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“Entering into Jesus’ Five-Fold Mercy in the Year of Mercy”

Retreat for Lay People

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## A “Kairos of Mercy”: The Why Behind the What of This Extraordinary Jubilee Year

### Introduction

- Our theme for these days is “Entering into Jesus’ Five-Fold Mercy in the Year of Mercy.” We’re now 67 days into the 348-day Jubilee of Mercy which began on December 8 and will continue through November 20. I just returned yesterday from Rome where earlier this week Pope Francis commissioned me with 1,141 others around the world (and 726 in Rome, 125 Americans) as Missionaries of Mercy, called to preach about this great gift, to be able to forgive even sins even sins that because of the canonical penalties associated with them are reserved to the Holy See, and to be special “signs and instruments” of God’s merciful closeness. So I’m very happy to the chance to try to act on that commission to work here with you!
- The main theme of this retreat will be seeking to learn from Jesus how he wants to us to receive the various manifestations of his mercy so that we, being so transformed by them, may be able to go out and bring that mercy to others. But what I’d like to do in the first talk tonight is to discuss the why behind the what of this extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. I’m a firm believer that, thinking and praying with the Church, ecclesiastical holy years ought to add flavor to almost everything the Church does during those years, to shake us out of routine, to prevent our becoming lukewarm with regard to the understanding and living of the faith. The practical genius of ecclesiastical holy years is that they focus the attention of the Church on an important aspect of Christian faith and life that needs to be better appreciated and lived. St. John Paul II, who experienced the importance of holy years in forming and strengthening people in faith under communism in Poland, convened holy years to celebrate and give greater attention to our Redemption (1983), Mary (1987), Jesus Christ (1997), the Holy Spirit (1998), God the Father (1999), the Incarnation (2000), the Rosary (2002-3), and the Eucharist (2004-5). Pope Benedict picked up from there, convoking holy years dedicated to St. Paul (2008-9), the Priesthood (2009-2010) and the Christian Faith as a whole (2012-3). Now Pope Francis has caught the bug, convoking at the beginning of last Advent the Year of Consecrated Life that will extend through the Feast of the Presentation next Tuesday and overlapping with it something that’s obviously very dear to his heart and urgent, this Jubilee of Mercy.

### The Background and Importance of the Year of Mercy

- To orient our time together and to help us to live this year, we can ask: Why this Year of Mercy now? And how are we supposed to live it?
- The ultimate reason is because Pope Francis is convinced that we are now living in a *kairos* of mercy
  - Pope Francis said in the interview aboard Shepherd One coming back from Brazil that the Church must follow the path of mercy and that this is a special need of our time: “The Church is a mother: she has to go out to heal those who are hurting, with mercy. If the Lord never tires of forgiving, we have no other choice than this: first of all, to care for those who are hurting. The Church is a mother, and she must travel this path of mercy. And find a form of mercy for all. ... I believe that this is a *kairos*: this time is a *kairos* of mercy. But John Paul II had the first intuition of this, when he began with Faustina Kowalska, the Divine Mercy... He had something, he had intuited that this was a need in our time.”
  - Paul Francis has given St. John Paul II credit for this intuition and John Paul II believed it was a special time of mercy because he thought that one of the greatest crises the human race faces is unexpiated guilt. After two World Wars and the Cold War, after the Holocaust, after the genocides in Armenia, the Ukraine, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, after so many atrocities from tyrannical governments, after the waterfalls of blood flowing from more than two billion abortions worldwide, after the sins that have destroyed so many families, after so much physical and sexual abuse, after lengthy crime logs in newspapers every day, after the scourge of terrorism, after so much

hurt and pain, the terrible weight of collective guilt crushes not only individuals but burdens structures and whole societies. The modern world is like one big Lady Macbeth, compulsively washing our hands to remove the blood from them, but there is no earthly detergent powerful enough to take the blemishes away. We can converse with psychiatrists and psychologists, but their words and prescriptions can only help us deal with our guilt, not eliminate it. We can confess ourselves to bartenders, but they can only dispense Absolut vodka, not absolution, and inebriation never brings expiation. We can escape reality through distractions and addictions — drugs, sports, entertainment, materialism, food, power, lust, and others — but none can adequately anaesthetize the pain in our soul from the suffering we’ve caused or witnessed. Whether we admit it, whether the world realizes it or not, we’re longing for redemption. We’re yearning for a second, third or seventy-times-seventh chance. We’re pining for forgiveness, reconciliation, and a restoration of goodness. We’re hankering for a giant reset button for ourselves and for the world. And if we can’t have that personal and collective do over, then at least we ache for liberation from the past and, like Zacchaeus or Ebenezer Scrooge, for a chance make up for has been done. We want atonement. And God responds to our age’s great desire and need for expiation with his mercy. That’s what it means that we’re now living in a *kairos* of mercy.

- In his recent book length interview, *The Name of God is Mercy*, with Andrea Torielli, Pope Francis spoke about this at length.
  - This is a time of mercy. The Church is showing her maternal side, her motherly face, to a humanity that is wounded. She does not wait for the wounded to knock on her doors, she looks for them on the streets, she gathers them in, she embraces them, she takes care of them, she makes them feel loved. And so, as I said, and I am ever more convinced of it, this is a *kairos*, our era is a *kairos* of mercy, an opportune time.
  - He traced how St. John XXIII, Blessed Paul VI, and St. John Paul II focused on the time of mercy. He quoted Pope Benedict who taught, “Mercy is in reality the core of the Gospel message; it is the name of God himself, the face with which he revealed himself in the Old Testament and fully in Jesus Christ, incarnation of Creative and Redemptive Love. This love of mercy also illuminates the face of the Church and is manifested through the Sacraments, in particular that of Reconciliation, as well as in works of charity. ... Everything that the Church says and does shows that God has mercy for man.”
- In the homily he gave during the Vespers Service in which he promulgated the papal bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, he said, “Many question in their hearts: why a Jubilee of Mercy today? Simply because the Church, in this time of great historical change, is called to offer more evident signs of God’s presence and closeness. ... This is a time for the Church to rediscover the meaning of the mission entrusted to her by the Lord on the day of Easter: to be a sign and an instrument of the Father’s mercy (cf. *Jn* 20:21-23). For this reason, the Holy Year must keep alive the desire to know how to welcome the numerous signs of the tenderness which God offers to the whole world and, above all, to those who suffer, who are alone and abandoned, without hope of being pardoned or feeling the Father’s love. A Holy Year to experience strongly within ourselves the joy of having been found by Jesus, the Good Shepherd who has come in search of us because we were lost. A Jubilee to receive the warmth of his love when he bears us upon his shoulders and brings us back to the Father’s house. A year in which to be touched by the Lord Jesus and to be transformed by his mercy, so that we may become witnesses to mercy. Here, then, is the reason for the Jubilee: because this is the time for mercy. It is the favorable time to heal wounds, a time not to be weary of meeting all those who are waiting to see and to touch with their hands the signs of the closeness of God, a time to offer everyone the way of forgiveness and reconciliation.”
- In the interview with Torielli, he said that he came to the papacy with the idea of a Jubilee of Mercy already in mind, never knowing he would be in a position to act on it.
  - When I was in Buenos Aires, I specifically recall a roundtable discussion with theologians. The topic was what the Pope could do to bring people closer together; we were faced with so many problems that there seemed to be no solution. One of the participants suggested a “Holy Year of Forgiveness.” This idea stayed with me. ... I believe that the decision [to call this Year of Mercy] came through prayer, through reflection on the teachings and

declarations of the Popes who preceded me, and by thinking of the Church as a field hospital, where treatment is given above all to those who are wounded.”

- In response to this *kairos*, Pope Francis is putting God’s mercy center stage and calling us all of us, having received God’s mercy, to seek to bring it to others.
  - In the first and most famous of his now many interviews, with Fr. Antonio Spadaro in September 2013, Pope Francis said priests that “the ministers of the Church must be ministers of mercy above all.” But we can expand this to include all those who serve others in the Church’s name. We’re all called to be ministers of mercy above all.
  - Mercy has been the central theme of the Pontificate of Pope Francis. I’ll never forget being present in St. Peter’s Square for his first Angelus meditation, March 17, 2013. His beautiful words in Italian remain indelible in my memory in which he proclaimed the beauty of God’s undying mercy as not only Jesus’ most powerful message but the Church’s most powerful continued message to the world: “Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think – and I say it with humility – that this is the Lord’s most powerful message: mercy. It was he himself who said: “I did not come for the righteous”. The righteous justify themselves. Go on, then, even if you can do it, I cannot! But they believe they can. “I came for sinners” (Mk 2:17)... The Lord never tires of forgiving: never! It is we who tire of asking his forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace not to tire of asking forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving.”
  - We see on Easter Sunday evening that just as God the Father sent his Son as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world, so Jesus was sending the apostles, and their successors, to continue that saving, merciful work. Pope Francis is using his office, his words, and his example, to do everything he can to get people to receive gratefully and often this gift.
- Understanding our need for God’s mercy is key for us to recognize who we really are. And it’s essential for our people to know who God is, who they are, and how loved they are.
  - (*Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio, El Jesuita*) An authentically Christian discipleship begins our recognition that we’re sinners in need of salvation and the concomitant experience that that Savior looks on us with merciful love. “For me, feeling oneself a sinner is one of the most beautiful things that can happen, if it leads to its ultimate consequences” the future Pope Francis said in “El Jesuita.” At the Easter Vigil, he says, we sing “O Felix culpa,” exulting in the “happy sin” that brought us to experience the love of the Redeemer. “When a person becomes conscious that he is a sinner and is saved by Jesus,” Cardinal Bergoglio said, “he proclaims this truth to himself and discovers the pearl of great price, the treasure buried in the field. He discovers the greatest thing in life: that there is someone who loves him profoundly, who gave his life for him.” Many Catholics have sadly not had this fundamental Christian experience. “There are people who believe the right things, who have received catechesis and accepted the Christian faith in some way, but who do not have the experience of having been saved,” he lamented. He then gave a powerful metaphor of what the true experience of God’s mercy is like. “It’s one thing when people tell us a story about someone’s risking his life to save a boy drowning in the river. It’s something else when I’m the one drowning and someone gives his life to save me.” That’s what Christ did for us to save us from the eternal watery grave of the deluge of sin. That’s what we should celebrate every day of our life, just like someone whose life has been saved by a hero would never be able to forget it, not to mention thank him enough. Unfortunately, he said, “There are people to whom you tell the story who don’t see it, who don’t want to see, who don’t want to know what happened to that boy, or who always have escape hatches from the situation of drowning and who therefore lack the experience of who they are. I believe that only we great sinners have this grace.”
  - (March 17 Homily) “Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think – and I say it with humility – that this is the Lord’s most powerful message: mercy. It was he himself who said: “I did not come for the righteous”. The righteous justify themselves. Go on, then, even if you can do it, I cannot! But they believe they can. “I came for sinners” (Mk 2:17). Think of the gossip after the call of Matthew: he associates with sinners! (cf. Mk 2:16). He comes for us, when we recognize that we are sinners. But if we are like the Pharisee, before the altar, who said: I thank you Lord, that I am not like other men, and especially not like the one at the door, like that publican (cf. Lk 18:11-12), then we do not know the Lord’s heart, and we will never have the joy of experiencing this mercy!

- Mercy is essential for understanding who Pope Francis is.
  - In the Sept. 19 interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro, when he was asked “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?,” he replied, “I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner. . .The best summary, the one that comes more from the inside and I feel most true is this: I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.” And he repeats: “I am one who is looked upon by the Lord. I always felt my motto, Miserando atque Eligendo [By Having Mercy and by Choosing Him], was very true for me. . . This is what I said when they asked me if I would accept my election as pontiff.” Then the pope whispers in Latin: “*Peccator sum, sed super misericordia et infinita patientia Domini nostri Jesu Christi confisus et in spiritu penitentiae accepto.*” I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance.”
  - MV 8: The calling of Matthew is also presented within the context of mercy. Passing by the tax collector’s booth, Jesus looked intently at Matthew. It was a look full of mercy that forgave the sins of that man, a sinner and a tax collector, whom Jesus chose – against the hesitation of the disciples – to become one of the Twelve. Saint Bede the Venerable, commenting on this Gospel passage, wrote that Jesus looked upon Matthew with merciful love and chose him: miserando atque eligendo. This expression impressed me so much that I chose it for my episcopal motto
  - Mercy is the fundamental story of his vocation. He said to the 200,000 in St. Peter’s Square on the Vigil of Pentecost (May 18): “One day in particular, though, was very important to me: 21 September 1953. I was almost 17. It was ‘Students’ Day,’ for us the first day of spring — for you the first day of autumn. Before going to the celebration I passed through the parish I normally attended, I found a priest that I did not know and I felt the need to go to confession. For me this was an experience of encounter: I found that someone was waiting for me. Yet I do not know what happened, I can’t remember, I do not know why that particular priest was there whom I did not know, or why I felt this desire to confess, but the truth is that someone was waiting for me. He had been waiting for me for some time. After making my confession I felt something had changed. I was not the same. I had heard something like a voice, or a call. I was convinced that I should become a priest. This experience of faith is important. We say we must seek God, go to him and ask forgiveness, but when we go, he is waiting for us, he is there first! In Spanish we have a word that explains this well: *primerear* — the Lord always gets there before us, he gets there first, he is waiting for us! To find someone waiting for you is truly a great grace. You go to him as a sinner, but he is waiting to forgive you.”
  - To encounter Jesus is to encounter one who has been waiting for us to share us his mercy, it’s to meet one who calls us precisely in his merciful love, it’s to proclaim when he asks, “Who do you say that I am?,” that he is the long-awaited Messiah come to set the captives free, the Son of the Living God who is slow to anger and abounding in merciful love, to the one who awaits us with the love of the Prodigal Father to restore us to communion with him and others.
- Pope Francis says that if we really are followers of Jesus, if we’re disciples of the Master, if we seek to imitate his life, we must grasp that everything he did was to share his mercy.
  - MV 8: The mission Jesus received from the Father was that of revealing the mystery of divine love in its fullness. “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8,16), John affirms for the first and only time in all of Holy Scripture. This love has now been made visible and tangible in Jesus’ entire life. His person is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously. The relationships he forms with the people who approach him manifest something entirely unique and unrepeatable. The signs he works, especially in the face of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion.
  - (July 4, 2013 homily) The Pope based his meditation on the miracle of the healing of a paralytic (Mt 9:1-8). He reflected on the sentiments that must have shocked the crippled man when, while being carried on his bed, he heard Jesus telling him “take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven”. Those who were near Jesus and heard his words “said: ‘this man is blaspheming’; only God can forgive

sins”. And Jesus, to make them understand, asked them “Which is easier, to forgive sins or to heal?”. Jesus, St Peter said, went about doing good, curing all”.

- “But when Jesus”, the Pope continued, “healed a sick man he was not only a healer. When he taught people — let us think of the Beatitudes — he was not only a catechist, a preacher of morals. When he remonstrated against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees, he was not a revolutionary who wanted to drive out the Romans. No, these things that Jesus did, healing, teaching and speaking out against hypocrisy, **were only a sign of something greater that Jesus was doing: he was forgiving sins**”.
- Reconciling the world in Christ in the name of the Father: “this is Jesus' mission. Everything else — healing, teaching, reprimands — are only signs of that deeper miracle which is the re-creation of the world. Thus reconciliation is the re-creation of the world; and **the most profound mission of Jesus is the redemption of all of us sinners.** And Jesus”, the Pope added, “did not do this with words, with actions or by walking on the road, no! He did it with his flesh. It is truly he, God, who becomes one of us, a man, **to heal us from within**”.
- Since sharing mercy is God’s greatest joy, God therefore has a preferential option for those in most need of his mercy.
  - (April 7 Homily, St. John Lateran Cathedral, for Divine Mercy Sunday): The Father, with patience, love, hope and mercy, had never for a second stopped thinking about [the Prodigal Son], and as soon as he sees him still far off, he runs out to meet him and embraces him with tenderness, the tenderness of God, without a word of reproach: he has returned! And that is the joy of the Father. In that embrace for his son is all this joy: he has returned! God is always waiting for us, he never grows tired. Jesus shows us this merciful patience of God so that we can regain confidence, hope – always!
  - (Sept 15, 2013 Angelus ) In the Liturgy today we read chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke, which contains three parables of mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the longest of them, characteristic of St Luke, the parable of the father of two sons. ... All three of these parables speak of the joy of God. ... The joy of God is forgiving, the joy of God is forgiving! ... **The whole Gospel, all of Christianity, is here!** ... Mercy is the true force that can save man and the world from the “cancer” that is sin, moral evil, spiritual evil. Only love fills the void, the negative chasms that evil opens in hearts and in history. Only love can do this, and this is God’s joy! Jesus is all mercy, Jesus is all love: he is God made man
  - MV 9: In the parables devoted to mercy, Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy. We know these parables well, three in particular: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the father with two sons (cf. Lk 15:1-32). In these parables, God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he pardons. **In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith,** because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon.
  - (Daily Mass, Nov 7, 2013) Indeed, the Holy Father said, God “**has a certain weakness of love for those who are furthest away, who are lost. He goes in search of them.** And how does he search? He searches to the very end. Like the shepherd who journeys into the darkness looking for his lost sheep until he finds it” or “like the woman who, when she loses her coin, lights a lamp, sweeps the house and seeks diligently until she finds it”. God, seeks out the lost because he thinks: “I will not lose this son, he is mine! And I don’t want to lose him!”. But God’s work does not consist only in seeking out the lost, Pope Francis then added. “When he finds us, when he has found the lost sheep” he neither sets it aside nor does he ask us: “Why did you get lost? Why did you fall?”. Rather, he restores what was lost to its proper place. And when this happens “it is God who rejoices. God rejoices not in the death of the sinner but rather that he be restored to life”.
  - (Aug 25, 2013 Angelus) Some of you, perhaps, might say to me: “But, Father, I am certainly excluded because I am a great sinner: I have done terrible things, I have done lots of them in my life”. No, you are not excluded! Precisely for this reason you are the favorite, because Jesus prefers sinners, always, in order to forgive them, to love them. Jesus is waiting for you to embrace you, to

pardon you. Do not be afraid: he is waiting for you. Take heart, have the courage to enter through his door.

- Lk 15: Heaven rejoices more for one repentant sinner than for 99 who never needed to repent.
- Since the essence of Christianity is mercy, mercy must characterize all that the Church does because the Church is made to be a field hospital for sinners
  - The reform of the Church is one in which we reshape the Church to conform fully with God's mercy, to help form each of us to be merciful as our Father is merciful, so that we may experience the happiness described in the beatitudes, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be called children of God."
  - MV 10: Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. ... Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy. The temptation, on the one hand, to focus exclusively on justice made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step. But the Church needs to go beyond and strive for a higher and more important goal. On the other hand, sad to say, we must admit that the practice of mercy is waning in the wider culture. In some cases the word seems to have dropped out of use. However, without a witness to mercy, life becomes fruitless and sterile, as if sequestered in a barren desert. The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters. Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope.
  - MV 12: The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. The Spouse of Christ must pattern her behavior after the Son of God who went out to everyone without exception. In the present day, as the Church is charged with the task of the new evangelization, the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father.
  - October 2, 2013 Audience). You could say to me: but the Church is made up of sinners, we see them everyday. And this is true: we are a Church of sinners; and we sinners are called to let ourselves be transformed, renewed, sanctified by God. There has been in history the temptation for some to say: the Church is only the Church of the pure, the perfectly consistent, and expels all the rest. This is not true! This is heresy! The Church, that is holy, does not reject sinners; she does not reject us all; she does not reject because she calls everyone, welcomes them, is open even to those furthest from her, she calls everyone to allow themselves to be enfolded by the mercy, the tenderness and the forgiveness of the Father, who offers everyone the possibility of meeting him, of journeying toward sanctity. "Well! Father, I am a sinner, I have tremendous sins, how can I possibly feel part of the Church? Dear brother, dear sister, this is exactly what the Lord wants, that you say to him: "Lord, here I am, with my sins". Is one of you here without sin? Anyone? No one, not one of us. We all carry our sins with us. But the Lord wants to hear us say to him: "Forgive me, help me to walk, change my heart!". And the Lord can change your heart. In the Church, the God we encounter is not a merciless judge, but like the Father in the Gospel parable. You may be like the son who left home, who sank to the depths, farthest from the Gospel. When you have the strength to say: I want to come home, you will find the door open. God will come to meet you because he is always waiting for you, God is always waiting for you, God embraces you, kisses you and celebrates. That is how the Lord is, that is how the tenderness of our Heavenly Father is. The Lord wants us to belong to a Church that knows how to open her arms and welcome everyone, that is not a house for the few, but a house for everyone, where all can be renewed, transformed, sanctified by his love, the strongest and the weakest, sinners, the indifferent, those who feel discouraged or lost. The Church offers all the possibility of following a path of holiness, that is the path of the Christian: she brings us to encounter Jesus Christ in the Sacraments, especially in Confession and in the Eucharist; she

communicates the Word of God to us, she lets us live in charity, in the love of God for all. Let us ask ourselves then, will we let ourselves be sanctified? Are we a Church that calls and welcomes sinners with open arms, that gives courage and hope, or are we a Church closed in on herself? Are we a Church where the love of God dwells, where one cares for the other, where one prays for the others?

- MV 15. In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes modern society itself creates. How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today! How many are the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich! During this Jubilee, the Church will be called even more to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care. Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! Let us ward off destructive cynicism! Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism! 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 where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy.
- To emphasize mercy in this way doesn't mean that we take it for granted. We must recognize how much we need it and come to get it — and not remain in our sins
  - Some have been misinterpreting Pope Francis' call to mercy as a general indulgence toward sinful behavior, a wholesale amnesty toward the breaking of God's commandments, a unilateral and universal spiritual debt forgiveness. They seem to have drawn this conclusion from widespread public perception of what some of Pope Francis' statements and pastoral initiatives "meant." Some have inferred, for example, that the Pope's remarks about not judging gays who are seeking God's will, his desire to reach out to those Catholics who are divorced and civilly remarried, and his comments about not obsessing about issues related to abortion or contraception indicate that he's soft on sexual morality, adultery, and the killing of innocent human beings.
  - Such perceptions have led some faithful and Catholic priests to question whether the Year of Mercy is in fact a Trojan Horse introducing reforms that will prove contrary to the Gospel, and for that reason, they've been hesitant to jump on board. They have also led many in situations the Church has long taught sinful, on the other hand, to think that the Year of Mercy is not about their conversion but the conversion on the part of the Church toward them and their behavior. So they're happy to give the Church a year to reform its life and attitudes, without sensing any call to action other than grateful acceptance. Let's address these distortions.
  - For Pope Francis, to speak about mercy is to focus first on God and his loving compassion for all his sons and daughters. But it also involves recognizing that we're all prodigals desperate for the forgiveness won for us on Calvary. Our need for conversion is the flip side of God's clemency.
  - That need for mercy is a point that Pope Francis has made repeatedly in homilies in which he has contrasted "sinners" with the "corrupt." "The problem is not sinning," he said in one homily about St. Peter's recognition of his own sinfulness, "but not repenting of the sin, not feeling ashamed of what we have done. That is the problem." The corrupt don't feel shame for their sins and don't repent.
  - On another occasion, speaking about the Parable of the Tenant Farmers, he said that the corrupt are "sinners like us but who have gone a step further," becoming "solidified in sin such that they don't feel the need for God."
  - In a Mass with Italian Parliamentarians, he stressed, "We are all sinners," but the corrupt are "more than sinners." They allow their hearts to become "so hardened that it is impossible to hear the voice of the Lord. And they slide from sinfulness into corruption," ending up people of "good manners but evil habits."

- Preaching on Jesus' words about scandal, in which Jesus calls the corrupt "hypocrites" or fakers, the Pope noted that "the difference between a sinner and a man who is corrupt" is that "one who leads a double life is corrupt, whereas a sinner doesn't want to sin, but is weak or finds himself in a condition he cannot resolve and goes to the Lord and asks to be forgiven." The corrupt person "does not repent, continues to sin, and pretends to be a Christian." His life ends up "a varnished putrefaction." Like shellacked decayed wood, it might look attractive on the outside, but on the inside it's dead.
- To illustrate the distinction between sinners and the corrupt, Pope Francis has presented various corrupt poster boys: the scribes and Pharisees; the sons of Eli who manipulated their position as priests in the Temple of Shiloh for graft and sexual abuse; and the most powerful example of all, King Solomon.
- Pope Francis commented that King Solomon went from "the wisest man in the world" — as a result of God's granting his petition at the age of 18 for an understanding heart to lead his people according to God's wisdom — to becoming totally corrupted by "vanity and passions." He went from saint to sinner to corrupt. He no longer followed God's wisdom whispering in his heart but allowed lust to consume him, acquiring 300 wives and 700 concubines. And he who had built the Temple to the true God began idolatrously to erect shrines for his wives' and concubines' pagan deities.
- The chief difference between Solomon and his father King David, Pope Francis emphasized, was that unlike David who repented after his terrible sins of lust, adultery and murder, Solomon "continued living as a sinner." He remained in his sins. And his fall from grace is warning that even very holy people can become corrupted when they allow sin, rather than God, to rule their lives.
- In his letter for this Jubilee Year, the Pope, in the "name of the Son of God who, though rejecting sin, never rejected the sinner," made a particularly fervent appeal to those who are corrupt to "change their lives," specifically calling out those "whose behavior distances them from the grace of God," who "perpetrate and participate in corruption," or who belong to "criminal organizations." He reminded them and all of us that "everyone, sooner or later, will be subject to God's judgment, from which no one can escape," and urged us all to take advantage of the graces of the Jubilee to meet the Lord in his mercy before we need to face him as judge.
- "Sinners yes, corrupt no!" Pope Francis has exclaimed repeatedly. Rather than blessing sinful lifestyles and choices, the Year of Mercy is summoning all of us to recognize that we're sinners who need God's mercy, come to receive that gift frequently, and, having been filled with the riches of God's mercy and holiness, never cease to pay that wealth forward.
- He emphasized this point in the book-length interview that came out last week with Andrea Tornielli entitled *The Name of God is Mercy*. Tornielli asked him, based on his daily Mass homilies, what is the difference between sin and corruption and he replied:
  - Corruption is the sin which, rather than being recognized as such and making us humble, is elevated to a system, it becomes a mental habit, a way of living. We no longer feel the need for forgiveness and mercy, but we justify ourselves and our behaviors. ... The corrupt man is the one who sins but does not repent, who sins and pretends to be Christian, and it is this double life that is scandalous. The corrupt man does not know humility, he does not consider himself in need of help, he leads a double life. ... Sin, especially if repeated, can lead to corruption, not quantitatively — in the sense that a certain number of sins makes a person corrupt — but rather qualitatively: habits are formed that limit one's capacity for love and create a false sense of self-sufficiency. The corrupt man tires of asking for forgiveness and ends up believing that he doesn't need to ask for it anymore. We don't become corrupt people overnight, it is a long, slippery slope that cannot be identified simply as a series of sins. One may be a great sinner and never fall into corruption. ... I think for example of the figures of Zacchaeus, Matthew, the Samaritan woman, Nicodemus, and the good thief: their sinful hearts all had something that saved them from corruption. They were open to forgiveness, their hearts felt their own weakness, and that small opening allowed the strength of God to enter. When a sinner recognizes himself as such, he admits in some way that what he was attached to, or clings to, is false. The corrupt man hides what he considers his true



treasure, but he really makes himself a slave and masks his vice with good manners, always managing to keep up appearances.

- We need to repeat it: sinners yes, corrupt no! ... Like the tax collector in the temple of God who did not even have the courage to raise his eyes toward heaven. Sinners, yes, like Peter, who recognized himself as one, weeping bitterly after betraying Jesus. Sinners, yes, the way the Church wisely helps us see ourselves at the beginning of every Mass, when we are invited to beat our chests and acknowledge our need for salvation and mercy. We need to pray especially now, in this Holy Year of Mercy, so that God can find his way into the hearts of the corrupt and grant them the grace of shame, the grace to recognize themselves as sinners in need of his forgiveness.
- And having received God's mercy sincerely, we're called to pass it on. Pope Francis insists that the practice of mercy shows who God's real children are, because his children seek to become merciful like their heavenly father is merciful.
  - MV 9: From another parable, we cull an important teaching for our Christian lives. In reply to Peter's question about how many times it is necessary to forgive, Jesus says: "I do not say seven times, but seventy times seventy times" (Mt 18:22). He then goes on to tell the parable of the "ruthless servant," who, called by his master to return a huge amount, begs him on his knees for mercy. His master cancels his debt. But he then meets a fellow servant who owes him a few cents and who in turn begs on his knees for mercy, but the first servant refuses his request and throws him into jail. When the master hears of the matter, he becomes infuriated and, summoning the first servant back to him, says, "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Mt 18:33). Jesus concludes, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Mt 18:35). This parable contains a profound teaching for all of us. Jesus affirms that mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. At times how hard it seems to forgive! And yet 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. Let us therefore heed the Apostle's exhortation: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph 4:26). Above all, let us listen to the words of Jesus who made mercy as an ideal of life and a criterion for the credibility of our faith: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7): the beatitude to which we should particularly aspire in this Holy Year.
  - I'd like to bring these introductory considerations to a close by pondering Pope Francis' hopes expressed at the end of *Misericordiae vultus*.
    - MV 25. I present, therefore, this Extraordinary Jubilee Year dedicated to living out in our daily lives the mercy that the Father constantly extends to all of us. In this Jubilee Year, let us allow God to surprise us. He never tires of throwing open the doors of his heart and repeats that he loves us and wants to share his love with us. The Church feels the urgent need to proclaim God's mercy. Her life is authentic and credible only when she becomes a convincing herald of mercy. She knows that her primary task, especially at a moment full of great hopes and signs of contradiction, is to introduce everyone to the great mystery of God's mercy by contemplating the face of Christ. The Church is called above all to be a credible witness to mercy, professing it and living it as the core of the revelation of Jesus Christ. From the heart of the Trinity, from the depths of the mystery of God, the great river of mercy wells up and overflows unceasingly. It is a spring that will never run dry, no matter how many people approach it. Every time someone is in need, he or she can approach it, because the mercy of God never ends. The profundity of the mystery surrounding it is as inexhaustible as the richness that springs up from it. In this Jubilee Year, may the Church echo the word of God that resounds strong and clear as a message and a sign of pardon, strength, aid, and love. May she never tire of extending mercy, and be ever patient in offering compassion and comfort. May the Church become the voice of every man and woman, and repeat confidently without end: "Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old" (Ps 25:6).

- Let's finish by praying the Prayer of Pope Francis for the Jubilee of Mercy, which he published May 6, which contains a special prayer for us to become Ministers of Mercy and Ambassadors of Mercy Incarnate. The text of this prayer is on your handouts.

*Lord Jesus Christ,*

*You have taught us to be merciful like the heavenly Father,*

*and have told us that whoever sees you sees Him.*

*Show us your face and we will be saved.*

*Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew from being enslaved by money;*

*the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things;*

*made Peter weep after his betrayal, and assured Paradise to the repentant thief.*

*Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us, the words that you spoke to the Samaritan woman:*

*"If you knew the gift of God!"*

*You are the visible face of the invisible Father,*

*of the God who manifests his power above all by forgiveness and mercy:*

*let the Church be your visible face in the world, its Lord risen and glorified.*

*You willed that your ministers would also be clothed in weakness*

*in order that they may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error:*

*let everyone who approaches them feel sought after, loved, and forgiven by God.*

*Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us with its anointing,*

*so that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace from the Lord,*

*and your Church, with renewed enthusiasm, may bring good news to the poor,*

*proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed, and restore sight to the blind.*

*We ask this through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy,*

*you who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen*