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This year, thanks to Pope Francis, we are invited to celebrate Christmas as a great festival of divine mercy, a joyful celebration of the Incarnation that reveals God's merciful, irreversible love for the whole human family. The God who revealed himself to Moses as a merciful Lord "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" has continued to manifest divine mercy throughout human history. In the "fullness of time," God sent "his only son into the world, born of the Virgin Mary, to reveal his love for us in a definitive way." The baby in the manger grows to adulthood and by "his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God." On Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, "the face of the Father's mercy."

We find this understanding of divine mercy in the opening paragraph of the official announcement by Pope Francis of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy running from December 8, 2015, to November 20, 2016. Before the 2013 conclave that elected Francis as Bishop of Rome, he received a book from Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German Jesuit theologian, with the revealing title: *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to the Christian Life*, which made an impact on him and influenced his decision to promote the Jubilee of Mercy. In his announcement of the Jubilee, Francis expressed his passion for this project: "How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman," bringing "the balm of mercy" to everyone as a sign that "the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst" (n 5).

Despite his passion, Francis is not very helpful in determining the precise essence of mercy. Perhaps we can gain some clarity by starting with the fundamental faith conviction that love is the essential trait or primary attribute of the triune God. When God's love encounters human weakness and sin, it issues in an active embrace of mercy, which leads to specific acts of forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness, in turn, opens up the possibility of reconciliation, which creates a more harmonious and just situation. In the Bible, God's justice promotes right relationships and a proper ordering of things. God's mercy does not abrogate justice but builds on it and tempers it so that relationships can flourish. The attempt by theologians to give a more precise meaning to mercy by distinguishing it from love, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation can be useful, but the mystery of God's unconditional, loving, merciful embrace of the human family, in all its sin and frailty, remains beyond all human concepts and logical explanations.

Typically, Pope Francis approaches the Year of Mercy more from a pastoral than a theological perspective. For him, mercy is a "synthesis word" which includes various descriptions: "a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace;" "the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us;" "the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life;" and "the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness" (n 2).

In his announcement of the Jubilee, Francis cites many biblical references which remind us that the mercy of God is not "an abstract idea, but a concrete reality." The psalmist proclaims: "He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems you from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy" (103:3-4). The story of the birth of Jesus has that same sense of sober reality: a long trip away from home for a pregnant teenager; no room in the travelers' inn; birth in a stable; the newborn placed in a feeding trough for animals; and a visit from unwashed shepherds, outcasts of society.

We learn what divine mercy is all about not by theoretical speculation but by observing Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. As Francis puts it: "Everything in him speaks of mercy" (n 8). Jesus was able to "read the hearts of those he encountered" and to respond to their deepest needs. Thus, he fed the multitude, raised the deceased son of the widow of Nain to life, and cured the Gerasene demoniac, instructing him to go tell his friends how the Lord had mercy on him.

The pope goes on to comment on the parables, such as the Prodigal Son story, that present mercy "as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon" (n 9). He uses the parable of the ruthless servant, who was forgiven a large debt by his master but refused to forgive a small debt owed by a fellow servant, to remind us that we are called to show mercy to others because mercy has first been shown to us. The pope recognizes how hard it is at times to pardon offenses but he insists "pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully" (n 9). During this Jubilee Year, we should pay special attention to the beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7).

Francis admits the church has at times forgotten the way of mercy, concentrating "exclusively on justice," which is an indispensable step, but only a first step in creating a genuine community of love. To take the next steps, the Church must proclaim the mercy of God, "the beating heart of the Gospel." As the spouse of Christ, she must "pattern her behavior after

the Son of God who went out to everyone without exception" (n 12). "Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy" (ibid). "Wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident" and "wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy" (ibid). In these and other images, Francis presents his vision of the Church called to be a credible witness to the "great river of mercy, a spring that will never run dry, no matter how many people draw from it" (n 25).

Francis proceeds to suggest various ways of celebrating during the Jubilee Year: making a pilgrimage to a holy shrine; celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation; entering into the spirit of the Lenten season; and reaching out to those on the margins. The pope puts special emphasis on practicing the corporal works of mercy (for example, feed the hungry and welcome the stranger) as well as the spiritual works of mercy (especially, comfort the afflicted and forgive offenses) as "a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty" (n 15). One day we will be judged on how well we practiced the works of mercy (Mt 25:31-45).

We celebrate Christmas this year not only during the Year of Mercy but also at a time of intensified concern about international terrorism, domestic violence, and hostile polarization. Recent attacks by ISIS have increased anxiety levels around the world and in the United States where xenophobic rhetoric is escalating. Gang violence promotes vengeance and retaliation. The harsh rhetoric of the culture wars tends to demonize opponents. In this atmosphere, "the practice of mercy is waning," as Pope Francis put it, and the word "mercy" itself "seems to have dropped out of use."

This year our celebration of Christmas as a festival of mercy is a call to rise above the temptation to exclusion, violence, and recrimination and to embrace the Gospel ideals of inclusion, peace, and forgiveness. To celebrate the Incarnation as the definitive act of divine mercy is a reminder that we have a responsibility to share that gift with others. The beautiful Nativity liturgy, enhanced by familiar music and treasured customs, has an inherent power to lift our souls in praise of a God whose mercy endures forever. Jesus in the manger is already the face of God's mercy, but this role takes on greater definition when he becomes a public figure who forgives a woman taken in adultery and a criminal on a cross and proclaims such inspiring parables of mercy, including the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

This Jubilee Year, the Church gathered for liturgy on Christmas must make a special effort to be a welcoming community that always puts mercy before judgment. Regulars at Sunday liturgy must not stand in judgment on those who show up only on Christmas and Easter, but should welcome them not as prodigal sons and daughters, but as brothers and sisters in Christ. Some in the Christmas assembly need to hear a word of forgiveness, to sense the merciful gaze of Christ, to feel the liberating power of God's mercy. Others need a reminder that God's mercy is a totally free gift and a completely unmerited blessing that should not issue in self-righteous complacency but should lead to generous sharing with others. The Christmas liturgy, enhanced this year by a focus on divine mercy, creates an encounter with the merciful Lord who forgives the contrite and challenges the complacent. The good news for all of us is that the Word made flesh, the incarnate Christ, has the power to transform the fear and dread so prevalent today into a courage that resists evil and a joy that passes all understanding.