



JUBILEE OF MERCY
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Notes for Priests, Deacons, Pastoral Ministers, Religious Educators
The Meaning of God's Mercy and Our Response

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The Jubilee Year of Mercy is upon us. It represents a great moment of spiritual opportunity to retrieve the heart of our faith and to live that faith out in eminently practical ways. Preachers, religious educators, and those responsible for faith formation have a chance to weave the theme of God's mercy into the ministries they exercise in the Church with greater emphasis and creativity. A challenge that they face, however, is giving some specific content to the notion of "mercy." It can be perceived as an unobjectionable but general and even vague conceptualization. In fact, mercy in our biblical and theological tradition has considerable content and power. In these notes, I want to offer some specifics concerning mercy as background for those who are inviting and forming others in the mercy of God. My aim is to be concise. If you want more development, please check the references found at the end of these notes.

We can begin with a very simple definition-description of God's mercy:

God's mercy is God's free and gracious readiness to forgive and transform us.

What does this mean?

The word "readiness" implies a disposition. The Bible speaks of God's mercy in terms of a disposition of "God's heart." It is a disposition rooted in love and appropriately compared to the tenderness of a parent for a child.

God's mercy is a grace or free gift that God bestows on us. So, by its very nature, mercy is not something that we earn, achieve, or might even deserve. It is pure gift, pure grace.

When we speak of the gift of mercy as God's readiness, we understand that it is available to us as a gift. That also means that it is a gift which must be received, in order for it to take root in our lives. God's mercy touches our lives, only if we accept it, receive it, and say "yes" to it. God's mercy is never imposed. God gives it to us freely, and we must freely accept it.

Some people will say that it is well and good to speak of God's mercy, but that we cannot forget God's justice. In saying this, they seem to set God's justice in opposition to God's mercy, as if these were two unrelated realities. In my estimation, this opposition of divine justice and mercy stems from an all too human way of thinking about the relationship of justice and mercy. Our conventional human patterns do not mirror God's ways interacting with us.

For human beings, the goal of justice is often retribution or punishment for wrongs committed, or a restoration of things to their previous state, or an equalization of forces. The goal of God's holy justice is much different.

In the Bible, the goal of justice is standing right with God and, therefore, with others as well. That sense of justice can only happen or be achieved through the action of God's mercy—not through retribution, restoration, or equalization.

From another perspective, God's mercy far exceeds our generally limited human measure of mercy. We say that God's mercy has to do not only with our forgiveness but also with our transformation. We come to understand that divine mercy is more than forgiveness for what has transpired, as important as that is. Divine mercy also leads to a constructive and creative action that truly transforms us by infusing us with God's very own life.

Catholic teaching strongly insists that every grace summons us to responsibility. If we have received the gift of mercy, then, of course, we are summoned to gratitude before the immensity of God's goodness which has touched our lives. There is also another dimension of responsibility. If we have been touched and transformed by God's mercy, then we are responsible for becoming and being the instruments of that mercy in our world. According to Matthew 25, the fundamental criterion on which we shall be judged at the end of time is the compassionate mercy that we have extended to others.

Resources for further study

As Cardinal Walter Kasper has noted, the theme of mercy has been largely neglected in Catholic theology. The Jubilee Year of Mercy helps to remedy this situation. There are also some resources which can be helpful to probe the deeper meaning of mercy.

Two documents of papal teaching are essential:

Pope Saint John Paul II, *Dives in misericordiae: On Divine Mercy* (1980)

Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus: Bull of Indiction for the Holy Year of Mercy* (2015)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a number of references to mercy (see the index). Two references, however, are particularly noteworthy: (1) Numbers 210-211 speak of God as merciful and gracious and so represented across the Sacred Scriptures; (2) Numbers 1846-1848 speak of mercy and sin in way that focuses on our existential situation.

From a theological perspective, Karl Rahner offers a very synthetic description of both divine and human mercy in his *Theological Dictionary*, trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), s.v. "mercy."

A somewhat more extended treatment of mercy can be found in: Adolf Darlap, "Mercy" in *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol 4, no trans. given (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), pp. 10-11.

Finally, there is the magisterial work on mercy by Cardinal Walter Kasper: *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2014),