



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

Pastoral Letter to be read in all parishes on the weekend of the 5th/6th December

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a famous painting by Holman Hunt, the original of which is in St Paul's Cathedral, Christ stands with a lighted lamp, knocking at a closed door. The door has no handle on the outside. When asked about it, the artist remarked, "It is up to each one to open the Door to Jesus."

Starting on the 8th December, in a few days' time, Pope Francis has inaugurated a special Holy Year of Mercy for the whole Church. This is to encourage each of us to open the door to let Christ in, and also to open the door of our hearts to let Christ out, so as to share Him with others.

I, therefore, ask everyone in the Diocese to try three things during this Jubilee Year. Firstly, to deepen our personal awareness that Jesus is our best friend. He is the One, St John the Baptist speaks of as he calls us to "Prepare the way." Jesus is the One who shows us God's mercy. One way we come to know this is through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is a precious gift. On the Tuesday evenings of Lent, between the hours of 7 and 8.30pm, I have asked for the main Parish Churches to be open. There will be Eucharistic Adoration and the priest will be in the Church, available to hear confessions. This will take place simultaneously, across the whole diocese. You may go to any parish church that you would like, especially if you have not been to confession for some time. Jesus, your best friend, waits to welcome you and show you the face of the Father's mercy. If you have been to confession, then please still go to the Church to pray for a period for others. Pray, too, for your priests and bishops, that we may be merciful instruments of the love of Jesus.

I have also asked that parishes allow more opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation at other times through the Year. I want to thank our priests for their generosity in making themselves available for this vital ministry.

Secondly, I ask you to make a new friend whom you sense needs God's mercy. We can do so through practising the works of mercy. The corporal works of mercy we know well - to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned, to bury the dead. Most especially this year, Pope Francis has asked those of us in Europe to be mindful of refugees. We are working closely with the civic authorities in the South West. I ask you to continue to be generous with your time, talents, and, where possible, with your money, too.

The spiritual works of mercy are not so well known. These speak of the need to heal the wounds of the human soul. They are: to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to admonish sinners, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences willingly, to comfort the afflicted, to pray for the living and the dead. There is a delicacy about how we communicate these. They should be shared with a mother's tenderness, rather than as a judgement. We have each been given the gift of faith, a spiritual power which can heal the wounds in our society and in personal lives. This transformation starts, of course, with ourselves. In manifesting the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in generous and gentle ways, I believe that this year provides many opportunities for us to be real "missionaries of mercy" to our brothers and sisters.

Finally, we are called to help bring our new friend to the mercy of Jesus. Next Sunday, I will open the Holy Door of Mercy at the Cathedral. I hope you'll have an opportunity to make a pilgrimage to the Cathedral during the Holy Year and perhaps to try and bring that new friend or another with you.

For those unable to go to the Cathedral, there are many other opportunities to accompany your friend in discovering the mercy of Jesus. Invite them to your local parish for a Church service, perhaps leading up to Christmas or Easter, maybe to the Parish Carol concert or to a service in Holy Week. Or, more simply, bring them to the Church for a time of personal prayer with you, maybe to light a candle. Pray about it before you approach them. Talk to them honestly and with an open heart, about what Jesus means to you. Tell them how you have experienced the gift of His mercy in your own life. Many parishes are also making prayer cards available with images of Divine Mercy. Share one of these with your friend and invite them to say the prayer with you.

Some parishes have also started forming Evangelisation teams who will be visiting homes in the parish during the year, or trying other initiatives locally. In these different ways, our neighbours are given a sense of what Jesus' friendship means to us. Another possibility, is to give a small copy of St Luke's Gospel to a friend to read during the year. It is in that 'Gospel of Mercy' that we read the lovely parables of mercy, such as the Prodigal Son and the Lost Sheep. These are very familiar to many of us, but to somebody encountering Jesus for the first time through them, they can be life changing. Never underestimate the power of His mercy, to transform hearts and minds.

I pray that this forthcoming Year of Mercy may be for each of us, a real Jubilee, a time when we come closer to our Merciful Saviour. And a time, too, when we help those around us to come to know the joy of His mercy and that peace that only He can bring to the human heart.

God bless your efforts this year and please pray for me.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Mark". The plus sign is positioned to the left of the name.

Rt Rev Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth