MASS FOR THE OPENING OF THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY
13 DECEMBER 2015
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Joined with the Church throughout the world we opened this Jubilee Year of Mercy by opening a door called holy.

That image of opening of a door has much to offer us as we begin this year long pilgrimage of renewal. Three things come to mind for me.

First, doors are opened by someone, someone who takes the lead, the initiative, to invite. This Jubilee of Mercy is God’s invitation. It is about what God is doing, and a reminder that as disciples of Jesus we live by God’s grace. If we are going to be holy, and move through doors that are holy, it will be because God has graced us. Becoming holy is God’s doing. He has prepared this year for us, and his mercy is waiting for us. That is the hope given to us as we are called to move, to change. We will not become holy by our doing, our efforts, which we know fall short, but by God’s special grace and initiative working now in this time and place. And so our first step, our first response to this open door of God’s mercy is to believe that God is inviting us to something new, is opening a new door for us that we have not had opened before. It also means putting aside the temptation as we look at the long stretch of our lives to conclude that this is as good as it gets, that our divisions in our families, our neighborhoods, our world can’t be healed. It means not settling for what we have or where we are in our relationships with one another, convincing ourselves that it is just too much trouble to change, to grow. That of course is the temptation of those who believe that they have to take care of their problems themselves; that everything depends on them. The offer in this year is to live in the freedom that everything does not depend on us. So, let us be attentive to the stirring of God’s new grace in us at this moment, a grace which we did not expect or initiate. That is the first message this open door offers to us.

Secondly, the door we cross over, like all doors, has a threshold that marks the entrance into a new space. There is the tradition of newlyweds crossing a threshold on their wedding day. In doing so they come into the new space of their relationship, where there are now new points of reference. This can be disconcerting, and even scary, for such a crossing means putting aside the familiar, giving up control, depending on someone else. All of that reminds us that our crossing over this threshold of the holy door into the new space of God’s mercy is more than coming to a new awareness about God. God’s mercy is not an idea or concept, but a person. Pope Francis has reminded us that Jesus is the face of God’s mercy. This year is about meeting more deeply the
person of Jesus, who has a different way of doing things, of settling disputes, of bridging gaps in human relationships.

For human beings, settling differences often involves a kind of justice marked by retribution or punishment for wrongs committed, or a restoration of things to their previous state, or an equalization of forces. Jesus time and again shows us that 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. The change we are to undergo has to do with making mercy central in our relationships to one another. The more we cross the threshold of accepting Jesus, the face of God’s mercy, as central to the meaning of our lives, the better chance mercy will define our relationships with one another.

Finally, the door is not only an entrance, but an exit. This holy door moves us out into the world.

The opening prayer puts into perspective what is at stake in this Jubilee year. It is not just our personal salvation, our personal holiness, but it is about the way the Church is to be in and for the world. We prayed in opening the holy door: “Grant that your Church, ever expanding in freedom and peace, may brightly shine out to all as a sacrament of salvation and make known and active in the world the mystery of your love. “

It should not be lost on us that the opening of the Jubilee Year by the Holy Father on December 8th was intentionally scheduled to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council.

It was an event that repositioned the Church in her approach to the world. Pope John XXIII called the council precisely at a time when the world was convulsed in turmoil. History has not seen a bloodier, more violent, and a more merciless time than the last century and the opening decades of our own time. In this period, there were two world wars, several genocides, totalitarian regimes responsible for the deaths of millions, the development of weapons of mass destruction that could obliterate both humanity and the earth, an ever-growing inequity between those who experienced an abundance of resources and those who were desperately poor, and the spread of various forms of terrorism. Never has humanity been more connected across the globe by way of electronic communication, travel, interdependent economies and—at the same time—more fractured and more divided within and against itself. It has been a dark and merciless period in human history.
John XXII convoked the Second Vatican Council for the purpose of equipping the Church to be a more effective instrument of the reconciling and healing mercy of God. In his opening speech to the council, Pope John recalled what had become a customary way of dealing with error and conflict for the Church. Then he charted a new course. He said:

*The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations.*

Pope Francis, in calling this year of mercy, is bringing to full circle and continuing the work begun at the council. He is calling us to be a Church that “…prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity.”

That is what is at stake as we begin this moment, this new time of grace, marked by God’s justice which is always accomplished by God’s mercy.

So let us in this year approach this open door called holy, believing that God by inviting us, by taking the initiative, is doing something new, something we never expected or could accomplish on our own. Let us pass over the threshold into the new space of God’s mercy, making mercy the point of reference in our relationships with one another, so that together as a community transformed by God’s own grace we can go out into the world with an ever expanding freedom and peace to “brightly shine out to all as a sacrament of salvation and make known and active in the world the mystery of God’s love.”