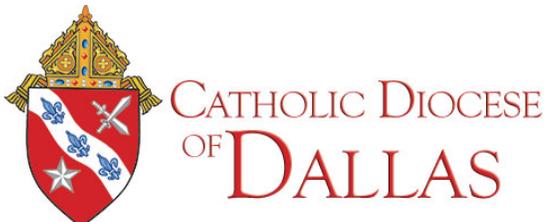

A Pastoral Letter for the Jubilee Year of Mercy

The Most Reverend Kevin J.
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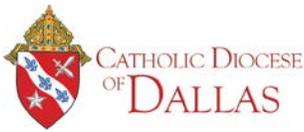
My dear brothers and sisters,

I address you in the spirit of Pope Francis who addressed his recent encyclical letter [*Laudato Si'*](#), On Care For Our Common Home, “to every person living on this planet,” (n. 3) and his letter announcing a Jubilee Year for Mercy ([*Misericordiae Vultus*](#), Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, n.23; hereafter MV) “to all who read it.” I begin by greeting all of you who seek, find, worship and serve God in any number of places (including churches, synagogues, mosques and in everyday life) and seek to be friends with God, with one another and with all creatures on this good earth. I invite you to consider sharing this letter with anyone who you think may be struggling with a commitment to organized religion or may want to know more about this upcoming special year of God’s mercy.

I write to you as we are all still in the afterglow of the [historic visit of Pope Francis to these United States](#). Our Holy Father proved himself to be exactly, a holy father, a wise counselor to our government officials, a leader among other world leaders and a true pastor to all. He invited representatives in the corridors of power in Washington, D.C., to evaluate their positions on a number of issues so that we as a society may “*do unto others what you would have them to do unto you*”. In effect, to show mercy as we, in fact, want to be shown mercy. He then applied the Golden Rule to a number of familiar issues, like migration, which remains a very important issue here in the state of Texas. He added a number of new issues, including care for the environment. He raised the expectation on other issues like the abolition of the death penalty. As the bishop of Rome, he spoke twice to the American bishops encouraging them, and yet also challenging them, in a way that a father needs to do (see, [Hebrews 12:7](#)). He invited people like me as your bishop to stay very close to you and both to encourage and support our priests to do the same. I say this, fully aware of the very large numbers of people, thank God, who belong to our parishes, who cooperate in a variety of ministries, who celebrate together the sacred liturgy and who work together to serve the poor, the homeless and the hungry. As a pastor, Pope Francis, led us through a series of talks and homilies in Philadelphia about the reality of family life and the challenges that are real and present in our twenty-first century.

In addition, who of us can ever forget the way he embraced infants brought to him numberless times during the drives in his Popemobile, and the way he embraced the young girl in a wheelchair in the center aisle of St. Patrick’s Cathedral. We will always remember the moment when he welcomed a young girl on the street in Washington, D.C., whose hand-written letter asked that the pope intercede so her migrant parents could enjoy citizenship in “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Throughout his journey to this country the Holy Father showed us by word and deed the human face of divine mercy; mercy always given to any and all through God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, “in whom we live and move and have our being.” ([Acts 17:28](#)). The cogency of the pope’s addresses and the keen pastoral insights in his homilies and instructions were always combined with his inviting and unassuming manner. There was no more poignant example than when he met the homeless and hungry at St. Patrick’s Church in Washington, D.C. Throughout his papacy Pope Francis has consistently been a model of integrity: not saying one thing and



doing something different, but consistently saying and doing the same thing (see [Matthew 7:21,24-29](#), [MV](#) n. 12). He was and is a Holy Father.

Extending mercy did not begin or end with a papal journey. Extending mercy and personifying mercy are key characteristics of God himself. God's all-encompassing mercy started before time began. In the meantime, Pope Francis has decreed that from December 8, 2015 (Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception) until November 20, 2016 (Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe) we will celebrate an **Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy**. He invites us to live an authentic faith life in the Church when we profess and proclaim mercy and bring people close to our Savior, the source of mercy for us all ([MV](#) n.1).

The purpose of this letter is to invite us to reflect together on what these next months can mean for us in terms of appreciating how mercy is at the center of God's relations with us and should be at the center of our relations with each other and the entire cosmos.

Jesus

With the words "Jesus [is] the face of the Father's mercy" ([MV](#) n. 1), the Holy Father begins his letter on the Holy Year and asserts that these words could well sum up the Christian faith. Why? Simply put this phrase means that from all eternity God willed and acted so that we could live here on earth and return to Him for eternity in perfect harmony with Him, each other and all creation. The pope reminds us of the biblical story of the sin of Adam and Eve, their disobedience and banishment from the Garden of Eden ([MV](#) n. 3). The result of the action of our first parents means that each of us is born into the human family bearing the human condition and estranged from God. But that banishment was to be temporary. The beginning of true and full reconciliation with God began with the Father sending the Son to restore what was lost. The disobedience of Adam brought alienation from God. The obedience of Christ, the Second Adam, began the process of reconciliation and restoration.

As we reflect on our place in the world, in personal and communal terms, we know only too well that we are imperfect, that relations among nations are imperfect and that we need the kind of help that only can come from God. God's help – this help we come to know as God's mercy – establishes and confirms the sense of peace in the world.

I begin by using these words of the Holy Father in order to emphasize that "mercy" is less a concept and more a way of understanding our relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and especially how we understand who Jesus is. When we remind ourselves that Jesus is the face of God's mercy, we can also say that Jesus is the face of God's justice, of God's peace, of God's reconciliation. In effect what we are talking about in this Holy Year is our relationship with Christ the Son of God, human and divine and how we in our humanity experience divinity through, with and in Christ. This is the key that unlocks the true meaning of Christmas. From the fifth century on, Christians have heard this prayer prayed at Christmas Day Mass:

O God who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature
and still more wonderfully restored it,



grant, we pray,
that we may share in the divinity of Christ,
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.
(from Pope Leo the Great, Collect, Christmas Day)

It is also worth recalling that Pope Francis is a Jesuit, a member of the Society of Jesus. Therefore, it is not surprising that he speaks so readily and often about Jesus and our relatedness to him and to each other. It is important to remember that the word “Jesus” literally means “the one who saves.” That Pope Francis wants us all to experience the fullness of God through Jesus is made clear again and again. Jesus is the incarnate face of God. This is the central theme of Pope Francis’ teachings, prayer and actions. The profound mystery of the Word made flesh is repeated each time we say the Nicene Creed together at Mass.

For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.

The Holy Father repeatedly refers to the *Incarnation* – the divine nature of the Son of God uniting in the human nature of Jesus Christ as a central tenet of our faith. This term is really a summary of much of Pope Francis’ Jesuit-inspired prayer and spirituality. Such incarnational spirituality was present at Christmas Mass (Midnight Mass) last year at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, when Pope Francis requested that – Mozart’s Mass *in C minor* be used as the setting for the Creed. This is not only one of his favorite music pieces, but, it also places great emphasis on the phrase *et incarnatus est*, “was incarnate...” The Holy Father led the congregation to kneel during this part of the Creed to listen and meditate on the true Christmas mystery.

This favorite phrase of Pope Francis, *et incarnatus est*, can be seen as a basis for the profound assertion to begin this holy year that “Jesus [is] the face of God’s mercy.” ([MV](#) n. 1)

Why Catholicism?

This question may sound strange in a letter coming from a Catholic bishop. Recent studies about faith traditions and religious practice indicate an increasing number of people who judge themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” and as “believers, but not believers.” In the most recent Pew Research Center study, the highest percentage in terms of religious self-identification are called the “nones,” meaning those who have no (“none”) religious affiliation or preference. In addition, depending on the survey results you read, it is asserted that for every one person who comes into the Catholic Church each year (especially at Easter) three or four (or more) leave. This means that we have to face the possibility of a crisis in Church membership and not put our heads in the sand.

Put somewhat differently, we need to ask ourselves this: what does being a Catholic mean in a particular way and what strengths does Catholicism bring to the ecumenical and interreligious table?



Allow me to mention two things. The first concerns our Catholics as being “spiritual *and* religious.” The word religion comes from the Latin *ligare*, meaning “to bind together.” As Catholics, our system of beliefs and practices binds us together. Catholic religion is a theological tradition where thinking about the questions of the day and welcoming them is part and parcel of who we are. This means that we welcome honest debate, based on the bedrock of the revelation in scripture as well as in the church’s magisterium, teaching and preaching. One of the characteristic points of Catholicism is that of asking questions in the context of faith and coming to ever-new insights. In effect, we are “spiritual *and* religious” because Catholicism is an inquiring theological religion.

The second point that I mention is that we Catholics are “believers *and* belongers.” From the time of Abraham and Sarah in the Book of Genesis through Christ’s shedding his blood for our salvation, the biblical evidence is that we belong to a covenant religion whose basis is belonging to each other in a community and believing in and worshipping God together. I emphasize that, in the same way the celebration of the sacred liturgy is the heart of our communal prayer life in which the rites and prayers have enormous theological significance and spiritual meaning. As the pope reminds us, we rely on the mediation of the church community to live our lives of faith especially when celebrated in the sacraments (*MV* n. 22). In addition, the ancient adage “what we pray is what we believe” (*lex orandi, lex credendi*) means that the more we comprehend and appreciate the liturgy the more we can experience the infinite depths of the richness and the wisdom of God. Liturgical prayer is not something we make up. The Church provides it for us. Our celebration of the liturgy incorporates us as a community again and again into Christ’s saving mysteries which were instituted “so that sins may be forgiven” ([Mt. 26:28](#)), and embedded in all the Eucharistic prayers at Mass).

In Catholicism, the words of the scriptures, of our theological giants like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, and of our magisterium, matter a great deal. In Catholicism, the words and rites of the liturgy matter a great deal. Both theology and liturgy reflect our being and becoming spiritual and religious, believers *and* belongers.

Forgiveness, Salvation, Redemption.

As Catholics, in our teaching, liturgical tradition and personal prayer we often use the words “mercy,” “forgiveness,” “salvation” and “redemption” to describe what we ask of God because of inheriting the “original sin” of Adam and Eve, thus our estrangement from God and our need for God and union with God. We ask for these things because of the restlessness of the human heart. As St. Augustine famously prayed “we are made for you, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Theologically, as Catholics, we use the rhetoric of “forgiveness” and “mercy” as a way of describing who Christ is as the second Adam. At the same time the Holy Father is well aware (as was St. John Paul II in his encyclical [Dives in Misericordia](#)) that in today’s culture many people judge that they do not need God’s mercy. They live in an “I’m OK, you’re OK, and that’s OK” culture where any fault is blamed on another, or worse, not ever felt or acknowledged. In this extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy, Pope Francis invites us to “listen to the

Word of God” ([MV](#) n. 13) so that we are aware of our need for mercy and confident in God’s mercy. In the spirit of Pope Francis, I invite us to read and reflect (in the ancient prayer form known as *lectio divina*) on [Romans 12: 1-21](#), which for me has always been a useful examination of conscience leading to a fruitful experience of receiving God’s mercy in the Sacrament of Penance. It is hard to come away from praying over Romans 12 without acknowledging sin and imperfection while realizing and experiencing God’s gracious love as expounded throughout the entire Letter to the Romans. Or as the letter to the Ephesians says, God is “rich in mercy” ([Ephesians 2:4](#)), which are the first words of the encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*).

Then there is the issue of forgiving others – seventy times seven times ([Matthew 18:22](#)) as Pope Francis reminds us from the verses leading to the parable of the ruthless servant ([Matthew 18:23-35](#), [MV](#) n. 9). As rich in mercy and forgiveness as is the God we believe in, sometimes in our broken and fragile lives there are times when we ask forgiveness for ourselves but cannot forgive others. Sometimes these hurts of the human heart are so deep and so painful that we literally turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the person(s) who offended us in order to survive. Sometimes it is hurtful to hear “forgive and forget.” Saying “I can forgive but I can never forget” is really a defense, or worse self-deception. Sometimes when we have been hurt that deeply and it was not our fault, which is almost always the case, asking for forgiveness that leads to reconciliation is the last thing we judge we can possibly do. The all too real issue of abuse is one example of this kind of violation with long-lasting effects. We find it very hard to want to be reconciled with the one(s) who committed the hurt. The words of the Lord’s Prayer “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” can sometimes be almost unutterable.

When I speak with people about their inability to forgive, I counsel them that it is very true that forgiveness does not come easily in life. Real forgiveness requires deep conversion and an ever-deepening surrender to God. I also say that if we do not forgive then we also choose to live in the past. The pain is as present as the moment it occurred, no matter the passage of time. It is of great significance that almost all our liturgies contain the communal recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us...as we forgive.” Those words are both consoling and challenging. In the Church’s wisdom we say this prayer several times a day at sacraments and in other prayers (like the Rosary). This repetition is intentional because it is hard to truly forgive and that forgiveness is only possible with divine help and the support of others, especially in the Church. I often advise people to pause as we begin to say the Lord’s Prayer at Mass and to reflect on these words: I need the Lord’s help to be able to forgive, and to reach the depth of forgiveness that enables me to live fully in the present and in joyful hope for the future. It is often said that there is no such thing as “cheap grace” as grace came because of the sacrifice of Jesus’ life. It is also true that there is no such thing as “cheap forgiveness.” True forgiveness needs to come from the heart and soul of our very being.

In addition to the words “mercy” and “forgiveness”, there are two other words we use in Catholic theology and the sacred liturgy to describe how we understand who Christ is and what we ask from God. These words are used most frequently during the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas.

The first word is “**salvation.**” This term is a healing metaphor and indicates that our Savior comes to heal us from any hurts or things that hinder us from being our best and most authentic



selves. Pope Francis repeatedly says that we are to rely with great confidence on “the medicine of mercy,” a phrase he quotes from St. John XXIII. In saying this, the Holy Father stands in line with a very long line of teachers of the Catholic faith who stressed how the sacraments were medicines to act as antidotes to what causes us spiritual illness.

During Advent we pray that God would send us a Savior, not in the sense that Christ our Savior is ever absent, but in the sense that we need to open ourselves once again to receive him and his saving grace. On the feast of Christmas we hear the gospel of Luke announcing, once again, “*Today* is born a Savior, Christ the Lord” ([Luke 2:11](#)). The “today” referred to here is from the Latin term *hodie*, meaning that what we experience in and through the liturgy happened once in human history, continues on through all of human history, and is celebrated in a privileged and unique way in the annual cycle of feasts and seasons. Or as Pope Leo the Great said, “what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries” (from the [Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 1115](#)).

The other word is “**redemption**.” This term is an economic metaphor and indicates that what Christ did and still does is to “buy back” what was once lost in the Garden of Eden and is lost in our lives because of behaviors such as, selfishness, squandering the world’s resources, lack of charity toward others. Join me in recalling with fondness the teaching and example of St. John Paul II whose first encyclical was *Redemptor Hominis*, Christ “the redeemer of the human race.” St. John Paul II wrote repeatedly about how Christ came to redeem and to sanctify us and admonished us again and again “be not afraid” ([Mt. 14:27](#)). What an encouraging and invitational posture to assume when we consider our lives before God, with each other and in our “common home” the very earth upon which we dwell (again quoting the title of Pope Francis’ encyclical on the environment). Liturgical prayer during Advent is filled with references to asking that our redeemer would come again among us. On the First Sunday of Advent you will hear the priest recite the Prayer over the offerings:

Accept, we pray, O Lord, these offerings we make,
gathered from among your gifts to us,
and may what you grant to us to celebrate devoutly here below,
gain for us the prize of eternal redemption.

This is a reminder that what we experience here on Earth will come to its fulfillment in heaven. In the meantime at the Christmas Mass during the Night, the Prayer after the Communion asks:

Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God,
that we, who are gladdened by participation
in the feast of our Redeemer’s Nativity,
may through an honorable way of life become worthy
of union with him.

All of this is summarized in the famous “Jesus Prayer”: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Here we acclaim the second person of the Trinity. We acclaim him as “Lord Jesus Christ” because he has ascended to the right hand of the Father and intercedes in heaven for us, and for all our needs. We plead “have mercy on us” in full confidence that the



way God wants to relate to us is always through superabundant grace to help us overcome the effects of original sin – in effect our separation from God - and our personal sins.

“God’s Justice is His Mercy” ([MV n. 20](#)).

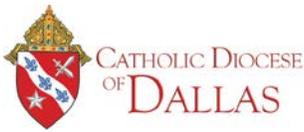
At the start of most sporting events in the U.S. and certainly at the start of sessions of our legislatures, we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, ending with the words “with liberty and justice for all.” It is often said that the U.S. is a nation of laws. Our legal system is meant to uphold “liberty and justice for all,” even though it can be a flawed system and justice may not be served equally “for all” and misjudgments can be made. In the end, justice is served by courts of law for which we are grateful and to which we are indebted. Pope Francis asserts: “justice is a fundamental concept for civil society, which is meant to be governed by the rule of law. Justice is also understood as that which is rightly due to each individual” ([MV n. 20](#)). He says further that “anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price. However, this is just the beginning of conversion, not its end, because one begins to feel the tenderness and mercy of God.”

The pope then goes on to discuss the relationship between justice and mercy ([MV nn. 20-21](#)). The Holy Father argues that justice and mercy are not two contradictory realities, but one single reality which culminates in the fullness of love. Regarding the Old Testament revelation, he says, “In these passages, justice is understood as the full observance of the Law and the behavior of every good Israelite in conformity with God’s commandments. Such a vision, however, has not infrequently led to legalism by distorting the original meaning of justice and obscuring its profound value. To overcome this legalistic perspective, we need to recall that in Sacred Scripture, justice is conceived essentially as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God’s will.” The pope continues, “For his part, Jesus speaks several times of the importance of faith over and above the observance of the law. It is in this sense that we must understand his words when, reclining at table with Matthew and other tax collectors and sinners, he says to the Pharisees raising objections to him, “*Go and learn the meaning of ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice’ . I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners*” ([Matthew 9:13](#)).”

For me, one of the most poignant of Jesus’ parables is of the day laborers in the vineyard ([Matthew 20:1-16](#)), all of whom receive the same wage but each of whom came to work at different times of the day. This seems to go against our usual notion of fairness, not even to say justice. But the poignancy of the parable is that it is a perfect expression of biblical justice, always influenced by mercy.

A Merciful Lent

Pope Francis singles out two very important biblical passages about mercy that are key texts used in the liturgy of Lent this coming year: [Isaiah 58: 9b-14](#) Lenten weekday (222) and Sunday (73) and also [Luke 15: 1-32](#) (only during Cycle C). I want to invite us all to a Lent filled with mercy, which is what Lent always celebrates but which will be particularly emphasized in this Jubilee Year of Mercy. Allow me to offer some thoughts on these and other texts that can be used this Lent as a kind of *lectio divina* to help us prepare for this season of mercy and conversion.



Ash Wednesday

The first reading from the prophet [Joel \(2:12-18\)](#) reminds us each year that we are entering upon a season of mercy:

Rend your hearts, not your garments,
and return to the Lord, your God.
For gracious and merciful is he,
slow to anger and rich in kindness,
and relenting in punishment. (vs. 13)

This is followed by the Responsorial Psalm, [Psalm 51](#), used regularly during Lent, with the refrain: “be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.”

The first verse of the Psalm follows:

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion
wipe out my offense.

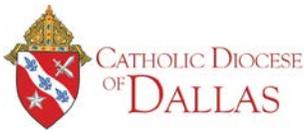
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.

At the Office of Readings on Ash Wednesday, the church proclaims exactly the same reading the pope refers to during this Holy Year: verses from [Isaiah 58 \(1-9a, also 9b-14\)](#). Notably this Isaiah 58 is divided and used as the first reading for the Eucharist on the Friday and Saturday after Ash Wednesday.

The prophet takes on the kind of fasting that focuses in itself and not focused on what fasting should lead to. He says:

This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke;
setting free the oppressed,
breaking every yoke;
sharing your bread with the hungry,
sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;
clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your own. (vss. 6-7)

If you remove from your midst oppression,
false accusation and malicious speech;
if you bestow your bread on the hungry
and satisfy the afflicted;



the light shall rise for you in the darkness,
and the gloom shall become for you like midday; (vss. 9-10)

As we hear these words again, it is hard not to recall the example which Pope Francis repeatedly gives us about caring for the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the immigrant, even in the city of Rome itself. He often reminds us to look into the faces of the poor and to see there the face of Christ himself. He teaches what Mother Teresa taught her sisters: when you bathe the dying, you bathe Christ himself. These actions make real the corporal works of mercy, which the pope summarizes as important actions to engage in and become second nature to us, especially during this Holy Year ([MV](#) n. 15). I think here of the exemplary work done by Catholic Charities and by the members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, by our permanent deacons and by so very many parish social justice ministries that make real in our diocese the corporal works of mercy. Among the spiritual works of mercy which Pope Francis encourages the following that are particularly poignant and pertinent to the season of Lent: *comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead* ([MV](#) n. 15).

Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent

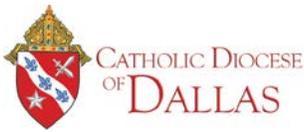
The other biblical passage the Holy Father refers to is the parable of the prodigal son/father, [Luke 15: 11-32](#). This poignant gospel text is familiar to us all due to its use in penance services and its recurrence in the Lenten liturgy, specifically the fourth Sunday of Lent in the Cycle “C” readings. Thus it will be proclaimed this coming Lent, along with two other texts about God’s mercy on the third and fifth Sundays.

Third Sunday -- [Luke 13:1-9](#)

This parable instructs us once again about how God’s ways seem to contradict our customary ways. In this text, the parable puts aside the typical human way of looking and acting. The man who owned the garden ordered the vinedresser to cut down a fig tree that had no yield for three years. This makes perfect sense. Yet, the vinedresser asks that the man allow the tree to stay one more year and to receive special attention. Again, God’s patient mercy overturns customary expectations.

Fourth Sunday – [Luke 15:1-3, 11-32](#)

This familiar parable is often called “*The Parable of the Prodigal Son*” because the word “prodigal” means spending lavishly and extravagantly. Clearly this is what the younger son did with his share of his father’s inheritance. Yet the word “prodigal” can also be used to refer to the father, because when the son returns (as we might remark “he came to his senses”), the father spends lavishly and extravagantly to host a party to welcome him home. One of the most famous depictions of this parable is Rembrandt’s painting called “*The Return of the Prodigal Son*” (*variously dated from 1661-69*). Art historians and experts have critiqued that, in depicting the embrace of the son by the father, that the father’s hands are slightly different in shape and size. The left hand is slightly larger and ruddier than the smaller, softer right hand. Some art historians argue that the left hand is the “justice” hand and the right hand is the “mercy”



hand. For our purposes during this holy year, we might think of it as God embracing us with the principle of justice and the medicine of mercy, always understood together.

In that same painting Rembrandt portrays the elder son on the right as watching the embrace but who is obviously unmoved, possibly stern. This reflects the poignancy of the biblical text: toward the end the elder son protests the reconciliation by recounting all that he did while staying home and working for the father. The father pleads that the elder son “celebrate and rejoice” (vs. 32) because his brother was “dead, and has come back to life” (vs. 32). This is where the gospel ends. Some have called this the saddest verses in the New Testament. We never know whether there was reconciliation. Sadly, there is no mention of a festive meal shared among father and sons.

Once again I quote the Holy Father as he applies the attitude of the father in this parable to the Sacrament of Penance, especially in his advice to confessors: “...a father who runs out to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance. Confessors are called to embrace the repentant son who comes back home and to express the joy of having him back again. Let us never tire of also going out to the other son who stands outside, incapable of rejoicing, in order to explain to him that his judgment is severe and unjust and meaningless in light of the father’s boundless mercy. May confessors not ask useless questions, but like the father in the parable, interrupt the speech prepared ahead of time by the prodigal son, so that confessors will learn to accept the plea for help and mercy pouring from the heart of every penitent. In short, confessors are called to be a sign of the primacy of mercy always, everywhere, and in every situation, no matter what.” ([MV](#) n. 17)

Fifth Sunday -- [John 8:1-11](#).

This text is often called “the woman caught in adultery” based on verse 5 referring to the law of Moses which says “to stone such women.” (John 8:5). In fact, it might well be called “the woman who is publicly humiliated and takes the blame for herself and the man” because in other texts both man and woman are to be put to death ([Lev. 20:10](#), [Deut. 22:22-24](#)). The strict interpretation of Mosaic law is that the woman was to be killed. When asked for his verdict, Jesus simply traces the ground with his finger and ignores the question. Then he says “Let the man among you who has no sin cast the first stone.” (verse 7). Again he traces his finger on the ground. When he stood up, the woman said that no one had condemned her, to which Jesus said “*Nor do I condemn you. You may go. From now on, avoid this sin.*” (verse 11).

Once again, it is Rembrandt’s painting *The Woman Taken in Adultery* that offers us keen insight into this text. The two figures who stand out are Jesus and the woman: Jesus because he is depicted as being taller in stature than the accusatory crowd, and the woman painted in white placed against a very dark background. Art historians will say that Jesus’ height was to show his moral superiority compared with the “scribes and Pharisees” who were the accusers. The fact that the woman was depicted in white shows that the darkness of the (old) law needs the light of Christ reflected in all whom, like the woman, receive his light of forgiveness and then radiate that light.

It is noteworthy that the “scribes and Pharisees” of this text combine with the “scribes and Pharisees” as well as the “tax collectors and sinners” from the beginning of the parable of the prodigal son ([Luke 15:1-2](#)). The specially invited guests - tax collectors and sinners - are the outcasts of society. They who are normally marginal are now center-stage. The “scribes and Pharisees,” masters of the law, are held out as those most in need of instruction about God’s justice, which again, as Pope Francis reminds us, is his mercy ([MV](#) n. 20).

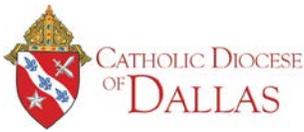
Do not Judge or Condemn.

As we have come to expect Pope Francis can be very direct in what he says and very pastoral in what he advises. In the letter announcing the Year of Mercy, he recalls the words of Jesus “judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned” ([Luke 6:37](#)). It sounds all so simple. But as we know from experience, sometimes it is not. One of the seven capital sins, so described from the early church onward, is *envy*, whose complement is *jealousy*. The manifestation of *envy* and *jealousy* is gossip. When we gossip, we speak ill of others and sometimes even undermine their reputation. There is no such thing as “innocent” gossip. Gossip is lethal. Gossip is the key manifestation of envy and jealousy. Fundamentally, envy and jealousy mean that we do not accept ourselves as we are with our gifts, talents and abilities as God has created us. This lack of self-acceptance means that we sin against God because we deny our very selves, the person who God made in his image and likeness.

Another aspect of voicing judgment or condemnation is that we can never take it back. Once those words are spoken or written (all too readily available in our internet and “instant messaging” world) they cannot be taken back. To utter a word of judgment or condemnation is to enact an injustice and to issue a condemnation. Given the fact that we can never erase emails entirely (with the right tools someone somewhere can find them) those words never go away. Among those who practice religion faithfully there can be a tendency to engage in the worst form of gossip, that is, to judge others’ religious practices. One glaringly public example of this is gossiping about who should receive Communion at Mass. No one should ever decide what is another person’s practice. Often we do not know all the facts or the counsel that others have received from a priest about their state before God, or the way they practice the Catholic faith.

With tender wisdom the pope counsels that during this Year of Mercy we should rediscover “the value of silence in order to mediate on the Word that comes to us” ([MV](#) n. 13). I would take this in a parallel direction and invite all to rediscover that silence can be important preventive medicine lest we gossip, judge or condemn.

I once learned the monastic value of silence from a wise Benedictine novice master. He was explaining why St. Benedict (as well as other monastic founders) put such a value on silence in the monastery among the community and with the guests. One reason is to allow the monk to be open and able to listen to God speaking to him at any time and as a way of praying over the things they discover in *lectio divina*. But then he said another reason is charity. Why? Because in the monastery it is likely that all the monks have to talk about are the other monks. All too often comments about the other monks are simply gossip.



A cultivated silence during this Jubilee Year of Mercy might well help us to cultivate self-acceptance and confidence in the person God created us to be, and wants us to become. The more we accept God's love in creating us the less will we need to put others down in gossip, judgment or condemnation.

An Extraordinary Year.

The fact that Pope Francis has described these next months as “the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy” means that this time is not intended to be “business as usual.” It is meant to be extraordinary in a number of ways. The pope illustrates this by speaking of the special ceremonies in Rome of opening the “Holy Door” in St. Peter’s basilica on December 8th and of the basilica of St. John Lateran, the cathedral church of Rome, on the Third Sunday of Advent ([MV](#) 3). The fact that these doors are closed in brick and mortar except for Holy Years means that when they are open more people can enter the basilica and do there what pilgrims do: pray together, celebrate sacraments and be still in the presence of the Lord. During this particular Jubilee Year of Mercy, these doors will be called “Doors of Mercy.”

In the Diocese of Dallas, I have chosen to designate a “Holy Door” a “Door of Mercy” at the Cathedral Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Pilgrims who pass through this Door will earn a Plenary Indulgence upon completing the requirements for this precious gift of the Church. The Door will be officially designated at the noon Mass on Sunday, December 13, 2015

The pope also speaks of sending out “Missionaries of Mercy” ([MV](#) n. 18), who are confessors to extend God’s mercy through the Sacrament of Penance leading towards reconciliation with God, each other and all of creation. In the Diocese of Dallas, all priests are Missionaries of Mercy and I ask all parishes to provide more opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is my hope that every Parish would have extra Penance Services during the year; extra times for scheduled confessions during the week; organize and promote the program “The Light is on for you” during Advent and Lent and promote the “Come Home for Christmas” initiative.

Instructions on the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy should be made the subject of homilies, study groups and the curriculum in parish schools and Religious Education programs. Liturgy planners should include petitions highlighting the Mercy of God in the prayers of the faithful.

Pope Francis speaks of the value of pilgrimage to make this Holy Year, a custom derived from visiting the holy places in, among other places, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Rome. The Diocese of Dallas will designate special times during the Jubilee Year for parishes in each of our Deaneries to make a pilgrimage to the Cathedral. Times will be scheduled for parishes to come to the Cathedral, join with their fellow Catholics for special prayers services including Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, Scripture Readings and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I urge clergy, especially pastors, to arrange time for a parish pilgrimage to the Cathedral: to experience the Sacrament of Penance, for Solemn Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, and for litanies, personal prayer, and yes, silence. Parish and individual opportunities abound for the



Jubilee Year of Mercy. I also encourage all People of God to extend a hand, a compassionate face, or open arms and hearts of mercy to others by means of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Such works need to be our habit and our renewed, merciful way of living.

With concern for those from other churches and religious traditions, Pope Francis says that...“I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions and with other noble religious traditions; may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination” ([MV](#) 23). This is one of the imperatives from the Second Vatican Council which needs to be revisited.

Conclusion

I want to encourage you to take this extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy very seriously, allowing God’s mercy to renew and revitalize your faith and the faith of all people in the Diocese of Dallas. Each day I am humbled that my name is spoken in the Eucharistic prayer at Mass along with that of the Holy Father. Allow me to quote the words of the pope when he repeatedly says “pray for me.” I rely on your prayer for me at each and every Mass, realizing that as my name is spoken it is really my ministry among you and the whole diocese that is supported by that prayer. Please know that, during this extraordinary Year of Mercy, I will pause each day as I pray the Lord’s Prayer at Mass and at the Liturgy of the Hours and any sacrament I celebrate, to remind myself that the “Our” in the “Our Father” is made concrete and real with you as fellow pilgrims in the Diocese of Dallas. Especially now, I will hold you in my mind, in prayer, and in my heart. Thank you for who you are and for all that you do.