

**PASTORAL LETTER
AT THE BEGINNING OF THE JUBILEE OF MERCY**

MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER

“Merciful like the Father”. This is the important message which the Jubilee of Mercy, inaugurated by Pope Francis, wants to convey to us all. Jesus himself declared that we should “be merciful just as the Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36).

Mercy: a sign of God’s love

The Good News may be summarised in Jesus’ own words: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). God is “rich in mercy” (Eph 2:4) and this attribute reveals most of all, God’s omnipotence (see *Misericordiae Vultus*, 6).

At the core of the Gospel there is the mercy of God. Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy: it is visible in his words, in his actions, in his entire person (see *Misericordiae Vultus*, 1). The Gospel reveals to us that whoever meets Jesus is able to experience God’s balm of mercy, which is a source of great joy.

Mercy: a sign of love to share with our brethren

We are called to be merciful because first and foremost, we ourselves were treated mercifully (see *Misericordiae Vultus*, 9). The mercy we receive from God makes us resemble him. Mercy, therefore, is a sign of love which we share with our brethren. Starting from the way we treat each other in life: to feel compassion for one another, to support each other in moments of difficulty, to bind the wounds of those who are wounded and to strive to overcome conflicts, hate, jealousy, to refrain from passing judgement on others which causes harm (see *Misericordiae Vultus*, 14). It is therefore fitting that during this Year of grace, we all proclaim the mercy of that God who loves us with an inner and concrete love. We can also do this by showing mercy in a tangible manner and in this way, we will continue announcing to mankind today the message of Psalm 136: “his mercy endures for ever”!

A concrete sign: safeguarding all weak and vulnerable creatures

“He kept us in mind when we were humbled, for his faithful love endures for ever!” (Psalm 136:23). God shows his mercy by protecting mankind, that needs to be sheltered from all things which threaten one’s life and liberty. As people who proclaim this mercy, we are all called upon to safeguard those persons who are most weak and vulnerable, those who mostly require protection. We should start with the human person from the moment of conception to the point of natural death: we must do our utmost to safeguard life from the very beginning, from the first eight weeks when the human being is an embryo. After eight weeks it carries a different name, but it remains one and the same human being that, when born, is legally recognized as a person. The law protects the human being from the moment of his or her existence; and rightly so, because the law must also be an expression of mercy that safeguards human life, giving particular attention to those that are most vulnerable and therefore require greater protection.

“He provides food for all living creatures, for his faithful love endures for ever” (Psalm 136:25). God, Father of all, shows his mercy by providing for the livelihood of all his children, created in his image and likeness. In this context, the Jubilee should highlight all the sufferings which immigrants face, many of whom arrive on our shores and others who arrive on other Mediterranean shores. It is appalling to read about the sufferings and humiliation which our brethren endure! When we welcome immigrants on our European shores, we are welcoming people who have walked the road of Calvary. This too is mercy. Blessed be our society when it utters words of love and respect when speaking about these people, our brethren. As your shepherds, we wish to state clearly that if someone speaks out with racist or hateful sentiments, this goes against our beliefs. Let anyone who insults or speaks with contempt about these people, convert!

A concrete sign: safeguarding creation

“In wisdom he made the heavens... He set the earth firm on the waters, for his faithful love endures for ever” (Psalm 136:5-6). Creation is an open book and if we look at it attentively, it demonstrates the greatness of God’s mercy. For this reason, to protect creation is a concrete sign of mercy. This year, Pope Francis offered us a beautiful document regarding the safeguarding of creation, the Encyclical Letter, *‘Laudato Si’*. He chose the word ‘creation’ to remind us that our environment was created by God. We need to safeguard the beauty of God’s creation and praise God, just as St Francis did: “Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon; Praised be You, through Brother Sun.” It is a great responsibility to look after our common home, and to sow beauty and not pollution and destruction.

A concrete sign: forgiving our enemies

“He rescued us from our enemies, for his faithful love endures for ever!” (Psalm 136:24). God’s mercy has the power to liberate us from all that which destroys our spirit (see Mt 10:38), from our true enemy that causes us to drown ourselves in feelings of anger, revenge and hatred towards our brethren. In his great mercy, Christ on the Cross is a sign of love, that weapon through which we emerge victorious: that self-giving love that is merciful and forgiving. Therefore, to forgive our enemies is an expression of mercy. The Lord encourages us to be merciful, just as the Father is merciful, and in the face of the violence, in the face of injustice, in the face of terrorism, He empowers us not to respond using the same language. With his help, we are empowered to resist the temptation to respond to violence with violence, the temptation to take revenge for any damages that are incurred. This is forgiving one’s enemy.

Jesus taught us that in the face of adversity, in the face of the violence, Christians must respond using a different language. The crucified Christ teaches us that the fundamental response is forgiveness and mercy. Lately, as Europeans, we have fallen victims to terrorism. How are we going to respond to such violence? As a community of faith, we are terrified to hear that these horrible acts are carried out in the name of God. As Pope Francis stated, to resort to violence, to kill innocent people in God’s name, is blasphemy! Whoever perpetrates such acts is doing great harm and is offending the heart of the Creator.

As Christians, as a Church, as a society, let us take the opportunity which this Holy Year of Mercy is giving us, to forgive one another sincerely, to proceed on the road to reconciliation. When we call to mind the many times we hurt each other, let us say: we need to stop falling

victim to our own sins, we need to desist from paying back one another, from using hard and hurtful words against each other. “Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 10).

The works of mercy

“Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his faithful love endures for ever!” (Psalm 136:26). This Jubilee Year should serve as a catalyst for us to give thanks to God, and at the same time, to embrace the wonderful and challenging mission to act as a reflection of Christ’s mercy to our brethren. This compels us to become more familiar with the works of mercy. The words of Jesus are very clear (see Mt 25): I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick, in prison. In such moments, Jesus expects that when we come face to face with our brethren who are in need, we see him. We should not turn away from those who are in need of our help, but support them fully. Pope Francis also mentions the spiritual works of mercy, which are also so important: to offer good advice, to teach the unlearned, to open the eyes of the sinner, to comfort those who are sad, to forgive trespasses, to be patient with people who annoy us, to pray to God for others, both alive and deceased. During this year, let us joyfully practise these deeds of mercy in our daily life. Let us lend an ear to those who are crying out for our help: “May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity!” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 15).

The balm of mercy

“Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love endures for ever!” (Psalm 136:1). Our Lord God is good and merciful. In fact, mercy is “the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved for ever despite our sinfulness” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 2). The Year of Mercy should encourage us never to give up. At times, in our weakness, we may be inclined to do so. Yet, “the high priest we have is not incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us, but has been put to the test in exactly the same way as ourselves, apart from sin” (Hebrews 4:15). If we want to believe in Jesus, we need to believe in him as the one who is compassionate towards us, who knows our weaknesses and helps us to move on.

The Lord does not look upon our sweet countenance in order to love us, he does not consider our holiness or the marks we have achieved in our exercise book of life. He does not say: ‘yes, you have achieved enough points for me to love you’. We are loved in spite of the fact that we are limited by our sin. “When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 3). For this reason, there lies a great value in the Sacrament of Reconciliation – confession – which conveys to us God’s mercy in such a beautiful manner. During this Year of Mercy, let us appreciate this Sacrament in a special way, may we treasure it and do our best to receive it joyfully as a means of God’s balm of mercy (see *Misericordiae Vultus*, 17).

Prayer

May our pilgrimages to the doors of Mercy, which will be opened at the Cathedrals and Sanctuaries on our islands, serve as a sign of our journey of conversion, in order that our own lives will be living witnesses to his mercy which endures for ever. In this way, we will really

pass through Christ, the gate through which we are saved and through which we will find eternal pasture (see Jn 10:9).

As we begin this Holy Year, as we prepare ourselves for the celebration of the birth of Christ in our midst, a feast of mercy which brings joy in our hearts, let us pray to Mary, Mother of Mercy, to help us always to hold dear in our hearts the mercy of God so that we too may be merciful like the Father.

We impart upon you our pastoral blessing as a pledge of the Lord's loving embrace.

Today, 8th December 2015, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

✠ **Charles J. Scicluna**
Archbishop of Malta

✠ **Mario Grech**
Bishop of Gozo