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Pastoral Letter for the Year of Mercy

TO BE READ AT ALL MASSES ON THE WEEKEND OF 5–6 DECEMBER 2015

As your Bishop, I want to alert you to the good news that our beloved Pope Francis has proclaimed an *Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy*, from the celebration of Mary's Immaculate Conception on 8 December 2015 until the celebration of Christ the King on 20 November 2016.

Pope Francis wants us to focus on Jesus' words, "Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful," (Lk 6:36) and from the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the Merciful for they shall obtain mercy." (Mt 5:7) In the Bible, "mercy" is a key word to describe how God deals with you and me. Pope Francis is asking of us a key question: "Have we long since forgotten how to show the way of mercy and how to live the way of mercy?"

Pardoning those who offend us is the clearest expression of merciful love, says the Pope, because pardon is the instrument put into our fragile hands to gain peace of heart. To let go of bitterness, resentment, anger, violence and revenge, are necessary conditions if we are to have peace and joy in our lives and bring joy to others.

It is 'spot on' for the Pope to remind us that the practice of mercy is diminishing in our wider culture. Look at the merciless actions and senseless violence on our streets, which can make it risky to be out alone at night. Yet, the Pope tells us that without our witnessing to God's mercy in the way we think and the way we behave, life loses its sparkle and it can become like living in a barren desert.

Francis our Pope reminds us that Jesus is the face of the Heavenly Father's Mercy – God's merciful attitude is living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth.

Connectedness

Pope Francis wants us to focus on what matters most – our relationships – because life is about relationships: our personal relationship with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit; our relationships with each other – those nearest and dearest in our families; people in our parishes; in our workplaces; in our schools; in our social, leisure and sporting activities; our relationship with people who are poor and in need as well as our relationship with our common home, the natural world around us. "Everything is connected" says the Pope. "Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere

love for our fellow human beings and to an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society." (*Laudato Si*, 91) "When we can see God reflected in all that exists," says Pope Francis, "our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures and to worship God in union with them." (*Laudato Si*, 87)

Jubilee Tradition

You may well remember Pope St John Paul II proclaimed the Great Jubilee of our Saviour's Birth in the Year 2000. The Jubilee tradition of God's chosen people (Leviticus 25-27) marked each 50th year as a rare and important time to stop and reflect on God's love and care, so as to respond by forgiving debts, releasing prisoners and letting the land lie fallow to regenerate. *Jubilee* meant a time of reconciliation, hope, justice and peace. The Church has embraced the Jubilee tradition since the 13th Century. In addition to this, Popes have also called Extraordinary Jubilees – Pope Paul VI in 1967 to mark the 19th Centenary of the Martyrdom of Ss Peter & Paul and Pope St John Paul II in 1983 called a Jubilee of Redemption.

This *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, about to commence on 8 December, has been called because our Pope wants us, the Church, in all our witness, our preaching and teaching and our pastoral work, to be taking our lead from the merciful heart of God. If we are to be credible to people who don't believe or to those who have given up on religion, especially due to the scandals and merciless acts of those who were called to be ministers of mercy, we, at all levels of the Church, have to show mercy and compassion. If all we do is condemn the evident evils in our society, we can seem to be out of touch with people who are really struggling because they are broken by suffering the tragedies life can bring. Rather, the Pope wants us to focus on how merciful the Gospels show Jesus was with sinners, with the sick, with people with disabilities, with those in need who were often on the margins of society. "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*." (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 12) How can we make this a reality in our parishes, schools and communities?

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The Sacrament of Reconciliation

In the focus on mercy, you and I realise we need to be open to God's mercy ourselves. St Paul reminds us that, "It is by Grace, you have been saved, not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God." (Eph 2:4-8). It can be a shock for us, as modern, sophisticated, self-reliant people, to comprehend the stark reality that, no matter how good we may think we are, we are always in need of God's mercy and forgiveness because of our human weakness and our often poor self-interested moral compass. Even though we find it hard to admit, we are all truly needy and broken human beings depending on God's mercy to be saved, redeemed, forgiven and made holy. Such lack of awareness possibly explains why so few people these days approach the Sacrament of forgiveness. "Everyone, sooner or later," says the Pope, "will be subject to God's judgement, from which no-one can escape."

During this Year of Mercy, the Pope wants us to "place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace." The Pope went on to say, "I will never tire of insisting that clergy in the confessional, themselves be authentic signs of the Father's mercy!" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 17) In the spirit of the Pope's invitation for dioceses to appoint specific priests to be *Missionaries of Mercy*, I am inviting *all* the priests of our Diocese to be missionaries of mercy and to make themselves more available to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Lent 2016

The Pope wants Lent 2016 to be a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy. On the Friday and Saturday (4-5 March 2016), before the 4th Sunday of Lent, he wants "24 hours for the Lord" to be celebrated as intense prayer throughout the Church with Exposition and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, personal devotion and opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Pilgrims Through the Holy Door

The practice of pilgrimage has a special place in this Holy Year because our life is a pilgrimage as we make our way to our final destination – to be with God forever. So to reach the Holy Door in Rome, or at our own St Francis Xavier Cathedral in Wollongong, or at designated places of pilgrimage in our Diocese:

- Immaculate Conception Parish Unanderra
- Shrine of Our Lady of Mercy Penrose Park
- The Benedictine Abbey Jamberoo
- The Carmel of Mary and Joseph Convent Varroville
- Bethlehem Monastery Campbelltown
- St Paul's Parish Camden
- St John the Evangelist Parish Campbelltown
- St Michael's Parish Nowra

We cross the threshold of the Holy Door as a sign we are seeking the grace to embrace God's Mercy and to dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as our Heavenly Father is with us.

A special Holy Year Indulgence will be available to free us from every residue left by the conflicting consequences of our sins on how we think and act, so that we may be strengthened as disciples of the Lord.

I commend this Holy Year to your prayer and consideration and acceptance, because as Pope Francis says, "God's mercy is a spring that will never run dry, no matter how many people approach it." (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 25)

I pray that, as the year unfolds, it will touch our hearts so that we can re-evaluate how we practise the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy (see below), as practical evidence that we are open to receive mercy so that we will *become* merciful like our heavenly Father. Where will the "oases of mercy" be in our personal lives, our parishes, schools and communities?

After announcing the Jubilee Year in March this year, the Pope said, "I am convinced that the whole Church will find in this Jubilee, the joy needed to rediscover and make fruitful the mercy of God with which all of us are called to give consolation to every man and woman of our time. From this moment we entrust this Holy Year to the Mother of Mercy so that she might turn her gaze upon us and watch over our journey." (*Homily*, 13 March 2015).



Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter W Ingham".

Most Rev Peter W Ingham DD
Bishop of Wollongong

Corporal Works of Mercy

- Feed the hungry
- Give drink to the thirsty
- Clothe the naked
- Shelter the homeless
- Visit those in prison
- Comfort the sick
- Bury the dead

Spiritual Works of Mercy

- Instruct the ignorant
- Counsel the doubtful
- Forgive offences
- Bear wrongs patiently
- Admonish sinners
- Comfort the sorrowful
- Pray for the living and the dead