

Where We're Going in the Year of Mercy

ONE Conference, Convention Centre

5 March 2016

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ of the Archdiocese of Vancouver:

Introduction

At the beginning of this ONE Conference during this great Jubilee Year of Mercy, we come together as an Archdiocesan family to celebrate the richness and diversity of the gifts we each have received for building up Christ's Church, and to reaffirm our unity in faith and evangelizing mission. I would like to thank all those who so beautifully and capably lent their hand to prepare this day's program and events.

Above all, I am grateful to our splendid guest speakers who will so generously share with us their experiences of the Father's mercy.

Angèle Regnier is co-founder of Catholic Christian Outreach, a movement which has had such an influence on the young people of our Archdiocese and now many more in our parishes through small-group faith study series. She will speak on practical ways of choosing mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation in our personal life.

Ken Yasinski is founder of Face to Face Ministries. The core of his message focuses on why we should open ourselves to God's eternal mercy of God, and how we can take concrete steps to realize our full potential in life – to be a saint.

Gwendoline Allison is an attorney who, on behalf of the Archdiocese of Vancouver defended the right of Trinity Western

University's proposed law school to be accredited by arguing that Different beliefs and values are part of Canada's foundation; and that freedom of religion is vital in our society. Like Pope Francis, her talk will challenge us to practice the corporal works of mercy by being of service to those in need, sharing her personal experience of choosing a focus for her volunteer work.

Jubilee Year

We are now living during an extraordinary year, the Jubilee Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis. For him mercy "is Jesus's most important message."¹ And this is the truth he wants to hammer home. Throughout this year he is inviting us "to live in the light of the word of the Lord: 'Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful' (cf. Lk 6:36)."²

This Year is a gift of grace. It is the occasion for each of us personally to rediscover "the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them. It is he who seeks us! It is he who comes to encounter us! . . . How much wrong we do to God and his grace when we speak of sins being punished by his judgment before we speak of their being forgiven by his mercy (cf. Saint Augustine, *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum*, 12, 24)! But that is the

¹ Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), 3.

² Francis, Homily at Penitential Vigil (13 March 2015).

truth. We have to put mercy before judgment, and in any event God's judgement will always be in the light of his mercy."³

This Jubilee Year is a privileged moment for the Church to meditate more on "what pleases God most." What is it that "pleases God most?" Pope Francis asks: "Forgiving his children, having mercy on them, so that they may in turn forgive their brothers and sisters, shining as a flame of God's mercy in the the world. This is what pleases God most. . . . God's joy is forgiving, God's being is mercy."⁴ Indeed, the name of God is mercy – the title of the Holy Father's recent book.

"To 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"⁵: this is the first purpose of this Holy Year.

"It is necessary to recognize ourselves as sinners, so as to strengthen within us the certainty of divine mercy. "Lord, I am a sinful man; Lord, I am a sinful woman: come with your mercy."⁶

³ Francis, Homily (8 December 2015).

⁴ Francis, General Audience (9 December 2015).

⁵ Francis, Homily at First Vespers of Divine Mercy Sunday (11 April 2015).

⁶ Francis, General Audience (9 December 2015).

At the same time, as beneficiaries of mercy, “we are all called to give comfort to every man and every woman of our time.”⁷ From grateful recipients to instruments of mercy. This is the Church’s mission. This is our mission. And this is your mission: to “become witnesses to mercy.”⁸

Our Mission of Mercy

This, then, is “the favourable 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, everyone, the way of forgiveness and reconciliation.”⁹

How will we do this?

I wish to share with you now some of the ways – by no means all! – in which in the coming years we will be working together more intentionally to help people experience God’s merciful love.

We can call these our “priorities,” for they focus our efforts and our mission.

1. Make Every Sunday Matter

First of all, we realize that for most Catholics Sunday Mass is their principal point of contact with the Church. After much discussion, we

⁷ Francis, Homily at Penitential Vigil (13 March 2015).

⁸ Francis, Homily at First Vespers of Divine Mercy Sunday (11 April 2015).

⁹ Francis, Homily at First Vespers of Divine Mercy Sunday (11 April 2015).

have decided – and many, many people had a hand in reaching this conclusion – that we must strive “to make every Sunday matter.”

What does this mean? First of all, it means that the Eucharistic celebration must be reverent and beautiful, but also that those of us who preach must strive to be more understandable, more directly relevant to our parishioners’ daily lives and willing to get feedback on our preaching.

It also means that we need to pay more attention to the quality of music. And this is not just for the choirs, but for all of us.

Secondly, we need to find practical and concrete ways of being more welcoming. There are “best practices” out there which can be collected and shared. And there is a lot to be learned from our non-Catholic brothers and sisters in this regard.

Nothing can ever replace Sunday Mass as the occasion when we meet the mercy of God: hearing it proclaimed in the Word and made present in the Eucharist.

2. Create Ways to Foster an Encounter and Personal Relationship

A second priority will focus on ways of helping the faithful to come to a direct and personal knowledge of God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. This is about primary evangelization – what comes before sustained catechesis.

What will this mean in practice?

It means that many of us need to be introduced to, or brought back, to basic evangelization. Programs such as Alpha or CCO's Discovery series will be more widely available as instruments of evangelization in our parishes, in our schools and in sacramental preparation. Some parishes already have wonderful programs in place and can bear witness to the fruits they have produced.

I believe it is also necessary to take a good look at our RCIA program, which initiates men and women into the Church. While our number of catechumens and candidates is relatively stable, studies tell us – though we do not know for sure this is the case in Vancouver – that more than 50% of those who become Catholics are no longer practising within a few years. Why is this? What can we do better? Did we catechize without evangelizing?

It is also apparent that many of our people are yearning for opportunities to deepen their faith and relationship with the Lord. This leads to the need to provide more retreats and spiritual direction by clergy and lay people. For young people, whose faith is so often deepened by a community experience of living and working with other young people in a common cause, we are hoping to encourage them to spend a “gap year” with a missionary organization or religious institute such as NET ministries, CCO, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps or Madonna House Apostolate.

3. Strengthen Marriages and Families

The Synod of Bishops which met last Fall and the soon-to-be published apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis on the family are timely reminders of our need to find more effective ways to strengthen marriages and families. The ever-present demands and messages of our wider culture pull many couples and families away from a close relationship with Christ and his Church. If they are to experience God's mercy, live it and share it, they need our support. And we have to work to find ways of providing that practical support.

Among the things proposed to meet this need are developing programs that teach parents the skills needed to raise and evangelize their children. Here I would point out that it is not just helping parents evangelize and catechize their children but meeting many of their other "felt needs" such as how they deal with internet safety, drug and alcohol use, dating, the omnipresence of social media and so.

It is also necessary for us to be more aware of how to help families in crisis and how to support those facing separation or divorce. What should we do to ensure they are welcome in our parish communities and that they are enfolded in God's mercy?

4. Develop Parish Leadership and Support

The last priority we will be working on is this: let's find ways together to develop further leadership and support in our parishes.

Parishes are most likely to thrive and experience God's mercy when pastors are enabled to delegate significant leadership, as well as apostolic and administrative functions to an evangelized, well formed and talented team of parishioners.

Many tools are available to do this. Among them is Divine Renovation or Evangelium, training programs which help pastors and parishioners form effective leadership teams which give life to parish families.

Conclusion

I have enumerated for you the principal priorities – but by no means the only things we shall be doing! – that have been identified as areas we shall be working on together in the next few years.

Each of you is crucial to this endeavour. I am counting on you to lend your hand and offer your advice on how we can all work together so that our local Church becomes ever more vital and enthusiastic in embracing God's mercy and sharing that experience with others.

The Jubilee Year gives us a “kickstart” on this path. With God's grace, always with that grace, we can become, as Pope Francis has called us to be. “The Jubilee is a favourable time for all of us, because by contemplating Divine Mercy, which overcomes all human limitations and shines in the darkness of sin, we are able to become more certain

and effective witnesses.”¹⁰

Thank you all for accepting the mission of living and testifying to God’s mercy so that the hearts of all people will be inspired to walk on the path leads to the Father.¹¹

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

¹⁰ Francis, General Audience (9 December 2015).

¹¹ Cf. Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 12.