

## ***Misericordiae Vultus***

### **(The Face of Mercy)**

#### **A Summary of the Papal Bull and a Reflection for our Lives**

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#### **A. Summary**

Pope Francis released the bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in 2015. There are 25 numbered sections in the bull. In this bull Pope Francis describes the salient features of Mercy. These features focus on the face of Christ as Jesus Christ is the face of Father's Mercy. The Pope develops the theme in a Trinitarian fashion in nos. 6-9, and he describes the Church as the credible sign of mercy. He notes that "mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life" (no. 10). We shall see the summary of the same.

(1) At the very outset Pope Francis makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the face of Father's mercy. He also notes that these words might well sum up the mystery of Christian faith. The Father is 'rich in mercy' as St. Paul notes it in Eph 2:4. He showed himself to Moses as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast

love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6). Throughout the history of salvation the Father never ceased to show this mercy. In the fullness of time he sent his only son who revealed the Father’s mercy in a definitive way in his entire person.

(2) The Pope points out that our salvation depends on the mystery of God’s mercy. It also reveals the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. It is the fundamental law that dwells in every human heart. It is the bridge that connects God and man.

(3) By gazing attentively on mercy we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives.

The year of Mercy begins on Dec 8<sup>th</sup>, the feast of Immaculate Conception. The feast itself signals the action of God on humanity. Sin became grave but God’s love has no limits. On that day when the Holy door is opened it becomes the door of mercy and hope. This will be followed by the opening of other doors such as the cathedral doors throughout the world, signaling the extraordinary moment of grace and spiritual renewal.

(4) The Holy Father has chosen Dec 8<sup>th</sup> 2015 as the starting of the Year of Mercy because it is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The Council made the Church enter into a new phase of her history. Earlier the Church was rather closed and the Council broke its walls opening a new era of evangelization and being a sign of God’s love in the world.

When the Council was convened Pope John XXIII said that the Church, the bride of Christ, wished to use the medicine of mercy. The Catholic Church wanted to show itself as a loving mother to all. The Pope also reminds us of

what Pope Paul VI said at the closing of the Council: “The old story of the Good Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the Council.”

5. The Jubilee year will close with the liturgical Solemnity of Christ the King on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016. On that day the Holy Door will be sealed. And we shall be filled with a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving to the Most Holy Trinity for having granted us an extraordinary time of grace. And we will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity, and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ. We would ask Him to pour out His mercy upon us so that all of us may work for a brighter future.

6. Mercy is proper to God. He shows his omnipotence in this way. St. Augustine wrote that God’s mercy is not a sign of weakness but of his omnipotence. In the Old Testament we see God as being “patient and merciful.” His mercy is exercised throughout the Old Testament. In a special way the Psalmist brings out the grandeur of God’s merciful action: “He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, and he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy” (Ps 103:3-4). God’s mercy is a visceral love, gushing forth from the depths naturally.

7. In Psalm 136 a refrain is repeated: “For his mercy endures forever.” To repeat this refrain continually breaks through the dimensions of space and time inserting everything into the eternal mystery of love. Jesus prayed this psalm before his passion as Matthew attests to it. Hence we are challenged to pray it daily in our lives.

8. When we look on Jesus and his merciful gaze we experience the love of the Most Holy Trinity. Jesus received the mission of revealing the mystery of God's love. God is love and this mystery is revealed in the entire life of Jesus. The signs and wonders she did especially in the midst of the poor, the sinners and the marginalized, speak of God's mercy.

9. There are parables uttered by Jesus devoted to mercy. They show that God never relents in showing mercy, compassion and forgiveness. This is seen especially in the parables of the Lost Sheep, of the Lost Coin, and in that of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:1-32). In these parables we see God as full of joy when he forgives. The core of the Gospel and of our faith is seen in them.

In the Parable of the Ruthless Servant (Mt 18:23-35) Jesus gives us a profound teaching: Mercy is not an action pertaining to God alone. His children should exercise the same mercy towards others.

The Sacred Scripture shows that mercy is a key word that indicates God's action towards us. Love can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete.

10. Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. The Church's very credibility lies in its showing mercy endlessly. But unfortunately, due to the focus made on justice perhaps mercy has been forgotten. However, life becomes meaningless and fruitless without mercy. Hence a reawakening on mercy is very much needed to look to the future with hope.

11. Saint John Paul II, in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordiae* pointed out that today's humanity is opposed to the God of mercy due to the technological developments. He pushed for a more urgent proclamation to mercy in the contemporary world. He noted that it is dictated by love for man. He also pointed out that the mystery of Christ obliges us to proclaim mercy as God's merciful love. Pope Francis insists that it is more pertinent today, quoting from John Paul II, that the Church leads an authentic life only when it professes and proclaims mercy.

12. The Church must announce the mercy of God in the manner of Jesus Christ who went out to every one without exception. In this age of new evangelization the Church must testify to mercy for the credibility of her message of salvation, for the Church's first truth is the love of Christ.

13. Jesus admonished us to be *merciful like the Father* (Lk 6:36). We must live in the light of his words. It should be a programme of our life in this Jubilee Year and always.

14. Holy Year is also known for pilgrimage which reminds us that our life is a journey. Mercy should be the goal of our journey and the pilgrimage should lead us to conversion. The Lord shows us the steps of the pilgrimage: judging, not condemning, forgiving, and giving (Lk 6:37-38). As the 'motto' of this Holy Year is 'Merciful like the Father' it should make us become compassionate towards others.

15. In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society. Like the Good Samaritan we need to look forward to heal the wounds of those living in the borders of society,

people who are neglected, breaking the barriers of indifference, removing our mask of hypocrisy and egoism.

We must enter into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have special experience of God's mercy. We need to rediscover the *corporal works of mercy*: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. We should not also forget the *spiritual works of mercy*: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead. The Holy Father reminds us the words of St. John of the Cross: "As we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love."

16. The Gospel of Luke shows that Jesus read from Isaiah and applied it to himself as he is anointed to preach the good news to the poor... and to proclaim the year of Lord's favour (Isa 61:1-2; Lk 4:18-22). The Lord's favour is his mercy. The Holy Year will bring to the fore the richness of Jesus' mission of liberation.

17. The Holy Father reminds us that the season of Lent during this Jubilee Year should offer us a special moment of celebrating and experiencing God's mercy. We read special texts on mercy from the Sacred Scripture during Lent. Prophet Micah shows us that God takes away our iniquity and is pleased to show mercy (cf. Mic 7:18-19). Prophet Isaiah shows us that the fast which the Lord chooses is to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the throngs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free etc. (cf. Isa 58:6-11). The Sacrament of Reconciliation should be placed

at the centre as more and more people, including young people, are returning to the same today.

The Holy Father highlights the role of priests as confessors in this Jubilee Year. They should know that they are authentic signs of God's mercy. Like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son they should accept penitents without asking useless questions. They should also look for the other son who remains outside, incapable of rejoicing.

18. The Holy Father makes it clear that he sends missionaries of mercy this Holy Year. There will be priests who will be given the authority to forgive even those sins reserved to the Holy See. The Holy Father advises the bishops to welcome these missionaries of mercy and also to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with the people.

19. The message of mercy should reach even those who are indifferent to mercy. In particular it should reach to those who belong to criminal organizations and engaged in bloodshed and other criminal acts. They should realize that money does not bring happiness or make one immortal. The Holy Father gives an invitation to such people to change their lives.

The same invitation is extended to those who either perpetrate or participate in corruption. This festering wound is a grave sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance, because it threatens the very foundations of personal and social life. Corruption prevents us from looking to the future with hope.

This is the time to change our lives. We need to listen to the cry of the people who are deprived of their property, their rights, their dignity and even their lives.

20. There is relationship between justice and mercy. They are not contradictory realities but two dimensions of a single reality. In the Bible justice is conceived essentially as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God's will. Jesus says: "Go and learn the meaning of 'I desire mercy not sacrifice'. I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt 9:13). Jesus is bent on revealing the great gift of mercy that searches out sinners and offers them pardon and salvation. According to Paul, salvation comes not through the observance of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, who in his death and resurrection brings salvation together with a mercy that justifies.

21. Mercy offers the sinner a new chance to look at himself, convert and believe. Prophet Hosea pictures that mercy surpasses justice. When the people of Israel become unfaithful to the covenant the prophet predicts that they will be punished and will be under Assyria. And yet the prophet changes his speech and shows the true face of God who cannot abandon Israel. His compassion grows warm and tender. For, he is God and not man (cf. Hos 11:8-9). St. Augustine also says that it is easier for God to hold back anger than mercy.

This does not mean that justice should be devalued or rendered superfluous. Anyone who makes a mistake should pay the price. But this is only a beginning of conversion. God does not deny justice. But God envelops it in greater event of mercy. Thus the Cross of Christ is God's

judgment on all of us and on the whole world, because through it he offers us the certitude of love and new life.

22. The Holy Father says that the Jubilee Year entails granting of *indulgences* too. God is always ready to forgive. But sin is a reality. Hence we need the sacrament of reconciliation and indulgences. To live the indulgence of the Holy Year means to approach the Father's mercy with the certainty that his forgiveness extends to the entire life of the believer.

23. There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. Judaism and Islam consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. The pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy as they narrate God showing always favour to his people. Islam calls God 'merciful and kind.' The Muslims believe that no one can place a limit to God's mercy. This Year of Mercy should make our hearts open to these religions and others so that there is dialogue and no violence and discrimination take place.

24. Mary is the Mother of mercy. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh. She treasured divine mercy in her heart in perfect harmony with her Son Jesus. The hymn of Mary, sung at the house of Elizabeth, was dedicated to the mercy of God. At the foot of the cross, together with John, she witnessed the words of forgiveness spoken by Jesus. This supreme expression of mercy towards those who crucified him shows us the point to which the mercy of God can reach. Mary attests that the mercy of the Son of God knows no bounds and extends to everyone, without exception. We need to pray to

her so that she turns her merciful eyes upon us to enable us to contemplate on the face of mercy, her son Jesus.

25. The Holy Father focuses on the role of the church regarding mercy of God. In this Jubilee Year we should allow God to surprise us. The church has the primary task today to introduce everyone to God's mercy. It is called above all to be a credible witness to mercy. The church should always echo the word of God which is a message and sign of pardon, strength, aid and love. The Church should never tire itself in this and should be always patient in offering God's mercy.

Thus, the document develops three main themes. In the first place the Pope elaborates the theological understanding of the mercy of God. He explains the role of mercy in the life of the people and the Church. They are both the beneficiaries and witnesses to God's mercy in this world. Second, the Holy Father shows that the mercy of God is not an abstract idea. It is a concrete reality through which He reveals His Love like a father or mother. The father or mother has the very depths of love for the child. Thirdly, The Pope shows that mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. The Church's very credibility is seen in the way she shows merciful and compassionate love.

## **B. The Place of the Bull in the Recent Teaching of the Church on Mercy**

The Church has been keeping mercy as one of the main themes of its teaching. Mercy has been the main focus in the life of the Church. There is more awareness on mercy in the recent past.

The notable Papal achievement of Pope John XXIII was the calling of the Second Vatican Council. In his famous October 11, 1962 speech to open the Council, he framed the entire Council in a merciful key.

He stressed the need for mercy in the years preceding the Second Vatican Council. He published an encyclical in 1962 entitled *Paenitentiam Agere* on the gift of God's mercy and the need for us to recognize our need for it, come to receive it in the Sacrament of Penance, and to do interior and exterior penance.

Pope John XXIII inaugurated the Second Vatican Council and said that the Church "desires to show herself to be a loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward children separated from her," and "she spreads everywhere the fullness of Christian charity, than which nothing is more effective in eradicating the seeds of discord, nothing more efficacious in promoting concord, just peace and the brotherly unity of all."

Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical titled "*Dives in Misericordia*" on 30.11.1980, the first Sunday of Advent. In the encyclical the Pope clarified how God is rich in mercy. He also clarified that justice alone is not enough for today's society.

Pope John Paul II promoted the Divine Mercy Sunday. He canonized St. Faustina who spread the devotion to God's Mercy and the Sunday after Easter was officially designated as the Sunday of Divine Mercy.

Pope Benedict XVI also stressed the need of yearning for God's mercy. He said in an interview that "mercy is what moves us toward God, while justice makes us tremble

in his sight. On 25<sup>th</sup> December, 2005 Pope Benedict XVI issued the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. It was the first encyclical of his Pontificate. It is subtitled *De Christiano Amore (Of Christian love)*. On 29<sup>th</sup> June, 2009, on the feast day of St. Peter and Paul, Pope Benedict issued the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. In this document the Pope reminds us that “charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine”. Thus both these encyclicals of Pope Benedict XVI continue the theme of mercy already dealt with by Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II.

Pope Francis accepted papacy on 19.03.2013 and mercy has been the fundamental theme in his papacy. When he was asked if he would accept papacy, he showed his own personal trust in God’s mercy, responding, “I am a sinner, *but I trust in the mercy and infinite patience of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and in a spirit of penance, I accept.*” The Pope issued the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* which means “Joy of the Gospel.” In the encyclical the Pope stated that the Church should be the home of mercy. And on 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2015 he issued the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. It is *Misericordiae Vultus* which means the Face of Mercy.

Thus the Papal Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Year of Mercy has come in the Church’s tradition of focusing on Mercy. In this Bull Pope Francis has given us a beautiful meditation on the meaning, nature, and calling of mercy – the word that best describes the scope, mission, and substance of his pontificate.

### **C. A Reflection: Justice and Mercy**

The Holy Father has stated that the temptation to focus exclusively on justice made us forget that it is only a first step, albeit necessary and indispensable step. We must go beyond. Without a witness to mercy life becomes fruitless.

We expect mercy from parents, friends, and colleagues. We expect mercy in our personal relationships. But we expect justice from judges. We do not want the judges to be lenient in their judgments. We expect the judges to impose the appropriate penalty for the offence committed. We do not expect them to be merciful. Thus justice and mercy do not normally go together. We have the pre-conceived idea that justice and mercy are alternatives. We expect either justice or mercy from the same person and not both at the same time.

Yet the Bible presents God as a judge who judges with justice and a God of mercy. How can we combine both which seem to have contradictory characteristics? Justice and mercy in God seem to be incompatible. Justice involves the dispensing of deserved punishment for the wrongdoing, while mercy is about pardon and compassion for an offender.

The Bible, in the very beginning, shows how God's justice is intertwined with mercy. The creation of the world and human beings is described in the first two chapters of Genesis. But when man and woman, instigated by the cunning snake (devil), disobey God they are punished. They wanted to become immortal but they are expelled from the Garden of Eden. Here God's justice prevails. But God did not completely disown them. God remains tenderly concerned to make them adequate clothes even as he expels

them from their hopes of immortality. But God gives a promise in Gen 3:15 which is described as 'Mother prophecy.' The first man and woman were not immediately destroyed when they ate the forbidden fruit. But God planned a redeemer for them. Jn 3:16, states that God in his love sent his own son. And Christ paid for every sin committed. Thus God was just in punishing sin, and he can justify sinners who receive Christ by faith (Rom 3:26).

God's justice and mercy are beautifully demonstrated in the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4). The story of Cain and Abel is placed after the garden as the second stage of human development. Both Cain and Abel bring offerings to God. No reason is given why Abel's sacrifice pleases God more than Cain's does. The authors are more interested in Cain's reaction, which is the welling-up of hot anger and envy. But God speaks to Cain. He did not speak anything to Abel who is walking with his Lord. God created human beings in a unique manner. He shows his love to each person differently. Cain did not try to understand this. He presumed that God did not love him enough as he loved Abel. Cain's problem was not Abel but God. He could not comprehend the mystery of God's love. Hence God takes the initiative to speak to him. He says to him: "Why are you resentful and crestfallen? If you do well, so you can hold up your head; but if not, sin is a demon lurking at the door; his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master" (Gen 4:6-7). Like a father God comes to Cain and tries to solve his problem. He did not speak to Abel. He did not do anything to Abel. He speaks only to Cain. All these show the love and mercy of God. This is the love which he shows to Cain before he shows his justice. But Cain refuses to

understand the love of God. This blindness makes Cain to kill his own brother Abel.

Now God's justice comes. He asks Cain, "where is your brother Abel?" (Gen 4:9). Cain being the first-born in the family and being the elder brother has the responsibility towards his younger brother, Abel. But Cain denies the truth of his brotherhood and his role as the first-born in the family. He answers: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9). Now God's justice comes to act. That is the reaction of the cry of the blood of Abel. And God curses Cain for the blood of Abel.

The justice of God opens the eyes of Cain. Now he pleads for God's mercy. He understands that the effect of sin is unbearable and that death would surely come. He is afraid of others. At this juncture God intervenes the third time. This is the reaction of mercy. He says: "If anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged sevenfold" (Gen 4:15). He puts a mark on Cain lest anyone should kill him at sight (Gen 4:15). God, thus, protects Cain. The murderer will not be murdered. It is the saving love or mercy of God. The story of Cain and Abel shows in what manner God acts. The basis of God's action and reaction is his love and mercy. This does not do away with his justice. God's love protects his justice and his justice guards his love and mercy.

The same story continues all throughout the Bible. God makes a covenant with the people of Israel. They break the covenant. But God promises a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). In this new covenant the law will be written in their hearts. This new covenant was ratified by Jesus Christ on

the cross. And God's justice and mercy were demonstrated by Jesus on the cross.

We have been familiar with the theme of justice in the past. This was needed as justice was and is still denied in many quarters. Justice delayed is justice denied. The cry of the poor is not for bread but for justice. Thanks to the awareness created by the Church and by other humanitarian organizations today there is more and more inclination towards justice. But we need to realize that justice is not opposed to mercy. The biblical notion on justice is synchronized with mercy. God acts as a God of justice through mercy. And Jesus exhibited it on the cross.

Hence, the Church while focusing on justice which is needed very much for the society, should also focus on mercy which is needed more. The Holy Father laments that today many cultures have dropped the word 'mercy.' It is very unfortunate. Mahatma Gandhi said: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." He also noted that fortunately humans are not always for vengeance and establishing justice; they forgive and thus life goes on. And Jesus admonishes us to offer no resistance to one who is evil (Mt 5:38-39). The Old Testament command, adopted from the Code of Hammurabi, was meant to moderate vengeance; the punishment should not exceed the injury done. Jesus forbids even this proportionate retaliation. Hence mercy takes priority.

Based on the concept that justice and mercy go together in God, as we have seen from the biblical narrations, the Church today should realize that mercy is the very foundation of its life (no. 10). The Church has

been in the past neglecting several groups of people: atheists, agnostics, Jews, people of other religions, divorcees, prisoners, even trans-genders. As the Bible shows that our God is God of both justice and mercy we need to show mercy to several types of people who were perhaps neglected on the grounds of justice. The Holy Father advises us to reach to the people on the fringes. He also has clarified to us elsewhere that we are not to judge gay people etc. "Who am I to judge them if they're seeking the Lord in good faith?" he said. Perhaps the Church has been too harsh on them in the past, forgetting that our God is primarily a God of mercy. His son Jesus promised paradise even to the one who was crucified together with him on the cross. While justice warranted the crucifixion of the robber, Jesus' mercy promised him admittance in the eternal abode (Lk 23:39-43). As Archbishop Fulton Sheen graphically describes in his book, *The Life of Christ*, the first one to go to heaven with Jesus was not a saint as we might expect but a notorious sinner. Such is the power of mercy.

When a woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus to be stoned to death, the people wanted to establish the justice stipulated by the Mosaic Law. But actually the men in the episode are guilty of sin. Yet Jesus does not condemn them; he simply leads them to recognize their sinfulness. Jesus does not condemn the woman either. And that converted her for a new life. This attitude should be ours. The Church condemned Galileo forgetting the fact that it was in error. The Church should reflect and see how it has failed to reflect the merciful Father in its life. It should reflect and see how it has failed to show Jesus Christ as the face of mercy. It is time for the Church to realize that

it can survive only by exhibiting the merciful face of the Father. Mercy should be the very foundation of the Church while it seeks to bring justice and peace in the world.

The Holy Father recommends dialogue between Judaism and Islam as they also focus on the mercy of God. They consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. Such dialogue may stop indiscriminate violence. Today hatred is shown to Christianity in India. This is because of the revivalism of Hindu fundamentalism. Christians are persecuted in many parts of India and Christian churches are attacked and demolished. But Hinduism is also focusing on the mercy of God. In fact Hinduism has been tolerating other religions in the past. It has tolerated Christianity so much that it allowed Christianity to flourish in India. But today the situation has changed. The Church should show itself in India as the Good Samaritan who offered to help the hating Jew who was wounded by robbers on his journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is true that this has been done. Mother Teresa showed the face of Christ in India as the face of Father's mercy. But this should be extended to so many areas. When we focus on this there may be dialogue and openness between Christianity and other religions in India and there may be more peace and love between people of different religions in India.

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