

Pastoral Letter for 1st Sunday of Advent 2015

Dear Sister and Brothers,

As we listen to the words of the readings at Mass they help us to reflect on God's overwhelming, merciful love for us. Like Judah and Israel of old, he will *save us and make us dwell in confidence*. We know that the words of the psalm are meant for us today: *The Lord is good and upright. He shows the path to those who stray, he guides the humble in the right path; he teaches his ways to the poor*. And all this is so that we might show God's overwhelming, merciful love to others. St Paul tells us this in the second reading: *May the Lord be generous in increasing your love and make you love one another and the whole human race as much as we love you*. As the Gospel tells us, with the knowledge that we are loved and surrounded by God's mercy, despite our sinfulness and weakness, we can *stand erect with confidence before the Son of Man*, holding our heads high, because our liberation is near at hand.

Beginning on 8th December, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Francis has declared a Holy Year of Mercy. He wants to remind us that mercy is not a fanciful idea or ideal; but mercy has become living and visible in Jesus Christ. On that day, 8th December, Pope Francis will open the Holy Door in St Peter's Basilica which will become a *Door of Mercy* through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instils hope. The Holy Year will close on the Feast of Christ the King, 20th November 2016.

In our prayers, especially in the Mass, we recognise that God demonstrates his power most of all in his mercy and forgiveness. In the Old Testament God showed his people that his mercy had no end. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus God's compassionate mercy is made flesh. This is shown clearly in so many of the parables; for example the calling of Matthew the tax collector on whom Jesus looked with merciful love and chose him.

Mercy is the very foundation of the life of the Church and should permeate everything we do and the way we live. The Church's calling is to proclaim the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. The Church's first truth is the love of Christ. If we are to take hold of this gift of the Holy Year of Mercy, then first and foremost we must try to live lives of mercy, recognising that we have been shown mercy and are called to be heralds of mercy to others. We need to learn to be *Merciful like the Father*. (Lk 6:36).

The practice of pilgrimage has a special place in the Holy Year, because it represents the journey each of us makes in this life; to reach the Holy Door in Rome or in any other place in the world, everyone, each according to his or her ability, will have to make a pilgrimage. This will be a sign that mercy is also a goal to reach and requires dedication and sacrifice. By crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God's mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us.

The Lord Jesus shows us the steps of the pilgrimage in order to attain our goal: *"Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."* (Lk 6:37-38) In this respect it will profit us to reflect on the Corporal

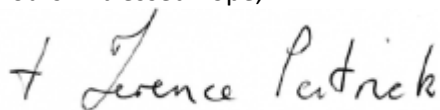
and Spiritual Works of Mercy, lest our idea of mercy remain only notional, without being translated into action.

A Jubilee also entails the granting of indulgences. God's forgiveness knows no bounds. Reconciliation with God is made possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and through the Church. Pope Francis explains in his Letter Announcing the Holy Year: *Though we feel the transforming power of grace, we also feel the effects of sin. But the mercy of God is stronger than even this. It becomes indulgence on the part of the Father who, through his Church, reaches pardoned sinners and frees them from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling them to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.*

The Church lives within the communion of the saints. In the Eucharist, this communion, which is a gift from God, becomes a spiritual union. The holiness of the saints comes to the aid of our weakness in a way that enables the Church, with her maternal prayers and her way of life, to fortify the weakness of some with the strength of others. To gain an indulgence is to experience the holiness of the Church, who bestows upon all the fruits of Christ's redemption, so that God's love and forgiveness may extend everywhere. Let us live this Jubilee intensely, begging the Father to forgive our sins and to bathe us in His merciful "indulgence." (Letter Announcing the Holy Year, *Misericordiae Vultus* #22)

So, as we enter this season of Advent, may we also begin our Pilgrimage into this Holy Year, steeped in and surrounded by the mercy of God, so that we might help others to find that same divine merciful love.

Yours in blessed hope,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Lawrence Patrick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop of Middlesbrough
04.11.2015 – Feast of St Charles Borromeo

To enable all to gain as much from this Holy Year as possible various events have and will be organised both at local and diocesan level. As well as the Cathedral, churches in every part of the diocese have been designated as churches with a Holy Door and as special places of pilgrimage during the course of the Holy Year. These are published in the Catholic Voice and below for your information.