A Reflection Guide for The Face of Mercy
On April 11, 2015, on the Vigil of the Second Sunday of Easter (Sunday of Divine Mercy), Pope Francis declared an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. This formal proclamation, called a bull of indiction, announced a Jubilee Year of Mercy beginning on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8, 2015. Pope Francis also cited that date as the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. The jubilee year will end on the Solemnity of Christ the King on Nov. 20, 2016.

Misericordiae Vultus, or “The Face of Mercy,” by Pope Francis is made up of 25 numbered sections. Celebration Publications has highlighted a number of sections from “The Face of Mercy” in this reflection guide. The entire text of Misericordiae Vultus can be found on the Vatican website here.

Mercy, if pondered, could profoundly and mysteriously influence the way we live our daily lives. Using Francis’ words as a springboard can help us examine the call and challenge to be disciples of Jesus. In doing so, we too witness to the divine love that God has for us as proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

This guide could be used by individuals or groups to begin to contemplate the theme of mercy during this jubilee year. It can serve as a supplement to parish efforts to ponder the pope’s words. Such communal reflection might suggest unique and concrete ways for parish communities to be the convincing heralds of mercy that Pope Francis invites all to be.
Jesus Christ, the face of God’s mercy

1. Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. The Father, “rich in mercy” (Eph 2:4), after having revealed his name to Moses as “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6), has never ceased to show, in various ways throughout history, his divine nature.

Often people think the God in the Hebrew Scriptures is an angry and vengeful God. Yet Pope Francis offers a concrete image of God from the book of Exodus as he begins “The Face of Mercy.”

What do the attributes of God described to Moses — merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness — say about God? What kind of image of God do they describe? What other words could be used to describe God?

How is Jesus Christ the face of God’s mercy? What did Jesus do or say that demonstrated mercy?

Recalling the invitation of the Second Vatican Council

4. 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. With the Council, the Church entered a new phase of her history. The Council Fathers strongly perceived, as a true breath of the Holy Spirit, a need to talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way. The walls which too long had made the Church a kind of fortress were torn down and the time had come to proclaim the Gospel in a new way. …

We recall the poignant words of Saint John XXIII when, opening the Council, he indicated the path to follow: “Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity … The Catholic Church, as she holds high the torch of Catholic truth at this Ecumenical Council, wants to show herself a loving mother to all; patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness toward her separated children.”
In opening the Holy Year on the anniversary of the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis grounds “The Face of Mercy” solidly in recent history and the attempts by the church to be contemporary and relevant in people’s lives.

What is your understanding of the work of the Second Vatican Council? How did the work and the documents of the council attempt to do this? What do you see as some of the long-lasting effects of the approach of this council on the church or on the world?

St. John XXIII uses two biblical images in describing the way of mercy: Bride of Christ and loving mother. How do these images help us imagine the work of mercy, particularly among the wounded members of humanity?

The psalms as an entry into the mystery of mercy

6. “Patient and merciful.” These words often go together in the Old Testament to describe God’s nature. His being merciful is concretely demonstrated in his many actions throughout the history of salvation where his goodness prevails over punishment and destruction. In a special way the Psalms bring to the fore the grandeur of his merciful action: “He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy” (Ps 103:3-4). Another psalm, in an even more explicit way, attests to the concrete signs of his mercy: “He secures justice for the oppressed; he gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (Ps 146:7-9). Here are some other expressions of the Psalmist: “He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds ... The Lord lifts up the downtrodden, he casts the wicked to the ground” (Ps 147:3, 6). In short, the mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a “visceral” love. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy.

Read Psalm 103, 146 or 147. What does the psalmist say about how God acts toward the people of God? What do the verses tell you of the covenant God has made? What does it say of our part in keeping the covenant?

Do you have another favorite psalm? What does that psalm tell you of God’s steadfast love?
Mercy unfolds in Jesus’ mission of revealing divine love

7. “For his mercy endures forever." This is the refrain repeated after each verse in Psalm 136 as it narrates the history of God’s revelation. By virtue of mercy, all the events of the Old Testament are replete with profound salvific import. Mercy renders God’s history with Israel a history of salvation. To repeat continually “for his mercy endures forever," as the psalm does, seems to break through the dimensions of space and time, inserting everything into the eternal mystery of love. It is as if to say that not only in history, but for all eternity man will always be under the merciful gaze of the Father. It is no accident that the people of Israel wanted to include this psalm — the “Great Hallel," as it is called — in its most important liturgical feast days.

Before his Passion, Jesus prayed with this psalm of mercy. Matthew attests to this in his Gospel when he says that, “when they had sung a hymn” (26:30), Jesus and his disciples went out to the Mount of Olives. While he was instituting the Eucharist as an everlasting memorial of himself and his paschal sacrifice, he symbolically placed this supreme act of revelation in the light of his mercy. Within the very same context of mercy, Jesus entered upon his passion and death, conscious of the great mystery of love that he would consummate on the cross. Knowing that Jesus himself prayed this psalm makes it even more important for us as Christians, challenging us to take up the refrain in our daily lives by praying these words of praise: “for his mercy endures forever.”

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.

Read Psalm 136. What do you hear in the psalmist’s hymn? How do you think Jesus’ understanding of this psalm shaped his relationship with God? How might it have affected his final hours?

What did Jesus teach the disciples about mercy in the relationships he had with those who approached him? What can we learn about God in contemplating mercy, love and compassion?
Mercy as the foundation of the church’s pastoral life

10. Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. … 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 instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope.

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. … 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.

The Church’s first truth is the love of Christ. The Church makes herself a servant of this love and mediates it to all people: a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of one’s self. Consequently, wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.

What are the words, language and gestures needed to proclaim mercy today? What has been the witness in language or gesture of Pope Francis to the church? Where or by whom do you see this kind of witness of mercy?

How could our parishes or communities be “an oasis of mercy”?

What is one way or one place we are called to offer a concrete sign or gesture of mercy?

Mercy invites us to open our hearts to those on the fringes

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. …

We cannot escape the Lord’s words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. Mt 25:31-45). Moreover, we will be asked if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness; if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty; if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer. In each of these “little ones,” Christ himself is present.

Who is on the fringe and outermost edges of society? Who are the wounded, the muffled, the impoverished, the oppressed?

Pope Francis speaks of solidarity and vigilant care for those on the fringes. That means more than a single moment of care or attention. This is mercy that must have a lasting impact. How do we offer this kind of mercy?

How do we “enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy”?

“It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.”
Mercy and justice as two dimensions of a single reality

20. It would not be out of place at this point to recall the relationship between justice and mercy. These are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love. Justice is a fundamental concept for civil society, which is meant to be governed by the rule of law. Justice is also understood as that which is rightly due to each individual. In the Bible, there are many references to divine justice and to God as “judge.” In these passages, justice is understood as the full observance of the Law and the behavior of every good Israelite in conformity with God’s commandments. Such a vision, however, has not infrequently led to legalism by distorting the original meaning of justice and obscuring its profound value. To overcome this legalistic perspective, we need to recall that in Sacred Scripture, justice is conceived essentially as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God’s will.

For his part, Jesus speaks several times of the importance of faith over and above the observance of the law. It is in this sense that we must understand his words when, reclining at table with Matthew and other tax collectors and sinners, he says to the Pharisees raising objections to him, “Go and learn the meaning of ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice.’ I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mt 9:13). Faced with a vision of justice as the mere observance of the law that judges people simply by dividing them into two groups — the just and sinners — Jesus is bent on revealing the great gift of mercy that searches out sinners and offers them pardon and salvation. One can see why, on the basis of such a liberating vision of mercy as a source of new life, Jesus was rejected by the Pharisees and the other teachers of the law. In an attempt to remain faithful to the law, they merely placed burdens on the shoulders of others and undermined the Father’s mercy. The appeal to a faithful observance of the law must not prevent attention from being given to matters that touch upon the dignity of the person. …

21. Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God’s way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert, and believe. The experience of the prophet Hosea can help us see the way in which mercy surpasses justice. The era in which the prophet lived was one of the most dramatic in the history of the Jewish people. The kingdom was tottering on the edge of destruction; the people had not remained faithful to the covenant; they had wandered from God and lost the faith of their forefathers. According to human logic, it seems reasonable for God to think of rejecting an unfaithful people; they had not observed their pact with God and therefore deserved just punishment: in other words, exile. The prophet’s words attest to this: “They shall not return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me” (Hos 11:5).
And yet, after this invocation of justice, the prophet radically changes his speech and reveals the true face of God: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy” (11:8-9). Saint Augustine, almost as if he were commenting on these words of the prophet, says: “It is easier for God to hold back anger than mercy.” And so it is. God’s anger lasts but a moment, his mercy forever.

How do you understand the relationship between justice and mercy?

The Pharisees are not the only ones who found this message confusing or difficult. Who else might struggle with this revelation of mercy, especially as God offers it to sinners? How do you grapple with this message?

How could parish communities find ways to reach out in mercy and offer a source of new life to people?

**Mercy in Judaism and Islam**

23. There is an aspect of mercy 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. Israel was the first to receive this revelation which continues in history as the source of an inexhaustible richness meant to be shared with all mankind. As we have seen, the pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy, because they narrate the works that the Lord performed in favor of his people at the most trying moments of their history. Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are “Merciful and Kind.” This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe that no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open.

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.
What do we know and understand about mercy in Judaism and Islam?

What is our responsibility for this encounter with these religions? What responsibility do parish communities have?

**Living daily lives of mercy**

25. I present, therefore, this Extraordinary Jubilee Year dedicated to living out in our daily lives the mercy which 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 which springs up from it.

Where does the world need convincing heralds of mercy and credible witnesses to mercy?

How would you describe the river of mercy? What more can you do to probe the depths of its mystery?

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More resources:
• Corporal Works of Mercy click here.
• Spiritual Works of Mercy click here.

Celebration and NCR stories on mercy:
• ncronline.org/feature-series/works-mercy
• ncronline.org/blogs/soul-seeing/mercy-can-overcome-even-islamic-state
• ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/because-gods-mercy
• ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/editorial-seek-encounter-during-year-mercy
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