A Mission of Mercy: Celebrating the Jubilee Year

By Joan Weber

Pope Francis has declared a Holy Year of Mercy, beginning on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 2015, and ending on the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, on November 20, 2016. In his Bull of Indiction released by the Vatican on April 11, 2015, Francis proclaimed that the Catholic Church’s "very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love." (Misericordiae Vultus, or The Face of Mercy, 10)

Pope Francis continued, "Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy...The temptation ... to focus exclusively on justice made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step." (The Face of Mercy, 10)

Francis sees mercy as something we should highlight and celebrate in the Church. "The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more," he writes. "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." (The Face of Mercy, 10)

The pontiff also takes as the motto for the holy year a phrase from Luke's Gospel: Merciful like the Father." The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us. He feels responsible; that is, he desires our well-being and he wants to see us happy, full of joy, and peaceful. This is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel. As the Father loves, so do his children. Just as he is merciful, so we are called to be merciful to each other." (The Face of Mercy, 9)

What an opportunity Pope Francis has presented to youth ministry and to youth ministers with this Jubilee Year of Mercy! Sharing the message of God’s undying mercy with young people opens so many possibilities—in catechesis, in retreats and prayer services, in preparation for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, in pilgrimage, and in justice and service. The Holy Father points out that God’s mercy gives all of us hope. That is certainly a virtue which we want for all of our youth.
Preaching and Witness
Pope Francis describes mercy as "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 Face of Mercy, 10)

These words challenge those of us who work with young people in three ways. First, we are called to share the reality of God’s mercy with them. Youth who are close to despair, youth who are uncertain about the future, youth whose home lives are less than ideal can all find comfort in knowing that God’s mercy is boundless. The very image of the Church which our teens have can be transformed by the vision which Pope Francis is holding up for all of us to see—that of the merciful father who welcomes sinners home. In his homily on March 17, 2013, Pope Francis stated:

“It is not easy to entrust oneself to God’s mercy, because it is an abyss beyond our comprehension. But we must! ... ‘Oh, I am a great sinner!’ All the better! Go to Jesus: He likes you to tell him these things! He forgets, He has a very special capacity for forgetting. He forgets, He kisses you, He embraces you and He simply says to you: ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more’ (Jn 8:11).”

The message is clear. When we sin, God welcomes us back and asks us to do better. The forgiveness and the need to change our lives go hand in hand.

Secondly, we are called to be merciful ourselves. When our youth look at us, do they see people who practice mercy? Are we non-judgmental? Do we forgive others when they hurt us? Do we give people second, third, seventh, and seventy times seventh chances when they mess up?

Finally, we are called to challenge our young people to also practice mercy. What a great opportunity the Jubilee Year offers to confront youth who bully others, who hold a grudge, who can’t find it in their hearts to forgive. We can share Pope Francis’ words from his March 17, 2013 homily:

“I think we too are the people who, on the one hand, want to listen to Jesus, but on the other hand, at times, like to find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others. And 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.”

Scripture
Pope Francis so beautifully demonstrates how we can break open God’s Word with our youth around the topic of mercy. He often refers to people in the Gospels whose lives
are changed forever by Jesus’ undying mercy. For example, when Francis preached on Divine Mercy Sunday (April 7, 2013), he said this about Thomas:

“In today’s Gospel, the Apostle Thomas personally experiences this mercy of God. ... Thomas does not believe it when the other Apostles tell him: ‘We have seen the Lord.’...And how does Jesus react? With patience: Jesus does not abandon Thomas in his stubborn unbelief ... He does not close the door, He waits. And Thomas acknowledges his own poverty, his little faith. ‘My Lord and my God!’: with this simple yet faith-filled invocation, he responds to Jesus’ patience. He lets himself be enveloped by Divine Mercy; he sees it before his eyes, in the wounds of Christ’s hands and feet and in His open side, and he discovers trust.”

Thomas is an apostle with whom many young people (and many of us older people as well) can identify — imperfect, struggling to understand, loved by God. Peter is another apostle whom Pope Francis preached about in his Divine Mercy Sunday homily and with whom young people can easily connect:

“Let us ... remember Peter: three times he denied Jesus, precisely when he should have been closest to him; and when he hits bottom he meets the gaze of Jesus who patiently, wordlessly, says to him: ‘Peter, don't be afraid of your weakness, trust in Me.’ Peter understands, he feels the loving gaze of Jesus and he weeps. How beautiful is this gaze of Jesus — how much tenderness is there! Brothers and sisters, let us never lose trust in the patience and mercy of God!”

We, too, can share the power of encounters with the forgiving Father and with Jesus with our youth. We can provide real encounters — through the sacraments, adoration, prayer, guided meditations, images, music, and other means. We can also offer small-group Bible study around the theme of mercy. And we can always count on Pope Francis to help us unpack the message of mercy, as he did with the story of the merciful Father:

“I am always struck when I reread the parable of the merciful Father. ... The Father, with patience, love, hope and mercy, had never for a second stopped thinking about [his wayward 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. ... God is always waiting for us, He never grows tired. Jesus shows us this merciful patience of God so that we can regain confidence and hope — always!” (Homily, Divine Mercy Sunday, April 7, 2013)
Pope Francis linked God’s infinite patience with mercy when he connected the story of the woman caught in adultery to our lives. In his Angelus message on March 17, 2013, he shared:

“Jesus’ attitude is striking: we do not hear the words of scorn, we do not hear words of condemnation, but only words of love, of mercy, which are an invitation to conversation. ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.’ Ah! Brothers and Sisters, God’s face is the face of a merciful father who is always patient. Have you thought about God’s patience, the patience He has with each one of us? That is His mercy. He always has patience, patience with us, He understands us, He waits for us, He does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to Him with a contrite heart. ‘Great is God's mercy,’ says the Psalm.”

What a great message he offers to young people today! And you can do the same. Think of all the Scriptures you can tap to share God’s Word about mercy with your youth. There is the fifth beatitude in Matthew’s Gospel: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (Matthew 5:7) That alone could be an entire session. Consider Jesus telling Peter how many times to forgive in the story of the unforgiving servant. It’s a great one to get youth to wrestle with (Matthew 18:21-19:1).

Ultimately, we want youth to say yes to the Gospel challenge about mercy as they pilgrimage to God. Pope Francis pointed out the two steps disciples are called to take when he wrote in The Face of Mercy:

"The Lord asks us above all not to judge and not to condemn. If anyone wishes to avoid God’s judgment, he should not make himself the judge of his brother or sister…Human beings, whenever they judge, look no farther than the surface, whereas the Father looks into the very depths of the soul.” (The Face of Mercy, 14)

**Holy Doors of Mercy**

On December 8th Pope Francis will begin the Jubilee Year by opening the special holy door of St. Peter's Basilica. The pope wants the door to “become a Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instills hope." (The Face of Mercy, 3) But Francis isn’t reserving this powerful experience for those who can travel to the Vatican. He is going to ask every diocese around the world to choose a "Door of Mercy" at a cathedral or special church which will also be opened during the year. "Every Particular Church, therefore, will be directly involved in living out this Holy Year as an extraordinary moment of grace and spiritual renewal.” (The Face of Mercy, 3)
Think of the possibilities for pilgrimages, retreats, or prayer services with your youth at the designated Door of Mercy in your own diocese. The opportunity to share God’s mercy in such a tangible way could truly touch the hearts of young people.

**Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation**

The Jubilee Year of Mercy is a perfect opportunity to explore the Sacrament of Penance with young people. As Pope Francis said in St. Peter’s Square on August 2 during the recitation of the Angelus at midday, "There are people who are afraid to go to confession, forgetting that they will not encounter a severe judge there, but the immensely merciful Father."

The pope also told those gathered that "when we go to confession, we feel a bit ashamed. That happens to all of us, but we must remember that this shame is a grace that prepares us for the embrace of the Father, who always forgives and always forgives everything."

Clearly the Year of Mercy is an opportunity to do awesome catechesis on Penance and Reconciliation! A gathered session on the meaning of the sacrament can open youth to the beauty of experiencing God’s forgiveness. Or perhaps your parish can offer an intergenerational session—for people of all ages—on the sacrament. Engaging youth in conversation about the sacrament with people of other ages can be powerful. In either setting, giving them the know-what, know-how, and know-why of Penance, with an emphasis on God’s mercy, can change their lives.

**Social Media**

We can use social media as tools for sharing the message of God’s mercy with youth during the Jubilee Year. Pope Francis is the perfect model for this. He sends tweets like this one on a fairly regular basis from his Twitter handle @Pontifex:

“We Christians are called to go out of ourselves to bring the mercy and tenderness of God to all.”

What if you texted messages of mercy to your youth? And you can always re-tweet Pope Francis’ messages. (I am sure there will be many of them in the Jubilee Year!) What if you challenged your young people to send texts or tweets about mercy to each other, to their families, to whoever needs a message of hope and forgiveness? What if they created videos or pictures that speak of mercy and posted them on Instagram, YouTube, Vine, or whatever the current popular site is?
Justice for and Service to the Poor

Pope Francis challenges us to live the Holy Year of Mercy by "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!...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!" (The Face of Mercy, 15)

We already know that mission trips and service projects can cause genuine conversion in the lives of youth—when the service is accompanied by reflection, prayer, a bit of Catholic social teaching, and a commitment to further action on behalf of the poor and vulnerable.

Pope Francis has a "burning desire" for people to reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy during the Jubilee Year. He asks us to listen to Jesus' directive in Matthew's Gospel as the directive for how his followers should act (Matthew 25). Francis wrote:

"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." (The Face of Mercy, 15)

How powerful it would be if we in youth ministry wove the works of mercy into every service project and every mission trip we offer to our young people in the Jubilee Year of Mercy!

Another aspect of justice and service which Pope Francis reminds us in The Church of Mercy is the importance of being advocates for those who suffer from poverty. He wrote, “True mercy, the mercy God gives to us and teaches us, demands that the poor find the way to be poor no longer.” (p. 107) What can we do with young people to help them embrace justice and speak out for those whose voices are suppressed or ignored? Can we train them in faith-based advocacy—with their state and national legislators and with the businesses which they patronize?

How can we weave more about the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable into our faith formation and ministry with youth during the Jubilee Year of Mercy?
Opportunity for Dialogue with Other Faiths

Pope Francis introduced the Jubilee with a reminder that other world religions also believe in mercy. He pointed out how much of the Old Testament includes passages on mercy and forgiveness. These are all passages which we use as Catholics to grow deeper in our faith. Francis also noted that Muslims call the creator “Merciful and Kind.” In The Face of Mercy, the pope encouraged more conversation with those of other faiths. He wrote:

"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." (23)

The Jubilee Year offers us a unique opportunity to bring our Catholic youth together with youth from other traditions, particularly Jews and Muslims. Think of having an inter-faith dialogue, a prayer service for peace, or just a meet and greet. Believing in the mercy of God is a powerful source of unity among our faiths.

Conclusion

In The Church of Mercy, Pope Francis tells us that we cannot be witnesses to our faith if we don’t have an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. He says, “Proclamation and witness are possible only if we are close to him, just as Peter, John, and the other disciples in the passage from John’s Gospel were gathered around the risen Jesus; there is a daily closeness to him—they know very well who he is; they know him.”

We can help our youth know Jesus better through his teaching on mercy. As Pope Francis declared in his Easter Urbi et Orbi message on March 31, 2013:

“God's mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones (cf. Ez 37:1-14). ... Let us be renewed by God’s mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.”

Let us be agents of God’s mercy to our youth, and let us challenge them to be agents of mercy in the world.

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Relevant Sessions from Youth Ministry Access

Below are some gathered youth ministry sessions and extended events to use with high school and middle school. You can find these resources by searching the titles within your subscription at www.YouthMinistryAccess.org.

**Themed on Justice and Service**
- *Engaging Youth in Ongoing Service* by Sean Lansing, Ralph Stewart
- *Rebuild My House: Preparing and Reflecting on Service with St. Francis of Assisi* by Tom East
- "The Buy Once, Give Twice" Boutique: An Alternative Christmas Shopping Experience for Your Parish by Sean Lansing

**Themed on Reconciliation**
- *Jesus Christ: Our Intimacy with God the Father* by Robert Feduccia (YMA-High School)
- *Sin and Reconciliation* by Sister Kieran Sawyer, SSND (YMA-High School)
- *The Sacrament of Reconciliation* by Leota Roesch (YMA-High School)
- *The Power of Clean! Getting Ready for Easter* by Brenda Cline (YMA-High School)
- *YouthWorks Prayer and Worship- Part Three: Reconciliation Service* (YMA-High School)
- *Pathways to Peace: Rwanda’s Healing* by Ted Miles (YMA-High School)
- *Reconciliation: We Celebrate Repentance and Forgiveness* by Sister Kieran Sawyer, SSND (YMA - Middle School)
- *Coming Home to Christ: Understanding the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation* by Tom East (YMA - Middle School)
- *Reconciliation Service: Can You Spare Some Change?* by Michelle Garlinski (YMA - Middle School)
- *Circle of Hope and Healing: Praying with the Advent Wreath* by Jen Yearwood (YMA - Middle School)

**Themed on World Religions**
- *World Religions* by Sr. Kieran Sawyer SSND (YMA-High School)

**Themed on Mercy**
- *Celebrating the “Wideness in God’s Mercy”: Divine Mercy Sunday* by Leota Roesch (YMA-High School)
- *We Are Works of Mercy: A Call to Put Compassion into Action* by Maryann Hakowski (YMA - Middle School)
- *Making Memories, Works of Mercy: Spending Time with Elders* by Catherine Becker (YMA - Middle School)

**Themed on Using Social Media**
- *Using Technology and Media to Reach Youth* by Peter Bierer (YMA Journal Article)
- #Photobomb! Recognizing the Saints in Our Midst by Peter Bierer (YMA-High School)
- *Tweeting God’s Love: Using Social Media as a Christian* by Peter Bierer (YMA-High School)
- *Fruit of the Vine: Christian Friendship* by Peter Bierer (YMA-High School)
Pope Francis’ Prayer for the Jubilee Year of Mercy

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.