t in any way deserve these blessings. But God sees our plight, and he does something about it. He sends us his Son to free us from the chains of sin and death that bind us. This is his mercy. In fact, as we begin the season of Advent, we could say that the coming of Christ among us is God’s mercy incarnate. In the Incarnation of our Lord, God not only looks with mercy on us, but he enters into our world and walks with us, even to the cross. Jesus’ death on the cross is the supreme proof of the mercy and love that God has for each one of us.

During this Jubilee year, it is important to remember this gift of mercy and to respond to it. Pope Francis gives special emphasis to the mercy of God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and he repeatedly calls all members of the Church to go often to confession. In this sacrament of God’s forgiveness, we experience the mercy of God in a powerful and personal way. Through the simple and sincere confession of our sins, we have immediate access to the forgiveness of God, and we also have an assurance of his help in our struggle against sin. Of course, this implies repentance, a firm determination to amend our lives. Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, “Go, and sin no more.” I invite everyone to take advantage of this extraordinary grace. If it has been awhile since your last confession, let this be the time for you to return. The priests of the diocese, and any priest for that matter, will be eager to share with you the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus. As Pope Francis says, “Mercy will always be greater than any sin.”

The Pope also invites us to go on pilgrimage during this holy year. A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey, one that opens our hearts to the grace of God. For this reason, the Holy Father has called for the establishment of a Holy Door, a “door of mercy” in the Cathedral and in several other churches of the diocese. On the Third Sunday of Advent, these Holy Doors were opened to show that the Church opens her doors to all, inviting them to enter and join the wedding feast of the Lamb and to experience the mercy of God. I invite everyone to make at least one pilgrimage to a Holy Door during this Jubilee Year. If possible, I hope we can make many pilgrimages to the Holy Doors. When we cross the threshold of the Door of Mercy, we enter into the embrace of God. We experience the love of God “who consoles, pardons, and instills hope.”

Pope Francis also calls each of us to give the gift of mercy as well, to be authentic signs and missionaries of God’s mercy in a world that is often merciless. “We are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us.” The corporal works of mercy include feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, healing the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying 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 offenses, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead.

I would dare to say that every single day offers an opportunity for works of mercy: perhaps a visit to an ill or elderly neighbor, a contribution to the needy or homeless, a prayer for someone who is in spiritual distress. Maybe now is the time to assist in teaching the faith to young people or adults in your parish, and every one of us could whisper a daily prayer for the souls of the departed. And who among us could not work on a greater spirit of forbearance and forgiveness toward those who offend us? The works of mercy are a challenge to return the mercy that we have received so generously from God. It is always

tempting to look past the misery of our neighbor, but Pope Francis calls us to put aside indifference or self-involvement, and to look toward the needs of others. I hope this Jubilee of Mercy will rekindle in each of us a heart for mercy, so we may truly live the motto of this holy year: “Merciful like the Father.”

This Jubilee Year is a great gift to the Church, and I pray that each member of the Fargo Diocese will enter into this time of grace with a heart open to God’s mercy. As Pope Francis says, “The Jubilee Year of Mercy reminds us that God is waiting for us with open arms, just like the father of the prodigal son.” With this promise of his mercy, let us too run to the Father.