

## **MISERICORDIA VULTUS AND THE CONTEXTS FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY**

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### **Abstract**

*The fundamental purpose of declaring the Jubilee Year of Mercy is that mercy might become more visible, first of all, as a free gift from God, and secondly as a Christian mission. On March 13<sup>th</sup> 2015, Pope Francis I, at the second anniversary of his election as the 266<sup>th</sup> successor of Saint Peter, announced that he would be convoking the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. It began in December 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, the feast of the Immaculate Conception to end on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. In our time when humanity is deeply wounded and needs the medicine of God's mercy to be healed and restored, this work, taking off from the Bull of Indiction- *Misericordia Vultus*, studies the various contexts for a deeper expression of the Jubilee Year of Mercy so that humanity can come into a more intimate and personal dialogue with the subject of divine mercy.*

**Keywords:** Meisericordia, Vultus, Contexts, Jubilee, Year, Mercy.

### **Introduction**

The Church has had a dynamic image. In Latin, the early Fathers of the Church referred to it as the *Ecclesia*- 'the called out ones'. From this perspective it is understood why the Church is spoken of as 'the elect', 'the saints' and why Jesus asked Peter to 'build my Church' (Mt 16:18). In the wake of Greek neo-Platonism, the Church was seen as the school of truth and the fellowship of adepts<sup>1</sup>. To Roman Stoicism, the Church is principally seen as a well ordered community governed by laws. In the early Church, they were referred to as 'the people of God' or 'the Church of God'. The Second Vatican Council speaks of the Church variously, as

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<sup>1</sup> Kung H. (1981). *The Church*. New York: Image Books.

'the people of God'<sup>2</sup>, "Bearer of the message of salvation"<sup>3</sup>, "Mystical Body of Christ"<sup>4</sup>. As the bearer of the message of salvation, she is a credible witness of mercy and a herald of reconciliation and an inn for the wounded. Her language and her gestures transmits mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father. Thus, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of Mercy<sup>5</sup>. Pope Francis uses the image of a field hospital after battle to describe the Church<sup>6</sup>.

These understanding of the Church, presents her as an instrument of God's mercy. And that this mercy might become more visible, on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2015, Pope Francis I, at the second anniversary of his election as the 266<sup>th</sup> successor of Saint Peter, announced that he would be convoking the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The Feast began in December 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, the feast of the Immaculate Conception to end on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. By proclaiming an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Francis addresses all of humanity in an intimate and personal dialogue on the subject of divine mercy. Humanity is deeply wounded and needs the medicine of God's mercy to be healed and restored. As we celebrate the Jubilee, this piece, while focusing on the document- *Misericordia Vultus* studies the various contexts where the Jubilee Year of Mercy can bring about progressive transformation.

### ***Misericordia Vultus- The Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee Year of Mercy***

The Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus* was given on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2015, the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday. In the Bull, the Holy Father, Pope Francis I said that he proclaimed the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy so that the Church may gaze even more attentively on mercy so that she may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives<sup>7</sup>. It is also a special time for the

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<sup>2</sup> Gaudium et Spes (1965). In A. Flannery (Ed). *Documents of the second Vatican Council* (pp.903-1001). Dublin: Dominican Publications.

<sup>3</sup>Gaudium et Spes (1965). In A. Flannery (Ed). *Documents of the second Vatican Council* (pp.903-1001). Dublin: Dominican Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Indulgentiarum Doctrina, (1967). In A. Flannery (Ed). *Documents of the second Vatican Council* (pp.62-79). Dublin: Dominican Publications.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*, no.12

<sup>6</sup> "[A Big Heart Open to God](#)," America magazine Sept. 19, 2013

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis I, The face of mercy: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. Kenya: Paulines. No. 2. p.6

Church when her witness might grow stronger and more effective<sup>8</sup>. The Jubilee year opens on 8 December 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception<sup>9</sup>, reason being that it recalls God's redemptive action of mercy from the very beginning of the history of mankind. After the sin of Adam and Eve, God did not wish to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil. So he turned his gaze to Mary, holy and immaculate in love (cf. Eph 1:4), choosing her to be the Mother of man's Redeemer. When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. The Roman Pontiff writes, "I have chosen the date of 8 December because of its rich meaning in the recent history of the Church. In fact, I will open the Holy Door on the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive."<sup>10</sup> This is based on the teachings of his predecessors and the vision of Vatican II. Saint John XXIII, at the opening of Vatican Council II, indicated the path to follow: "Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity."<sup>11</sup> The Jubilee Year would end on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. "On that day, as we seal the Holy Door, we shall be filled, above all, with a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving to the Most Holy Trinity for having granted us an extraordinary time of grace"<sup>12</sup>.

Expounding on the implications of the theological content of the Year of Mercy, the Holy Father taught that this year is a key that indicates God's action towards us. In the Sacred Scripture, God does not limit himself merely to affirming his love, but makes it visible and tangible. Love, after all, can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes, and behaviours that are shown in daily living. The mercy of God is his loving concern

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*, no. 3. p.6

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*, no. 3-4. pp. 6-8.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus* No. 4. p.7

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 4. p.7

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 5. pp.8-9

for each one of us<sup>13</sup>. This is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel. As the Father loves, so do his children. This is at the heart of the Church's mission: her credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. "Mercy is the foundation of the Church's life. All her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her tenderness to the world can be lacking in mercy"<sup>14</sup>.

To resound the message of mercy, Pope Francis drew attention to the great teaching of John Paul II's encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (*Rich in Mercy*). He drew attention to two passages: First, Saint John Paul II highlighted the fact that we had forgotten the theme of mercy in today's cultural milieu: "The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Saint John Paul II pushed for a more urgent proclamation and witness to mercy in the contemporary world: "It is dictated by love for man, for all that is human and which, according to the intuitions of many of our contemporaries, is threatened by an immense danger. The mystery of Christ ... obliges me to proclaim mercy as God's merciful love, revealed in that same mystery of Christ. It likewise obliges me to have recourse to that mercy and to beg for it at this difficult, critical phase of the history of the Church and of the world."<sup>16</sup> The church is, therefore, called upon to be a servant of mercy and to mediate it to all peoples.

Towards the end of the bull, Pope Francis turns to Mary, Mother of Mercy: "My thoughts now turn to the Mother of Mercy. May the sweetness of her countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness. No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh. The Mother of the Crucified and Risen One has entered the sanctuary of divine mercy

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<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 6-9. p.8-13

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 10. p.13

<sup>15</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Rich in Mercy*, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 15

<sup>16</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Rich in Mercy*, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 15

because she participated intimately in the mystery of his love”<sup>17</sup>. After Mary as the Mother of Mercy, the Pope extends his thoughts to the saints and blessed ones who have made divine mercy their mission in life. In this regard, he singles out St. Faustina: “Our prayer also extends to the saints and blessed ones who made divine mercy their mission in life. I am especially thinking of the great apostle of mercy, Saint Faustina Kowalska. May she, who was called to enter the depths of divine mercy, intercede for us and obtain for us the grace of living and walking always according to the mercy of God and with an unwavering trust in his love”<sup>18</sup>. He ended the Bull by asking us to open our hearts to God who can surprise us on the path of mercy<sup>19</sup>.

### **The Contexts for the Jubilee Year of Mercy**

#### **Mercy, Dedication and Sacrifice**

One of the fundamental dimension of the Jubilee Year of Mercy is pilgrimage. **Pilgrimage** is an ancient symbol of Christian life with profound anthropological roots: *Homo viator*. The idea of pilgrimage, first, conveys the message that we proceed from a mystery, God, and we on our way towards a mystery, God. Along our journey we are accompanied and illuminated by Christ, who is the way and the light. The pilgrim is not a vagabond (because he is aware of his destination) neither is he a solitary person (because he is a member of a pilgrim people). The act of pilgrimage to the Holy Door of Mercy in Rome and other parts of the world further teaches believers that mercy requires dedication and sacrifice<sup>20</sup>. This explains why a reflection on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy is most appropriate in this year. The Roman Pontiff said: “It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel

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<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 24. pp.29-30

<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 24. p. 30

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 25. pp. 30-31

<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 14. p.16

where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead"<sup>21</sup>.

### **The Sacrament of Reconciliation**

In the programme of the Jubilee Year, one observes that the season of Lent is part of the Jubilee Year, the reason is to emphasize the importance of Reconciliation to the Jubilee Year of Mercy: "The season of Lent during this Jubilee Year should also be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy. How many pages of Sacred Scripture are appropriate for meditation during the weeks of Lent to help us rediscover the merciful face of the Father!"<sup>22</sup>. Focusing more intensely on the sacrament of reconciliation, the Roman Pontiff writes: "Let us place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace"<sup>23</sup>. In a very practical way, Pope Francis will send out Missionaries of Mercy during Lent of this Holy Year, who will be a sign of the Church's maternal solicitude for the People of God, enabling them to enter the profound richness of this mystery so fundamental to the faith. Added to this is that the jubilee year entails the granting of indulgences<sup>24</sup>.

The indulgence given during the Jubilee Year further discloses the fullness of the Father's mercy who offers everyone his love, expressed primarily in the

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<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 15. p.18

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 17. p.20

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 17. p.21

<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 22. p.27

forgiveness of sin”<sup>25</sup>. Normally, the Pope says, “God the Father grants his pardon through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation”<sup>26</sup>, but “reconciliation with God does not mean that there are no enduring consequence of sin from which we must be purified. It is precisely in this context that indulgence becomes important, since it is an expression of the total gift of mercy from God. With the indulgence, the repentant sinner receives a remission of the temporal punishment due for the sins already forgiven as regards the fault”<sup>27</sup>.

### **The Menace of Corruption**

It is the hope of the Holy Father that the message of mercy would reach everyone especially those involved in criminal organizations and in corruption. He writes, “May the message of mercy reach everyone, and may no one be indifferent to the call to experience mercy. I direct this invitation to conversion even more fervently to those whose behaviour distances them from the grace of God. I particularly have in mind men and women belonging to criminal organizations of any kind. For their own good, I beg them to change their lives”<sup>28</sup>. Extending the invitation further, he writes: “The same invitation is extended to those who either perpetrate or participate in corruption. This festering wound is a grave sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance, because it threatens the very foundations of personal and social life. Corruption prevents us from looking to the future with hope, because its tyrannical greed shatters the plans of the weak and tramples upon the poorest of the poor”<sup>29</sup>.

Pope Francis makes a poignant distinction between sin and corruption. According to him, one can be a sinner and not be corrupt but one cannot be corrupt and not be a sinner. Corruption, he argues, is a sin which, rather than being recognized as such and rendering us humble, is elevated to a system and becomes a mental habit,

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<sup>25</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, No. 9

<sup>26</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, No. 9

<sup>27</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, No. 9

<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 19. p.23

<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 19. p.23

a way of living<sup>30</sup>. It is not just an act but a condition of personal and social state of evil we become accustomed to living in. It deprives the poor of their property, dignity, their feelings and their very lives. He describes the wealth from corruption thus: "Their money is a fruit of the blood of so many people who are exploited, mistreated and enslaved by poorly paid jobs...I say to these people, please, take back your money, burn it, the Church doesn't need dirty money, it needs hearts open to the mercy of God"<sup>31</sup>.

### **The Value of the Family**

During the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Church needs to focus on the family. It is the task of teachers, catechists, clergy men to reflect and give urgent attention to matters such as break-ups and breakdown in families as evident in widespread cohabitation which does not lead to marriage and sometimes excludes the idea of it; the issue of dowry seen as "cost price" of the woman; dispute with in-laws and its negative impact on the family; the issue of separation and divorce; problems arising from mixed-marriage and disparity of cult; infertility and childlessness in marriage and the option of IVF; single parenthood; polygamy; conflicts between parents and children; sibling rivalry fuelled by envy, jealousy and inordinate ambition; psychological, physical and sexual violence and abuse in families; incest and sexual promiscuity; human trafficking and exploitation of children; and the negative impact of the media and social networks on the young.

The Synod Fathers acknowledge the existence of these problems and proposed pastoral solutions. It is expedient during this year of mercy to work towards the healing of broken marriages and restoration of the dignity of the family. Married couples and dysfunctional families should be able to count on the assistance and pastoral guidance of the Church. The divorced but not remarried who bear witness to their faithfulness in marriage ought to be encouraged to find in the Eucharist the nourishment they need to sustain their present state of life.

### **Christian-Muslim Dialogue**

The Pope takes the practice of mercy beyond the walls of the church to include other peoples: Muslims and Christians. He writes: "There is an aspect of mercy

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<sup>30</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis I, During his General Audience in St. Peter's Square, March 2, 2016

that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. ... I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions and with other noble religious traditions; may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination"<sup>32</sup>.

In some countries, good relations exist between Christians and Muslims; in others, the local Christians are merely second-class citizens, and Catholics from abroad, religious and lay, have difficulty obtaining visas and residence permits; in some, there is insufficient distinction between the religious and political spheres, while in others, finally, there is a climate of hostility<sup>33</sup>. During the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Christians must persist in esteem for Muslims, who "worship God who is one, living and subsistent; merciful and almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity."<sup>34</sup> If all of us who believe in God desire to promote reconciliation, justice and peace, we must work together to banish every form of discrimination, intolerance and religious fundamentalism. In her social apostolate, the Church does not make religious distinctions. She comes to the help of those in need, be they Christian, Muslim or animist. In this way she bears witness to the love of God, creator of all, and she invites the followers of other religions to demonstrate respect and to practice reciprocity in a spirit of esteem. Christians, through patient dialogue with Muslims, are to seek juridical and practical recognition of religious freedom, so that every citizen in Africa may enjoy not only the right to choose his religion freely and to engage in worship, but also the right to freedom of conscience<sup>35</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The primary purpose of engaging in this work is to help the realization of the vision of Pope Francis for the Jubilee Year of Mercy. He wrote that he proclaimed

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<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis I, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*, no. 23. pp.28-29

<sup>33</sup> Pope Benedict XIV, *Africae Munus*, 92

<sup>34</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions [\*Nostra Aetate\*](#), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Pope Benedict XIV, *Africae Munus*, 92

the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy so that the Church may gaze even more attentively on mercy so that she may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives. This piece has tried to point out areas where the Church may focus on for the effectiveness of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. These spheres are based on the areas pointed out by the Holy Father for attention during this Jubilee Year. This piece has also studied some major areas that would require the attention of the people of God for more witnessing. These areas discussed as the contexts for the Jubilee Year include Christian-Muslim dialogue, the family, corruption, reconciliation and the need for dedication and sacrifice. It is believed that focusing on these areas would make the Jubilee Year more alive and effective in the lives of people.

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