

INVITATION

Brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ:

The Jubilee Year of Mercy has now begun.

This year we are invited to open ever wider the doors of our hearts, our homes and our churches - and having more deeply experienced the love and mercy of God ourselves - we are asked to bring that warmth and tenderness to all those we meet.

In this Pastoral Letter, I invite you to explore with me what the Jubilee Year of Mercy means; where it comes from; what graces and blessings it offers and how best we might celebrate it together here in Ferns diocese.

The Jubilee Year of Mercy

The Jubilee of Mercy was announced by Pope Francis last March.

It commenced on 8th December and it will run until 20th November 2016.

Both dates are well chosen and rich in significance.

In the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (8th December) we see how God the Father kept His promise to intervene, to save and heal humanity, immediately upon the Fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15).

In the Feast of Christ the King, (20th November 2016), Jesus, our Sovereign King, is revealed as "the Living Face of the Father's Mercy" (Pope Francis).

Pope Francis has chosen the verse "**be merciful as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:36)**" from Luke's Gospel as the central theme of the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

In very simple terms, we are invited to approach God anew seeking an ever deeper experience of His mercy. And as God is merciful to us in the encounter, we are invited to wholeheartedly mirror that mercy to one another.



What are the origins of a Jubilee Year?

The word 'Jubilee' is derived from the Hebrew word 'jovel' – meaning ram's horn – the blowing of which announced a special time of joy and celebration for the people, every fifty years. (Cf. Leviticus 25:8-55).

During the time of jubilee, sins were forgiven, debts were cancelled and slaves were freed.

The Jubilee was "a year of favour from the Lord" (Isaiah 61:2).

In Jesus Christ, since His incarnation in human history, that Jubilee is always happening now: "for now is the favourable time. This is the day of salvation" (II Cor. 2:6).

To highlight this salvific opportunity, the Church has by way of Jubilee Year - at various times down the centuries - drawn our attention to this wonder of God's Love made visible and accessible to us in His Son (I John 4:9, Romans 8:39).





Pope Francis, successor to St. Peter, has chosen to continue this tradition by drawing our attention to the theme of God's love 'expressed in mercy' through The Jubilee Year of Mercy, a gift to the Universal Church, in this Year of 2015 to 2016.

The Concept of Mercy in Sacred Scripture.

The Hebrew Scriptures:

From the very moment of humanity's straying from God's Truth - in the Fall of Adam and Eve, their act of rebellion against God - the response of God was mercy. God immediately opened the way back towards healing and forgiveness. He said to the Devil, who had instigated and plotted the first sin, "I will put enmity between you and the Woman, between your seed and her seed". This text of Genesis 3:15, is regarded by the fathers of the Church as the Protoevangelium (i.e. the first announcement of the Gospel), of our deliverance through the Son of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary.

The Hebrew word for 'Mercy' is *hesed* which translates as 'grace', as 'loving kindness'.

God is constant in His merciful and kind reaction to the waywardness and rebellion of human beings throughout our history of sin.

The image of God's loving kindness, in the Hebrew Scriptures, is beautifully described by St John Paul II, during an address at the General Audience, on July 23rd, 2003: "God is a Loving Father, who leans over the physical and interior wounds of the human person, surrounding him and her with tenderness and care".

The Christian Scriptures:

In the Gospels and in the New Testament, the image of God's kindness and love take on the human nature, face and features of God Incarnate, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, living among wounded and sinful human beings. In His ministry and teaching, He clarifies, for all Eternity, that the Living God is on the side of suffering and sinful humanity. By His passion and death, He identifies Himself with us at the terrifying crux of our existence. In His resurrection from the dead, He vindicates our human nature as destined for glory, to be embraced forever, most lovingly, by His Father and our Father.

God's Infinite Mercy is revealed in His Beloved Son, who speaks to us in the Parables of God's Mercy recounted in Luke's Gospel, chapter 15, (The Lost Coin, The Lost Sheep, The Lost Son) who shows us, in His most tender actions, that God "desires mercy" and that He came to call sinners (Luke 5:32).

The Theological Concept of Mercy

Theology, according to the ancient definition of St Anselm, is "faith seeking understanding". Theology is how the Church understands all of God's dealings with humanity. Theology is not a complicated science. It is easily grasped by the human heart that understands love and the need to be forgiven.

The Church, in its teachings, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, shows God's Face as a most loving and merciful gaze upon the afflictions and mistakes of human beings. God seeks only to forgive and to heal: "For God did not send his Son into the

world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him" (John 3:17). God reveals Himself to humanity as infinite mercy, abounding in loving kindness and He repeats constantly, to our ears, hearts and minds, 'do not fear'.

In His Beloved Son, through His Death and Resurrection, God has implicated and involved Himself, in the mess we have made of ourselves and Creation. His intervention is to raise us up and to kindly restore and heal. The merciful love of God re-clothes us in our original dignity, as flawless children of God.



For this reason, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception was chosen as the beginning of the Year of Mercy: the Immaculate Mother of the Lord, takes the hands of her children – and throughout the Jubilee of Mercy, as she always does - she brings us before the One Who has established His sovereignty over Death and every merciless power that oppresses humanity (I Cor. 15:17).

The Most Blessed Virgin stands as the one who crushes the head of ancient enmity and introduces the taste of 'the wine of the New Creation', of grace, mercy and joy. Pointing to her Most Merciful Son, she says: "do whatever He tells you" (Cf. John 2:1-12).

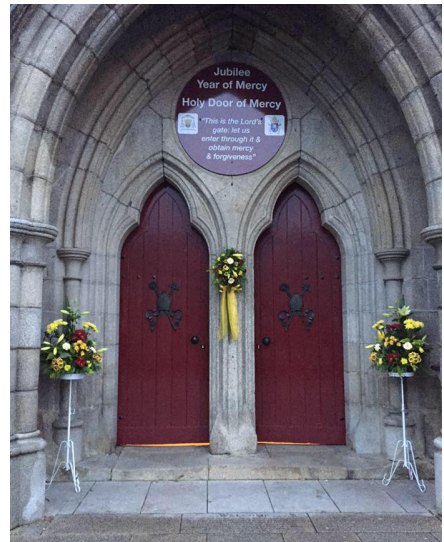
The Year of Mercy in Ferns Diocese

Some suggestions have been made as to how best we might mark the Year of Mercy in our diocese, our parishes and our individual lives. This list is in no way exhaustive. You may have suggestions of your own.

1. For the three days - 8th / 9th and 10th March, the sacrament of reconciliation is available at the Cathedral from 10am to 8.30pm. The priests of the diocese will be available and you are invited to come along - to enter by the Holy Door, to avail of the sacrament of reconciliation and to pray for the intentions of the Holy Father. Each day will begin with Mass at 10am and a service of reconciliation will occur each evening at 7.30.

2. On the afternoons of 8th and 9th March, the blessing of the sick will take place at the Cathedral at 3pm. You are invited to assist a relative or neighbour who might wish to come along and to participate.

3. Each of us is asked to look in to our own lives and see who it is we might need to forgive or who it is that we might need to approach with an apology.



4. We might consider joining an apostolic group - St. Vincent de Paul, Meals on Wheels, Family Life Services etc. - and offering our time, talent or treasure.
5. We might invite a friend or family member to return to Church and experience the mercy of God with us.
6. Go on pilgrimage as an individual or as a group - a local holy well, Our Lady's Island, Knock, Lough Derg, World Youth Day, Lourdes or Fatima. Become a helper on one of the diocesan pilgrimages.
7. Organise a coffee morning after Sunday Mass and make a special effort to include the elderly and the sick. Extend an invitation to all homes in the curacy or parish. Send out the message that all are welcome.
8. Bring your 'mercy candle' along to the Cathedral for the days of our Triduum (8th, 9th and 10th March) and have it blessed. Place your blessed candle in a place of prominence in your home and light it this year during a significant family event.



Conclusion

Divine Mercy is where God's unconditional love meets our sinfulness and our waywardness.

It is where we see clearly God's untiring and unending pursuit of us as his beloved sons and daughters. It is a glimpse of God's continuing search for us... His perpetual "leaving the rest" (Luke 15:4) to come and find us.

This epic pursuit will continue until the end of time.

Our God awaits us at every turn. And our turning back towards Him is His delight.

In approaching God for His mercy this year, may we be gifted with ever bigger hearts and minds - apologising to each other where needed - and graciously accepting an apology offered to us by another.

In a world that can at times get cold and dark, we the disciples of Jesus are invited to become warmer and brighter - a beacon of hope and kindness that reflects the light of Heaven - **"being merciful to others as our Father in Heaven is merciful to us."**

In this Year of Mercy may we hold out a hand to the outcast and the sinner, the person in darkness, the one in grief or pain, our neighbour who is lonely, our brother or sister in torment or in difficulty. And may we do that by opening our own lives to that Mercy first.

Sustained by mercy - may we be ambassadors of mercy - to those and for those, with whom we share this gift of God's life.

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Bishop of Ferns