



SUPERIOR GENERAL'S ADVENT-CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2016

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Dear Brothers, Sisters and Friends in the Passionist Family, last week the Holy Father, Pope Francis closed the Holy Door at St Peter's Basilica in Rome, officially bringing to a close the Holy Year of Mercy which he proclaimed one year ago. Personally, I found so much richness in the reflections and catechesis of Pope Francis throughout this Year, both comforting for my soul and challenging to my conscience. So, what happens now? Is it all over? Doors closed! Where do we go from here?

Speaking of opening and closing, beginning and ending, can give the impression, and possibly the false notion, that one thing has finished and now we search for a new focus. However, this is not to be the case! Rather, what we have lived in this special time of the Holy Year, the graces and conversion which we have encountered and has shaped us even in a small way, must continue to inspire and inform our daily lives and actions as Passionist disciples of Jesus.

In declaring a Year of Mercy, Pope Francis as the leader of the Church was outlining his vision for the Church and the world of today. He has a strong sense of a **“wounded humanity” in need of mercy** and he wants us, as members of the Church, to be part of this shared vision which is ongoing and not ended.

This is a time of mercy. The Church is showing her maternal side, her motherly face, to a humanity that is wounded. She does not wait for the wounded to knock on her doors, she looks for them on the streets, she gathers them in, she embraces them, she takes care of them, she makes them feel loved...I am ever more convinced of it, this is a kairós, our era is a kairós of mercy, an opportune time.

(Pope Francis)

Throughout the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis not only reflected on and encouraged us to engage and confront God as a Merciful Father, but he also challenged us in turn, and showed us by his own example, how to **be merciful** to our fellow sisters and brothers... *“Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful” (Lk. 6:36)*. The Pope's words and gestures reflecting acts and actions of mercy sought to bring about healing and dignity to a wounded humanity.

As Passionists who are members of the Church, it is important that we too support and adopt a vision which fits-in and merges with the vision of the wider Church - naturally from the standpoint of our specific mission which flows from the Passion and Cross of Jesus reflecting God's immense mercy for humanity and all of creation.

The Christian life is always about new beginnings and new opportunities. The rhythm of our yearly cycle in celebrating the liturgical seasons is designed to nourish our growth in Christ and offer us a fresh start – a new opportunity. A favourite saying of Catherine De Hueck Doherty (social justice worker and founder of Madonna House Apostolate in Canada) was: *“With God, every moment is the moment of beginning again.”*

This time of Advent is another opportunity – a moment to ponder our *beginning again* with God *“as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ”*. This ‘coming’ of the Saviour is the ‘coming of God’ which we commemorate in the Mystery of the Incarnation: God becoming human (flesh) in the human birth of the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus, as the human face of God, is the face of Mercy. Through his life and mission Jesus is the one *“who is to save his people from their sins”* (Mt. 1:21) and he is *“Immanuel, a name which means God-is-with-us”* (Mt. 1:23). During the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis’ reflections led him to declare that mercy is the very identity of God. In fact, he said: ***“The Name of God is Mercy”***. So, the coming of God in the Mystery of the Incarnation – which we prepare for with patience and hope and commemorate in the birth of Jesus at Christmas – is the coming of Mercy: yesterday, today and tomorrow. Not only in his birth, but in his entire life – passion, death and resurrection - Jesus is the Mercy of God.

Mercy is the divine attitude that embraces, it is God’s self-giving that welcomes, that leans down to forgive.

(Pope Francis)

How privileged we are and so how necessary it is that we not miss the opportunity this Advent to *“treasure these things and ponder them”* in our hearts, like Mary did quietly contemplating the face of the Christ-Child.

At the end of the Holy Year and the beginning of the Advent season, perhaps we Passionists in particular can prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus not by ‘closing’, but by continuing to keep alive our focus on the Mercy of God, contemplating the face of Christ: always comforting because of our personal need to know God’s tender love, but also challenging because of our responsibility to be witnesses of mercy to a wounded humanity.

We have received freely, we give freely. We are called to serve Christ the Crucified through every marginalised person. We touch the flesh of Christ in the one who is outcast, hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, ill, unemployed, persecuted, in search of refuge. That is where we find our God; that is where we touch the Lord.

By welcoming a marginalised person whose body is wounded and by welcoming the sinner whose soul is wounded, we put our credibility as Christians on the line.

(Pope Francis)

Blessings on your Advent journey! May our reflections and prayers shape our lives that we may grow in compassion and act with mercy and tenderness in all our relationships, especially towards those who are marginalised, crucified and excluded.

27 November 2016

P. Joachim Rego CP
Superior General