

For a World Apostolic Congress on Mercy

The following statements testify that Mercy is today more than ever, the "unique hope" for the world.

*"The truth, revealed in Christ, about God the "Father of mercies," (2 Cor 1,13) enables us to "see" Him as particularly close to man especially when man is suffering, when he is under threat at the very heart of his existence and dignity. And this is why, in the **situation of the Church and the world today, many individuals and groups** guided by a lively sense of faith **are turning**, I would say almost spontaneously, **to the mercy of God**. They are certainly being moved to do this by Christ Himself, who through His Spirit works within human hearts. For the mystery of God the "Father of mercies" revealed by Christ becomes, in the context of today's threats to man, as it were a **unique appeal addressed to the Church**."*
(Dives in misericordia, 2)

*Mercy is "the power that puts a limit to evil in history,"
(cf. John-Paul II, Memory and Identity).*

*"The hour has (indeed really) come when the message of Divine Mercy needs to fill hearts with hope and to become the spark of a new civilization: the civilization of love."
(John Paul II, Krakow, 2002).*

*"How the world needs to understand and accept divine mercy!"
(John Paul II, Regina Caeli Posthumous message of 3rd April 2005)*

John Paul II exhorted the Church to be "more conscious and more motivated" by this mystery of mercy, of which she is heir for the salvation of the world. Dioceses and parishes worldwide are invited to remodel their pastoral programmes by refocusing on the invigorating mystery of Divine Mercy. (Homily of John Paul II in Krakow, 18th August 2002)

These intuitions of John Paul II concerning the pastoral care and mission of the whole Church receive new impetus through the Encyclica of Pope Benedict XVI (Deus Caritas Est) as well as

through his many vigorous messages i.e. Address to the Roman Curia on December 2005, Lenten message of 2006, Way of the Cross meditation on Good Friday and the Regina Caeli address of Divine Mercy Sunday 2006.

In the modern day context of man's search for identity and meaning; the present crisis of the person and collectivities; the confusion of values and the confrontation of cultures and of religions; muddled messages from the media and the standardizing of globalisation, the Church is called ever more to speak to the world about Mercy.

"And if at times he (modern man) lacks the courage to utter the word "mercy," or if in his conscience empty of religious content, he does not find the equivalent, so much greater is the need for the Church to utter this word, not only in her own name but also in the name of all the men and women of our time. (Dives in Misericordia , 15)

Only in this way, can the Church help people discover "the true face of God and the true face of their brethren." (Homily, Canonisation of St Faustina, 30th April 2000).

Our propos is therefore a long term pastoral perspective if Divine Mercy is to become "the light for the way forward of the people of the third millenium." (cf. Dive in Misericodia, 12)

To make this vision reality, Mercy ought to become the "paradigm" of all evangelisation.

1 SOME POINTERS FOR THE PREPARATION OF THESE CONGRESSES

The Mercy Congresses are intended to be of interest to all individuals, realities and tendencies present in the Church from parish level to diocesan, from national level to international. At this stage, we would like to present an outline of the concept in tripartite form i.e. in terms of the Church's:

- Mystery
- Communion
- and mission

This tripartite form echoes the structure of the Papal exhortation *Christifideles laici*.

11. PREPARATION AT PARISH LEVEL.

The main objective is to recentre the life of parishes on Mercy and its radiance. Parishes, not being communities by election, are a perfect setting to exercise mercy and thus be a visible sign of the love of God.

➤ Preparation in terms of mystery

Preparations would be geared towards better approaching, contemplating and adoring the Merciful Jesus. In order to support this aim, parishes would encourage particular attention to reflection on Holy Scripture and the encyclicals *Dives in Misericordia* and *Deus Caritas*. By highlighting the traditional liturgical insistence on the *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord, have mercy) parishes would be reminded of the centrality of the experience of Mercy in Christian prayer. (leiturgia)

God in his beauty expresses himself and gives himself by the splendour of Mercy. The local ecclesial community can offer Him to the world in so far as they too shine out with this Mercy. Indeed, the believer (and the community of believers as a whole) only really exists within his/her filial relationship to the Father of mercies. The gift of oneself, in the strong sense of the term, is the act which gives a person to exist. It is therefore Mercy and the giving of oneself out of mercy which allows a parish community to come alive, to open itself up and really exist!

➤ Preparation in terms of mission

Preparations evolve around “announcing the Mercy of God to everyone.”(cf. St Faustine, Diary)

- with preferential ministry to the little, the poor, the forgotten, and to public sinners.(diakonia)
- by the witness of unconditional love which is always victorious over evil and which is capable of being faithful right to the end. (martyria)
- by announcing the Mercy of God in every action, spirituality and theology of the Church. (kerygma)
- by announcing the truth, in a constant articulation to mercy and justice. (cf. 1 Co 8, 1-3)
Only merciful love is credible and without it, one cannot tell the truth about God without betraying Him.

In this way, every disposition of the Church would pass through the demanding filter of a merciful attitude. Becoming ever more perfect in mercy would always be the Church's goal. (cf. Mt 5, 48; Lc 6, 36)

➤ Preparation in terms of communion

- The mission of the Church begins with her communion and aims to extend this *koinonia* with her Lord (in particular in the Eucharist, source and summit) to the brethren and new brethren. (cf. 1 Jn 1, 1-4)

- Mercy allows the Church to become what she is : a community of “*merced*” and “*mercifying*” people reaching out to the world.
- The presence of Mercy would be reintroduced into the heart of parish communities to heal the divisions caused too often by quarrels, jealousies and destructive criticism within the parish family.

By renewed attention to the place of Mercy within the concrete life of the parish, the preparation phase would aim to help parishioners rediscover themselves in their missionary identity as prophets of mercy (ref. Hos 6,6), as priests of mercy (ref. Rm 12, 1f; Heb 2, 17) and as kings of mercy through their baptism and the Eucharist.

??Suggested ways of preparing the parishes

The following are but a few suggestions among many other possibilities :

- Preaching in Lent and Eastertide on Mercy
- Bible sharing on Mercy
- Moments of trust, praise, prayer and invocation, adoration of Mercy.
- Place for “the imagination of mercy” (Cf. John Paul II, Homily in Krakow, 18.08.02), a new creativity of love with regard to individuals and sectors of society who need mercy most.
- Reflection on Mercy with people who are not Catholic (ecumenical and interreligious gatherings....)
- Moments of sharing and communion with all tendencies and groups, new movements present in a parish.
- Welcoming the stranger, the suffering, the lonely with benevolence
- Experiences of mutual forgiveness, of sacramental reconciliation

12. PREPARATION AT DIOCESAN LEVEL.

“The Church of our time, (...) must become more motivated and profoundly conscious of the need to bear witness in her whole mission to God's mercy” (Cf. DM 12)

The World Apostolic Congresses of Mercy would be prepared by Diocesan congresses.

- Representatives from all the ecclesial realities present in a diocese would be invited to participate in these diocesan congresses : from all parishes, lay ministries, movements, communities etc
- Christians from neighboring dioceses and guests from abroad would equally be invited.

The following are a few suggested guidelines for preparations at diocesan level :

➤ **Preparation in terms of mystery**

Preparations would be aimed at helping the Church be “more conscious” of the mystery of mercy. (Cf.DM 12)

○ *With regard to priests*

We would favour a rediscovery of the priestly ministry as “mystery of mercy.” (cf Congregation for the Clergy, *Priest, you are mystery of mercy!* 2001)

○ *With regard to the faithful*

We would favour the awareness that the Fatherhood of God is a gift to all Christians given out of Mercy.

It is precisely out of Mercy that the Father is father, that he makes us exist and be reborn in Christ.

“in his great mercy (the Father) has given us new birth as his sons, by raising Jesus Christ from the dead, so that we have a sure hope and the promise of an inheritance that can never be spoilt or soiled and never fade away ..” (1 Pet 1, 3-4).

And Peter gives the name of Christians to those to whom God has given new birth. (Christifideles laici, 11).

❖ **Suggested ways and means**

- Set up meetings of diocesan groups (and amongst themselves) around a lectio divina shared on Mercy (Biblical modules are available)
- Highlight the visible presence of the merciful Jesus (image, icons, sacraments)
- Greater attention would be given to the spreading of the theological virtues in the diocesan community.

“Faith shows us the God who has given his Son for us, and has woken up in us the victorious certitude which is the true affirmation : God is Love.” (Benedict XVI , Deus Caritas est, 39).

- Importance would be given to “Trust” in God “even in moments of obscurity.” It is indeed through trust that we rediscover Love and Mercy.

➤ Preparation in terms of mission

Preparations would be geared at making Mercy the paradigm of all evangelisation and to make every person within the diocese “more motivated” by mercy. (Cf DM,12)

The encounter with the God of mercy becomes mission too. The encounter with the merciful Jesus converts the hearts and makes them missionary in their turn. By focusing on these encounters the pastoral care of the Church can be transformed. That’s to say:

- it is mercy that encourages us to journey with people far away from the Church, who perhaps are afraid of the Church.
- it is mercy that opens us the way forward to face questions around remarried couples; around sexual morality; around pedophile priests; internal disaccord; and the pastoral care of young people.

With mercy as our inspiration, we can put more accent on the essential: unconditional charity towards the poor of today.

The preparations present an opportunity to take up the challenge of finding new creative ways of giving witness to those searching, new ways of expressing charity and solidarity to those who suffer.

“It is time for a “new imagination” of charity (...) in the capacity of being close, in solidarity with those who suffer, in such a way that the gesture of help be felt not as a humiliating alms-giving, but as a fraternal sharing.” (John-Paul II , Novo Millenio inuente, 50)

Mercy would also be a source of new courage to take-up the modern-day challenge of meeting people of different cultures and religions.

➤ Preparation in terms of communion

We would be attentive to the people’s relationship with their Lord; therefore to the liturgical, sacramental life

The spirituality of mercy found in the priests can give renewed taste for the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. (leiturgia)

Mercy leads us to live a more authentic communion. It is a formidable vector of unity within a diocese, while, at the same time, leaving each person his freedom,. This veritable unity is called Mercy. (koinonia)

Entering the "school of mercy" is indispensable for ecumenical work. (cf. *Document of preparation for the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, 1997*)

"The contemporary Church is lively conscious that it is only on the basis of the mercy of God that it can carry out the tasks which flow from the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and in first line, the ecumenical task consisting to unite all those who believe in Christ." (cf. DM,13)

This ecumenical question on Mercy could have special repercussions on relations with Judaism. The origin of the differences of opinion between Christianity and Judaism, stems from, according to A. Neher, the "fatal cliché opposing Christian mercy with the rigour of the Jewish religion," forgetting that the Aramaic word *raham* is equivalent to its Greek translation *agape*. Mercy always comes first, even in relationship to *ahava*. (cf. A. Neher). In this sense, Mercy is not a virtue of Love, but at the very heart of Love.

??Some other suggestions

- Study of Mercy in the theological institutes
- A pilgrimage, an encounter with mercy, for the priests, for parishioners
- Beginnings of Evenings of Mercy and other liturgies where Mercy is proposed
- New initiatives to meet those who have the most need of mercy (those burdened with material, physical, moral, spiritual poverty) in order to relieve their burden, by giving them back their dignity.
- Time dedicated to sharing on Mercy between parishioners.

2. Sketched Outline of a first World Apostolic Congress on Mercy in Rome.

21. Aims and Objectives.

The World Apostolic Congress on Mercy in Rome would be the first Congress of a regular series. It would follow in a certain way the rhythm and pattern of the Eucharistic congresses.

"The message of merciful love needs to resound forcefully anew. The world needs this love."
(John Paul II, 18th August 2002)

This is the principle objective of the World Apostolic Congress:

- that the Church be more aware and more motivated by mercy
- that parish and diocesan pastoral programmes be inspired
- as a manifestation and proclamation of Eternal Mercy for the world.

What is fundamental to the Risen Christ, is Mercy. The Risen One is the Merciful One. In what way is he merciful? By his patience, his pedagogy, his love for people just as they are

This is not a teaching. This is the Risen Christ saying: "This is what I am ... This is what you could be."

It's Jesus ! ... And the Church is called to reactualise and prolong this manifestation of salvation.

Furthermore, in today's context of globalisation, we are confronted with the urgent question of world peace.

"The world will not find peace until it turns with determination towards the mystery of Divine Mercy....."

(cf. St Faustina, Diary)

Mercy is given as the response to the mystery of iniquity : with mercy and our commitment side by side, God can put a limit to evil.

22. Content

Bishops, priests, delegates from dioceses, congregations, movements, new communities ...would be invited to participate. The Congress would also have a strong ecumenical dimension. Invitations would therefore be extended to Christians of other confessions. Representatives of other religions would also be invited to attend.

The Congress would take place over at least four days and built on the following elements:

- Keynote Speakers (on biblical, theological, and pastoral themes)
- Testimonies of Evangelisation and Mercy
- Apostolic workshops (reaching out towards the people of God)
- Celebrations around the Mercy theme in key places like Basilicas etc
- Street processions (for example, with the image of the Merciful Christ)
- An interreligious meeting on Mercy.

We would expect around 10.000 people for the first Congress in Rome.

3. Organisation

31. The role of local Bishops

32. The coordination of the Pontifical Council of the Laity

33. The role of the Bishops' Conferences

to be developed)

4. Contact and further information

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5. ANNEXES

"Yet you are so terribly different to Who you are.
You tired yourself out in each one of them.
You mortally exhausted yourself.
They totally destroyed you.
That is called Mercy.

And yet, you remained beautiful.
The most beautiful of mankind's children.
Such a beauty has never been seen again.
Oh, what difficult beauty!
This beauty is called Mercy".

(John Paul II, young priest, praying towards
the image of Christ undergoing his martyrdom,
image known as the Ecce Homo)