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“Becoming Ambassadors of Mercy Incarnate and Ministers of Mercy Above All”
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**Preaching the Mercy of God:
The Transformation of our Preaching to Draw People to an Encounter with God in His Mercy**

- Introduction
 - Earlier today, we focused on how we’re called to share in Jesus’ merciful task of teaching. We also heard Jesus’ direct appeals through St. Faustina for us to preach about his mercy. And there have been several questions about how to get the balance right between preaching mercy and conversion.
 - What I’d like to do this afternoon in this Conference is to sketch out what I think Christ is asking of us through his vicar on earth with regard to our Sacred Preaching.
 - Pope Francis actually gave us a primer on preaching today in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. It was specifically within the context of the missionary reform of the Church, but I believe everything he said there is relevant to the question of mercy, because he believes that preaching mercy is a crucial part of that New Evangelization.
 - What I propose to do this afternoon is to present his insights, interspersing within them a few other ideas, so that we can get the big picture of what he’s asking of us with regard to the purpose of preaching in general, the messenger, the message and our style. Then tomorrow morning I’d like to take up some concrete ideas with regard to a preaching program on Mercy throughout this Year of Mercy based on the Lectionary and the Liturgical Cycle.
 - This afternoon, I am going to go faster than I’d like, but extensive notes will be able to be found on CatholicPreaching.com later tonight.
- Missionary Reform of our Preaching
 - In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis called on bishops, priests and deacons in a special way to participate in this missionary metamorphosis of the Church through the evangelical transformation of our sacred preaching. He wants to transform the way we proclaim the Gospel so that it is consistent with what the new evangelization requires. And insofar God’s mercy is part of the kerygma, and growing in receptivity to it part of Christian formation, everything that he says is relevant to the subject of preaching mercy. Our preaching is in a particular way paradigmatic of the reform of lives and the Church.
 - We know that the Church — both the people of God as well as the hierarchy! — has long been saying that preaching in general needs a lot of improvement:
 - EG 135: Let us now look at preaching within the liturgy, which calls for serious consideration by pastors. I will dwell in particular, and even somewhat meticulously, on the homily and its preparation, since so many concerns have been expressed about this important ministry and we cannot simply ignore them. The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people. We know that the faithful attach great importance to it, and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case.
 - SC 46: Given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved. The homily is "part of the liturgical action" and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful. (2006).
 - He repeated this verbatim in VD 49 four years later.
 - US Bishops in 2012 *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* said, “We are also aware that in survey after survey over the past years, the People of God have called for more powerful and inspiring

preaching. A steady diet of tepid or poorly prepared homilies is often cited as a cause for discouragement on the part of laity and even leading some to turn away from the Church.”

- Pope Francis wrote this section, he said, to “renew confidence” in our preaching through which God reaches out to his people. There are many good insights that come from Pope Francis’ four and a half decades of priestly experience.
- To make things simple and hopefully a little more easily memorable, I’ve re-organized the most “meticulous” papal preaching course in Church history into four points focusing on
 - The purpose of liturgical preaching,
 - The messenger,
 - The message and
 - The style.
- The point and purpose of liturgical preaching
 - Pope Francis first indicates what preaching is *not* supposed to be:
 - It’s not, he says, a “form of entertainment.”
 - Neither is it supposed to be a weekly commentary on current events.
 - He says we shouldn’t speak about the latest news to awaken people’s interests.
 - These commentaries on current affairs are listened to more informatively than performatively, leaving listeners “without being challenged or changed.”
 - It’s not a lecture or speech on biblical exegesis
 - It’s not meant to be a catechetical session or even a meditation.
 - What it’s supposed to be is a bridge to a heart-to-heart dialogue between God and his people.
 - This is a development of the Church’s understanding of the point of a homily:
 - PO 4, in a paragraph in which it says that priests “have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all,” says, “Whether by entering into profitable dialogue they bring people to the worship of God, whether by openly preaching they proclaim the mystery of Christ, or whether in the light of Christ they treat contemporary problems, they are relying not on their own wisdom for it is the word of Christ they teach, and it is to conversion and holiness that they exhort all men.”
 - VD 59: The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives. It should lead to an understanding of the mystery being celebrated, serve as a summons to mission, and prepare the assembly for the profession of faith, the universal prayer and the Eucharistic liturgy
 - A liturgical homily promotes a heart-to-heart dialogue between God and his people, proclaiming the deeds of salvation and restating the demands of the covenant.
 - It takes up the dialogue God has already established and leads to sacramental communion.
 - This dialogue is more than the communication of truth. It’s an expression of love for each other, of an exchange of persons, through the medium of words.
 - The preacher’s task is to join loving hearts of the Lord and his people, strengthening covenant and bond of charity. The hearts of believers allow God to speak, with the preacher as an instrument to express God’s word and the people’s own feelings so that afterward they can continue the conversation. The word is a mediator, bringing God, faithful and intermediary together.
 - It should guide the assembly and preacher to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist.
 - For this reason, the preacher needs to keep his ear to the people and find what they need to hear. He must contemplate his people, their habits, aspirations, limitations, worldviews, learning their language, so that he can link it to their human situation that needs God’s word.
 - This double-contemplation will lead to a “synthesis” between the Gospel and culture.
 - The homily is part of the offering made to the Father and a mediation of the grace that Christ pours out.

- SC 52: The homily is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself; in fact, at those Masses that are celebrated with the assistance of the people on Sundays and feasts of obligation, it should not be omitted except for a serious reason.
 - VD 59. In a section entitled “The importance of homilies,” Pope Benedict writes: “The homily ‘is part of the liturgical action’ and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful.” ... Consequently, those who have been charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart. ... The homily for Sundays and solemnities should be prepared carefully, without neglecting, whenever possible, to offer at weekday Masses *cum populo* brief and timely reflections which can help the faithful to welcome the word which was proclaimed and to let it bear fruit in their lives.”
 - US Bishops (2012): “One of the most important teachings of Vatican II in regard to preaching is the insistence that the homily is an integral part of the Eucharist itself. As part of the entire liturgical act, the homily is meant to set hearts on fire with praise and thanksgiving. It is to be a feature of the intense and privileged encounter with Jesus Christ that takes place in the liturgy. One might even say that the homilist connects the two parts of the Eucharistic liturgy as he looks back at the Scripture readings and looks forward to the sacrificial meal. This is why it is preferable that the celebrant of the Eucharistic liturgy also be the homilist.”
 - It’s quasi-sacramental, since faith comes from what is heard.
 - The homily is meant to help form a people
 - The Church is a pilgrim people advancing toward God.
 - We’re not meant to remain a group of individuals, but a family.
 - Magi came together to cross the desert. Shepherds came together to adore Jesus. It’s a mutual journey.
 - Francis insists that Jesus didn’t call apostles to form an exclusive or elite group.
 - Everyone is meant to be “welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”
 - And the homily is meant to call and help form people to be evangelized evangelizers
 - Evangelization is not the task of professionals while others are “passive recipients.” The entire people of God is meant to proclaim the Gospel
 - We’re not supposed to be “disciples *and* missionaries,” but rather “missionary disciples.”
 - Preaching flourishes in the service to the mission of evangelization, helping others to take up their own mission. Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples.
 - Just as the first disciples immediately told others about the salvation they had found, so we should do the same.
 - Life is simply not the same with Jesus as without him. In one of the most moving passages in the exhortation, Francis says, “It is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize.”(266)
- The Messenger
 - Francis says several things about the one preaching the word so that people will have ears to hear the word he seeks to proclaim for God.
 - Francis says that people today thirst for authenticity, for credible witnesses, for preachers who speak of a God they know and for a minister who communicates he’s at least striving to treat them the way they believe God treats them and wants them to be treated.
 - First, the preacher should be:
 - close

- approachable
 - welcoming
 - warm
 - joyful
 - unpretentious
 - ready for dialogue
 - patient
- The Pope says he should be striving for holiness, stating the obvious truth that “The greater or lesser holiness of the minister does impact his proclamation.”
- He should enjoy passing on the faith to others.
 - Jesus enjoyed talking with people, Francis says. The preacher should strive to communicate that same enjoyment.
 - To do so, like Jesus, he must get beyond others’ weaknesses and failings to see what Jesus sees and loves in them.
- He must also strive to know those whom he addresses.
 - The preacher must know the heart of his community, where its desire for God is alive and ardent, and where the once loving dialogue has become barren.”
- Message
 - The message, Pope Francis says quoting Blessed John Paul II, is the “joyful, patient, progressive preaching” of the incarnation, birth, life, saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus has got to be the center and hero of the homily, not the minister, and we should seek to bring the “fragrance” of Christ’s closeness and personal gaze.
 - Pope Francis has been giving a lot of attention since his election on the “progressive and patient” aspects of that proclamation. He says our preaching must begin and emphasize above all the kerygma, so that we make sure that the secondary issues of the faith don’t triumph over the primary, so that the various “no’s” of living the Gospel don’t drown out the fundamental “yes.”
 - He says the kerygma is first not just because it should be at the beginning, but also because it’s principal.
 - In a previous section of the exhortation, he said, “It needs to be said that in preaching the Gospel a fitting sense of proportion has to be maintained. This would be seen in the *frequency* with which certain themes are brought up and in the emphasis given to them in preaching. For example, if in the course of the liturgical year a parish priest speaks about temperance ten times but only mentions charity or justice two or three times, an imbalance results, and precisely those virtues which ought to be most present in preaching and catechesis are overlooked. The same thing happens when we speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God’s word.” (38)
 - If instead of kerygmatic preaching the people receive a purely moralistic or doctrinaire preaching, or a lecture on biblical exegesis, it will detract from the heart-to-heart communication that is the point of preaching.
 - He’s phrased the kerygma himself in a few different places in the exhortation:
 - “The personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship.” (128)
 - “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.” (164)
 - Mercy is part of this kerygma!
 - For the preacher to preach the kerygma, he says, he must believe it. The preacher must know that God loves him, that Jesus has saved him, that his love has the last word.
 - Even though the preacher begins and proportionately emphasizes the kerygma, Pope Francis stresses that his missionary preaching involves more than the kerygma.
 - Jesus, Francis reminds us, calls us to teach others to observe all that he commanded us on how to respond to his love with the love of neighbor. This points to ongoing formation,

maturation and growth. Evangelizing preaching is meant to stimulate the desire for growth until Christ lives us.

- Formation involves entering more deeply into the kerygma.
- We need a pedagogy and mystagogy that can help people step by step to enter into the mystery, one virtue at a time, patiently leading them to maturity, freedom and responsibility
- Francis also says that our preaching should be prophetic.
 - Pope Francis pointed out in a Dec 16, 2013 homily that prophecy involves “three times,” the past, the present and the future. The prophet first is aware of the past and all God has done and promised; it’s a living memory. Second, he contemplatively applies that living memory to the situation of the present and the particular circumstances of his listeners. And third, on the basis of that application, he guides them with hope and courage on the right path toward the future..
 - In the exhortation, he talks about how this all works, saying the memory should overflow, like Mary’s, with the wondrous things of God. Everyone’s hearts should sense that each word of Scripture is a gift before a demand.

- The Style

- The fourth and last part schematic part would be about the style of preaching, about which Pope Francis said the most. He said that good preaching means not just knowing what to say but how to say it. (156)
 - He laments that preachers often haven’t taken the trouble to find the proper way to proclaim the message. The method is also a profoundly spiritual concern.
 - He said it’s a great act of love of neighbor to refuse to offer a product of poor quality. Do we love our neighbor enough to refuse giving a poor quality homily?
- What are the elements of a high quality homily?
 - First, it’s well-prepared
 - Preparation is so important, Pope Francis writes, that a “prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity should be devoted to it.”
 - For pastors who don’t have enough time, he asks a shift in priorities, even if less time will be given to other important activities.
 - The Holy Spirit, he said, demands our active and creative cooperation.
 - A preacher who doesn’t prepare is not “spiritual” but dishonest and irresponsible with his gifts.
 - This type of preparation, he said, isn’t quick, easy and immediate, but patient. In order to carry out this type of persevering remote, proximate and immediate preparation, it requires love for the God of whom we’re preparing to speak and who speaks to us, and love for the people to whom we’re going to speak.
 - Second, it’s prayerful. It begins, Francis says, with calling on the Holy Spirit in prayer.
 - Next, it’s Scriptural
 - The biblical text has to be the foundation of our preaching, Pope Francis indicates, and we need to give it our full attention. This involves both careful study as well as prayerful reading, in which we say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”
 - The homily and all evangelization is based on the word of God, listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to, especially through the Eucharist
 - The preacher must develop great personal familiarity with the word of God. Exegetical and linguistic aspects not enough, but docile and prayerful heart needed. We should examine whether we’ve grown in love for the word we preach
 - If we have a lively desire to hear the word, we’ll communicate it to God’s people. Words must resonate in heart of pastor before they’ll do so in the faithful.
 - Word must become incarnate in preacher’s daily life, to communicate to others his contemplation. Must be penetrated by the word before we think about what to say to

others If the word hasn't really touched his life through prayer, he will be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow impostor.

- Preparation begins with reverence for the truth of the word of God. We take the time to study it and to speak to God about it lest we distort it.
- We must understand meaning of the words we read, not just exegetical details but its principal message. If the preacher doesn't make this effort, his preaching won't have unity or order, but it will just be an accumulation of disjointed ideas incapable of inspiring others. A common defect in tedious and ineffectual preaching, he said, is the inability to transmit the intrinsic power of the text.
- He must also consider the effect the author wanted to produce. A consoling text shouldn't be used to correct errors; an exhortation to teach doctrine; a summons to mission to talk about the latest news.
- Prayerful reading of the Bible is not separate from study; it should begin with study and go on to discern how that same message speaks to his own life. We should ask, "Lord, what does this text say to me?" How is my life to change? What troubles me about this text, or attracts me and why? What temptations arise? We should apply it to our own life, to avoid excuses for watering down the meaning of the text. We should not be afraid of the demanding aspect of the text, which can rob us of the pleasure.
- It's not enough for the preacher to have a personal familiarity, but he should try to preach in a way to inspire his listeners to hunger for a similar familiarity. Sacred Scripture, he says, must be a door opened to every believer. Evangelization demands familiarity with God's word, which means parishes, dioceses and associations must provide for serious, ongoing study of the Bible.
- In liturgical homilies, the preacher should be on fire based on his preparation with Sacred Scripture.
 - They should be words that set hearts on fire.
 - To speak from the heart means our hearts are not just on fire but enlightened by the fullness of revelation and historical path of God's word in heart of Church.
- He should be humble
 - He has to recognize his poverty and abandon himself to Christ, whose message must penetrate the preacher's entire being, not just mind. When this happens, the Holy Spirit can place on his lips the words he couldn't find himself.
 - Knowing of his own need of God's mercy helps him to be humble!
- He should be simple
 - Simplicity shows itself with the language we use, so that people can understand it.
 - The greatest risk for a preacher is to become so accustomed to his own language that he thinks everyone else understands and uses it.
 - To adapt language to the people, we need to share their lives and pay loving attention to them.
- He should be clear.
 - Simplicity and clarity are different. Our language can be simple and still not clear because of disorganization.
 - There's a need for thematic unity so that people can easily grasp his line of argument.
- He should be practical
 - One is to use familiar, practical, every-day images, to appreciate and accept the message we're communicating.
 - It can help people to savor the message, awaken desire and move the will.
- He should be positive

- His own heart and the hearts of listeners should be able to sense that each word of Scripture is a gift before a demand
 - He should point out not what shouldn't be done, but rather what we can do better. It should indicate the positive and attractive value, filling listeners with hope, liberating them from negativity.
 - In moral catechesis, Francis says, we should show the attractiveness of a life of wisdom, self-fulfillment and enrichment, which can help people better understand the rejection of evil that endangers life.
 - We should behave as and be joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of goodness and beauty of a life of fidelity rather than experts in dire predictions and dour judges
 - He even says priests, deacons and the laity should gather periodically to discover resources to make preaching more attractive and positive. That brings us to the next point.
 - This is one of the reasons why he leads with mercy rather than repentance, with God rather than man.
- His preaching should aim to be beautiful
 - The preacher must attend to the “way of beauty.” Proclaiming Christ is not just showing something to be true but beautiful, capable of filling life with joy even in difficulties. Preaching is not about communicating abstract truths. The beauty of the images used by the Lord can encourage the practice of good.
 - Beauty can be a path leading to an encounter with Jesus.
 - Preachers and the whole Church need to have a renewed esteem for beauty as a means to touch the human heart and enable the truth and goodness of Christ to radiate within it. We only love what is beautiful.
 - Formation in the way of beauty ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith.
 - His preaching should be eschatological
 - It should make us desire the embrace of the Father who awaits us in glory.
 - The preacher should try to help people to feel that they live in the midst of the baptismal embrace and the eternal one
 - His preaching should be brief
 - Pope Francis says, “It is a distinctive genre, since it is preaching which is situated within the framework of a *liturgical* celebration; hence it should be brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or a lecture. A preacher may be able to hold the attention of his listeners for a whole hour, but in this case his words become more important than the celebration of faith. If the homily goes on too long, it will affect two characteristic elements of the liturgical celebration: its balance and its rhythm” (138).
 - He adds elsewhere the wisdom of Sirach, who teaches, “Speak concisely. Say much in few words.”
 - On May 12, in a get together with seminarians, he specified what he meant by brief: “The problem with boring homilies — so to speak— the problem with boring homilies is that there is no closeness. It is precisely in the homily that we measure a pastor’s closeness to his people. If in the homily you speak, let’s say, 20, 25 or 30, 40 minutes — these aren’t fantasies, this happens! — and you speak of abstract things, of truths of the faith, you are not delivering a homily, you are playing school! That is different! You are not close to the people. That is why the homily is important: calibrate it, get an idea of how close the priest is. I think that in general our homilies aren’t good, they do not really belong to the homiletic literary genre: they are conferences, or they are lessons, or reflections. But a homily — and ask your theology professor about this — the homily at Mass, the Word of Almighty God, is a

sacramental. For Luther it was almost a sacrament: it was *ex opere operato*, the Word preached; for others, it is only *ex opere operantis*. However, I think it is somewhere in the middle, a bit of both. The theology of the homily is somewhat sacramental. It is different than saying words about a topic. It's something more. It implies prayer, it implies study, it implies knowing the people to whom you will speak, it implies closeness. Regarding the homily, for evangelization to succeed we must move far ahead, we are behind. It is one of the points where today the Church stands in need of conversion: prepare our homilies so that people can understand them. And after eight minutes, one's attention span is exhausted. A homily shouldn't be longer than eight or ten minutes. It should be brief, it should be firm.

- His Sunday and solemnity homilies are generally about 15 minutes, which is the average length of his homilies on Sundays and solemnities.
- St. John Vianney's homilies, we should note, were an hour, as were Chrysostom's, Augustine's.
- His preaching should be modeled on a mother's conversation with her children.
 - The Church preaches, Francis says, like a mother, evangelizing her family, loving her children, teaching them what is for their benefit, counting on their trust.
 - A Mother listens to concerns and learns from children.
 - A spirit of love guides conversations and corrections.
 - Preaching is better understood when it is taught in the "mother tongue" because heart is better disposed. In that circumstance, the preaching becomes like a style of music inspiring encouragement, strength and enthusiasm.
 - The fact that he learned the faith primarily from his grandmother obviously influences this metaphor. If the inspirational heroes in his life had been male coaches or spiritual fathers, he likely would have accentuated the necessary paternal side to preaching, challenging sons and daughters courageously to strive beyond their comfort zones. We see both the paternal and maternal sides in Jesus' preaching.
- Preaching People into the Confessional
 - I'd like to introduce the topic by focusing a little on the patron saint of parish priests, whose life is illustrative of many of the points Pope Francis makes. We can focus on how he preached mercy and conversion.
 - The most notable means St. John Vianney's used to draw people to the confessional was through regularly preaching about the need for the sacrament in the pulpit. His customary style would be to speak about God's mercy; when times warranted, however, he could also thunder with the fierceness of an Old Testament prophet.
 - He would generally begin with a focus on what a great gift the sacrament of confession is. "My children," he preached once, "we cannot comprehend the goodness of God towards us in instituting this great Sacrament of Penance. If we had had a favor to ask of our Lord, we should never have thought of asking him that. But he foresaw our frailty and our inconstancy in well-doing, and his love led him to do what we should not have dared to ask."
 - The essence of the sacrament, he continued, is an encounter between God's mercy and our misery, where the love of God "heals the wounds of our soul." He labored to eradicate the popular Jansenist conception of an angry God, an image that would scare people away from the sacrament. "The good God will pardon a repentant sinner," he countered, "faster than a mother will grab her child out of a fire." In the sacrament, he said, "it's not the sinner who comes back to God to ask for forgiveness, but God himself who runs after the sinner to make him return." The Father of the prodigal son "comes after you, he pursues you after you have abandoned him." Basing himself on Jesus' words about the great eruption of joy in heaven for one repentant sinner, St. John Vianney stressed, "God's greatest pleasure is to forgive us."
 - Anticipating almost verbatim some of what Christ himself said to St. Faustina a century later about his Divine Mercy, he continued, "How good God is! His good heart is an ocean of mercy. Even though we can be great sinners, we should never despair of our salvation. It is so easy to be saved!"

God's mercy is much greater than our misery. "What are our sins," he asked, "if we compare them to God's mercy?" This mercy extends not just to the past but to the future: "The good God knows all things. It knows that after you confess, you will sin again, but he will pardon you. What love God has that he will even voluntarily forget the future to forgive us."

- But there were times when the honey of God's mercy was not enough to attract people to the sacrament. On those occasions, he didn't hesitate to resort to fire-and-brimstone to let his parishioners know the consequences of sin and the failure to come to have sins forgiven. "Scaring them" into the sacrament was preferable to letting them live and die without it. He preached about the realities of the Last Judgment and Hell just like Jesus himself frequently did before him. Sometimes he would describe what sinners were doing to themselves, like carrying their souls to Hell by unnecessary work on Sunday. At other times, he would beg those who refused to repent at least to "commit as few mortal sins as possible, so as not to add to their everlasting punishment." Most often he would just start sobbing in the pulpit, for as much as 15 minutes at a time, contemplating the fate of damned souls, and saying, "Cursed by God! Cursed by God! What a pity!"
- Even when he had to resort to the latter to persuade inveterate impenitents, however, he could not keep up a fire-and-brimstone style for long. He would break down in the pulpit, weeping almost uncontrollably over the fate of the damned. His tears were probably his most eloquent and persuasive homily on the reality of Hell, the sadness we should have as a result of sin, and the tragedy of failing to take advantage of the gift of God's mercy while we still have time.
- It was almost impossible not to be moved. He would always conclude his homilies by inviting his listeners to action. "If the poor people who are damned had the time that we lose," he said once, "what good use they'd make of it!" He would remind them of the words of "God does not will the death of the sinner" and call them to take advantage of the means they have to meet the mercy of God in confession before they meet his justice at the judgment. Most did. "Without the sacrament of penance, it would be fitting to weep," he said; because of God's love in founding the sacrament, however, there was an opportunity to turn those tears into joy.
- It took about a decade in his tiny parish of 230, but eventually his regular, versatile and bold preaching about how much we need the sacrament of penance got through to his parishioners and they began to come in great numbers. St. John Vianney would eventually set aside a few hours on Saturdays to hear the confessions of his own people, so that they would not have to wait in line for days with those coming from all over France.
- As Pope Benedict mentioned in his letter to begin the Year for Priests, St. John Vianney's success in preaching people into the confessional should inspire and encourage all priests today. "Priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this Sacrament. In France, at the time of the Curé of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day, since the upheaval caused by the revolution had long inhibited the practice of religion. Yet he sought in every way, by his preaching and his powers of persuasion, to help his parishioners to rediscover the meaning and beauty of the Sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence."
- Still, it is the experience of many priests today who try "in every way, by [their] preaching and powers of persuasion" to help people return to the sacrament that — no matter how often they preach about it or what their tone — many Catholics don't seem to respond to any message and treat the sacrament as if it's an optional part of Catholic life. A 2005 Gallup survey showed that of Catholics who go to Mass each Sunday, 42 percent say they never go to confession, 30 percent say they rarely go, and just 26 percent say they are faithful to the precept of the Church to go at least once a year. Only one out of 50 practicing Catholics reports going to confession once a month or more. If we were to factor in the frequency of those Catholics who don't come to Mass every Sunday and who are probably in ver greater need of God's mercy, the low numbers would be much more alarming still.
- Faced with this phenomenon as well as the various types of deeply-embedded "darnel" that have been sown among Catholics with respect to the sacrament of penance, many priests do not know really where to begin in trying to help their people, practicing and un-practicing, to return. Where should their preaching and catechesis start?

- The most detailed and helpful answer to this question came in Pope John Paul II's 1984 apostolic exhortation "Reconciliation and Penance," which he wrote after he and bishops from across the world spent a month studying how to respond to the crisis of the sacrament of penance. It is the greatest document published in the history of the magisterium on the subject of confession and it's well worth re-reading this Year of Mercy. Its examination and advice are still as relevant today as they were 32 years ago.
- Pope John Paul II said that preaching and catechesis are the "first means to be used" in trying to get people back to the sacrament. In paragraph 26, he specifies ten different catechetical themes that are needed to eradicate the various weeds choking the growth of the word of God in people's hearts today as well as to help nourish any seeds that have taken root.
 - The first is about reconciliation, which he defines as the "need to rebuild the covenant with God in Christ, the Redeemer and Reconciler ... and with one's brethren." He suggests this catechesis be based on Jesus' many homilies on reconciliation with God and others in the Gospel.
 - The second is on penance, which "literally means to allow the spirit to be overturned in order to make it turn toward God." There can be no reconciliation with God and others unless it is preceded by conversion and repentance, which are not just superficial feelings but a crucifixion of the "old man" so that the "new" can be born by the power of Christ. This catechesis is all the more needed, John Paul II says, because contemporary man "finds it harder than ever to recognize his mistakes" and say he's sorry.
 - Third, there needs to be a catechesis on conscience and its formation, because if the conscience is poorly formed, it will turn into "a force that is destructive of the true humanity of the person" rather than serve as the "holy place where God reveals to him his true good."
 - Fourth, there must be a teaching on the sense of sin, which has become "considerably weakened in our world." If we don't recognize that sin is poison of the soul and that sins are particular spiritual toxins, we'll never sense our need to go to the doctor.
 - Fifth, there's a need for catechesis on temptation and temptations, and how to respond to them with faith and the power of God.
 - The sixth and seventh parts of the catechesis focus on fasting and almsgiving, respectively. These are not merely "signs" of conversion, repentance, mortification and charity, but "means" by which we can become configured with Christ who himself fasted and gave all.
 - The eighth and ninth aspects John Paul II describes concern the "concrete circumstances in which reconciliation has to be achieved" — namely, the family, civil community, and social structures, and the like — as well as the "four reconciliations" that remedy the four fundamental rifts caused by sin: with God, oneself, others and the whole of creation.
 - Lastly —and as we begin the month of November, this point takes on added significance — there's a need for a "constant catechesis" on the four last things: death, judgment, hell and heaven. "In a culture which tends to imprison man in the earthly life at which he is more or less successful," John Paul II explains, pastors must "provide a catechesis that will reveal and illustrate with the certainties of faith what comes after the present life. ... Only in this eschatological vision can one realize the exact nature of sin and feel decisively moved to penance and reconciliation."
- This ten-part preaching and catechetical strategy John Paul II recommended adequately responds to the most common and serious questions, misunderstandings, and doubts modern man has with regard to the sacrament. He says that "pastors who are zealous and creative" will never lack opportunities to impart these points to their people. He specifically mentions homilies, Bible studies, lectures, religious education curricula and especially "old style popular missions." This last point is particularly one for the Church to ponder today. Is it merely a coincidence that the throngs started to come to St. John Vianney's confessional only after he had participated in such "old style" popular missions?

- Conclusion

- Many times we priests and deacons can get into habits in our preaching that quickly become inveterate. We can become “corrupt” in the sense of the definition that when something isn’t working we don’t fix it, we keep doing it any way.
- Pope Francis is asking of us that we examine our preaching and, if we need to, to go back to the basics so that it really brings about a covenantal encounter with the living God of Mercy. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to assist us. Perhaps in this Year of Mercy, our theme can be, “Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo,,” “I will sing of your mercies forever!” (Ps 89:2)