The Face of Mercy

On April 11, the eve before the first Sunday after Easter, now celebrated as Divine Mercy Sunday, Pope Francis issued a profound and stunningly moving document—technically called a papal bull, announcing a Jubilee Year starting December 8 of this year—a Jubilee of Mercy. A blogger over at Commonweal magazine said of the document, “It is the best papal bull ever—and that is no bull!”. I have already read its 21 pages three times and meditated on them, trying to allow their message of mercy to wash over me.

The document begins with and throughout traces a deep Christology. It declares: “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him.” December 8th, 2015 will also mark the fiftieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council. Francis expounds: “The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive. ..The Council Fathers strongly perceived, as a true breath of the Holy Spirit, a need to talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way. The walls which too long had made the church a kind of fortress were torn down and the time had come to
proclaim the Gospel in a new way. As Saint John XXIII said in opening the Council, “Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity”.

At the close of the Council, Blessed Paul VI noted that all its rich teaching was channeled in one direction: “The service of mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need.” Indeed, as Francis puts it in his new papal bull: “Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.”

Citing Thomas Aquinas, Francis notes “It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way. “God’s mercy, Francis says, “rather than a sign of weakness is the mark of his omnipotence. “But mercy is more than just some abstract notion. It flows forth in Jesus as a truly ‘visceral’ love, gushing forth,” full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy.” In an extended meditation on Jesus’ works and signs, Francis claims:” The signs he works, especially in the face of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy.” Ourselves learning to be merciful, shows we are true children of God and followers of Jesus. “We are called to show mercy because mercy has been first shown to us.”

In # 10 Francis states: “Mercy is the very foundation of the church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers. Nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. “. Francis fears that the practice of mercy is waning in the wider culture. For Francis, the mercy of God is the very beating heart of the gospel. In a profound sense, Francis wants this Jubilee Year to echo those words of Jesus: “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful”. Also Jesus reminds us: “Judge not that you be not judged.”. Francis comments: “To refrain from judgment and condemnation means in a positive sense, to know how to accept the good in every person and to spare him any suffering that might be caused by our partial judgment and our presumption to know
everything about him.” As God comes to assist us in our weakness, so we should open “our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society; fringes modern society creates. How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today! How many the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich! Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! Let us ward off destructive cynicism!”

The corporal and spiritual works of mercy should be our guide posts for this Jubilee of mercy.

Some critics may fault Francis for making mercy, not justice as such, the crowning virtue of Jesus, the church (and, as he notes in # 17, confessors must be authentic signs of the Father’s mercy. We only become good confessors when, above all we allow ourselves to be penitents in search of his mercy. “Every confessor must accept the faithful as the father in the parable of the prodigal son: a father who runs out to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance. .. Confessors are called to be sign of the primacy of mercy always, everywhere, and in every situation, no matter what.”).

Francis talks about the relation of mercy to justice. He notes: “These are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love. Justice is a fundamental concept for civil society, which is meant to be governed by the rule of law. Justice is also understood as that which is rightly due to each individual.” To be sure, scripture speaks of divine justice and refers to God as a ‘judge.’. But, notes Francis,” such a vision has not infrequently led to legalism by distorting the original meaning of justice... To overcome this legalistic perspective, we need to recall that in Sacred Scripture, justice is conceived essentially as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God’s will.” He continues: “Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God’s way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert, and believe.”
“This does not mean that justice should be devalued or rendered superfluous. On the contrary, anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price. However, this is just the beginning of conversion, not its end, because one begins to feel the tenderness and mercy of God. God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice.”

Besides the Holy Door in Rome, Francis wants churches in dioceses to have a holy door for the Jubilee of Mercy. Moreover, in an unusual move, he states: “During lent of this Holy Year, I intend to send out Missionaries of Mercy. They will be a sign of the church’s maternal solicitude for the People of God, enabling them to enter the profound richness of this mystery so fundamental to the faith. There will be priests to whom I will grant the authority to pardon even those sins reserved to the Holy See, so that the breadth of their mandate as confessors will be even clearer. They will be, above all, living signs of the Father’s readiness to welcome those in search of his pardon. They will be missionaries of mercy because they will be facilitators of a truly human encounter, a source of liberation, rich with responsibility for overcoming obstacles and taking up the new life of Baptism again.” (#18).

Francis also notes that mercy is seen as one of God’s most important attributes in Judaism and Islam and states that “among the privileged names Islam attributes to the Creator are ‘Merciful and Kind’”. I loved also that in his final paragraph, Francis invites us to live out in our daily lives the mercy which the Father constantly extends to all of us. “In this Jubilee year, let us allow God to surprise us!”

In all my years of reading, pondering and explicating Vatican documents (so often filled, even when interesting, with arcane and philosophical meanderings), I can not remember ever reading one that so profoundly moved me as The Face of Mercy. In it I heard the authentic tone of the gospel of Jesus and felt myself not only thrilled and moved but also called to a real
and truly deep conversion of heart and life. In it I heard the voice of a pastor speaking to me of life, possibility and truth. Someone once said of Francis that his is the voice of the good parish priest to and for the universal church. I truly urge readers to read, ponder, pray and let this deep message of Jesus as the face of mercy to wash over them with love, compassion and an invitation to a deeper joy and exuberance in who Jesus is, who we are called to be as the faces of his mercy in a broken world, what the church must always be: the face of mercy for all of us who need it. Indeed, as Portia put it, “the quality of mercy is not strained.” I totally agree with that blogger at Commonweal: This is the best papal bull ever—and that is no bull!