

Merciful Presence in the Year of Mercy

Archbishop John C. Wester, January 2016 *People of God*

As we begin this new calendar year, we also continue our journey into the Year of Mercy that Pope Francis inaugurated last December 8th. Our archdiocese joined with the universal church in beginning this year of grace by opening holy doors throughout the archdiocese and gathering in prayer to ask God's blessing as we begin this holy year. While there are many themes that weave their way through the Year of Mercy, one of them strikes me as particularly compelling: to be merciful is to be present. A synonym for mercy is compassion. This nuance reminds us that to be merciful, to be compassionate, is to "suffer with" someone, or more broadly, to journey with someone, especially during a painful moment. I believe that being present to each other, as God is to us, is a key feature of mercy.

Having just concluded the Christmas season, we are keenly aware of the lengths that God took to become one of us by sending us His only Son. He wants to be present to us and so became one of us. We also reflected on Mary who was present to God as she accepted his will and became the handmaid of the Lord. God is always present to us; He loves us with an unfathomable love and wishes to be present to us in every moment of our lives. Sadly, we do not respond to God in the same way nor do we offer our presence to others as we should. Quite often we find ourselves caught up in busy lives that find us running from pillar to post with little time to really attend to God or others, to be with them on a deeper level. To make matters worse, we are often caught up in our technological devices, fascinated by the ease with which we can stay in touch with others and yet, ironically, missing out on so many precious moments to be present to those in the room with us. Furthermore, we are more and more self-conscious, not that we are shy but that we are concerned more with what we want than with what others need. We are reticent to give people the time needed to be truly present to them.

This Year of Mercy gives us an opportunity to see that our ability to be present to others is a gift of compassion, a gift of mercy, in their lives and conversely, in ours as well. God made us in His image and likeness, an image that is grounded in presence: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who relate to each other in an ontological bond of love. God is a community of persons and we are created to be a community of persons in His image. The more we are present to one another as the persons of the Trinity are to each other, then the more we are true to our very nature and the more we reflect God in whose image we are created. This presence is more than a nicety. It is vital to our very well being.

Many studies have shown that infants require love, touch and the presence of others. Without these, the loving presence of parents or care givers, they are inclined to diminish and even die. One of our Carmelite sisters recently told me a new-born infant was abandoned on the steps of a hospital. The nurse who cared for the infant cuddled her and cared for her as if she was her own. When the nurse went home for a two day break, the baby began to get sick and her vital signs were plummeting. When the nurse returned and realized this, she resumed her loving touch and the baby recovered. (The nurse went on to adopt the baby and raised her as her own!) Clearly, it is important for us to connect with each other and to be present on all levels: physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. God's breath brought us into being and our presence to one another gives life in a similar fashion.

With these thoughts in mind, I believe a fitting way to celebrate the Year of Mercy is to commit ourselves to be more present to God and to one another. Families can find ways to pray together, eat together, recreate together and just be in each other's presence. We can single out people we work with, worship with or relax with and focus more on their needs, trying to attend to them and really respond to the unique presence they bring to our lives. We can reach out to those who are routinely alone: shut-ins, those in assisted living facilities and hospital patients. They would relish a short visit, a comforting word and the assurance they have not been forgotten. The way we approach the homeless, new arrivals, immigrants and strangers can reflect our desire to journey with them as they make their way in difficult times. We can never overestimate the importance of a friendly smile, a welcoming handshake or an assuring word. I know our parishes have many ministries that put people in touch with each other and that allow us to bring Christ's loving presence to the lonely and the forgotten.

This Year of Mercy is a splendid time to journey with our neighbor, showing real compassion and concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our presence to each other will be a genuine present that can last a lifetime. Pope Francis has given a great gift to our church and we receive it with joy as we make his prayer our own in the Year of Mercy:

"In this Jubilee Year, may the church echo the word of God that resounds strong and clear as a message and a sign of pardon, strength, aid, and love. May she never tire of extending mercy, and be ever patient in offering compassion and comfort. May the church become the voice of every man and woman, and repeat confidently without end: 'Be mindful of Your mercy, O Lord, and Your steadfast love, for they are from of old.'" (Psalm 25:6)