

ADVENT'S PROMISE - A YEAR OF GRACE THAT NEVER ENDS

The Jubilee Year of Mercy is due to end this month on the feast of Christ the King (November 20), with a Eucharist in Rome led by Pope Francis. But in the days before the year ends, special celebrations will highlight the pope's desire to reach out to some of the most marginalised – the homeless and imprisoned.

A three-day pilgrimage is planned for around 6000 homeless people, drawn from the streets where they live all across Europe. They will come as the pope's special guests, to listen to his teaching, to tour the city and attend a Vigil of Mercy and to participate in a Mass in St Peter's Square.

"The world today is in urgent need of this witness of divine mercy," the pope told representatives of Fratello, the French agency which will sponsor the pilgrimage of the homeless to Rome. "Today, the human person is often dismissed as useless... God, on the other hand, always recognises the dignity and nobility of those he loves. The poor are favoured by the Lord, and are at the centre of the Gospel."

A statement from Fratello notes that this time of pilgrimage "will give people from the most vulnerable sections of society, who are often treated as outcasts, a chance to discover that their place is in the heart of God and in the heart of the church."

Earlier in the month, Francis will preside at a jubilee pilgrimage for prisoners and their families. Taking part will be prison chaplains and staff, and Catholic organisations that offer help both within and beyond prisons. While insisting that those like traffickers who commit crimes against human dignity be given no quarter, the pope has also noted that punishment must never be seen as an end in itself, but as a way to re-educate "wrong-doers in the hope that they can be reintegrated into society." No one is ever beyond the reach of God's mercy and love.

The needs of society's poor and excluded have been a central theme for Pope Francis during this Year of Mercy. Some months ago he invited 150 homeless people to join him for dinner and a tour of the Vatican museums. "This is everyone's house," he told them as they stood in the Sistine Chapel. "The doors are always open for all." More recently he invited another 2000 poor, homeless and a group of prisoners to a circus which had been organised especially for them.

This message of outreach and inclusion will resonate with anyone who shared in Mercy's Te Whakaruru hau mo ngā iwi katoa Shelter for All pilgrimage to Parliament last month. Sisters of Mercy and their partners in ministry were joined by several of their clients who travelled to Wellington and had the chance to speak of their experience – of being excluded and marginalised until Mercy reached out in practical ways to touch their lives and draw them in.

One of the lessons for all who participated in this pilgrimage was the power of collective action. Voices are stronger when they are joined; our determination and desire for change are galvanised when others stand at our side. Our witness is more powerful when our partners add their weight to ours. As a senior student from one of our northern Mercy colleges told one of our mission team, "This event has changed my life. I came because I was asked, but I go home a different person. This has been transformative for me."



ADVENT wreath, symbol of another year of grace about to dawn.

Graphic: Ars Celebrandi.

Where does the Year of Mercy go when it ends? The Jubilee will finish, but as Mary famously declared, “God’s mercy embraces the faithful from one generation to the next.” As the image of Mercy’s open doors fade, a new image emerges as another year of grace dawns. It is the living Advent wreath, green with the promise of an abundant nature which, given even half a chance, constantly renews itself. And a circle like Mercy’s own, that is called to widen itself until all are embraced and warmed in its light.

Increasingly today, our mission is to find new partners who will stand with us in the search for sustainable practices, in caring for our common home. The challenge we face is to move beyond individual effort to collective action. Mercy’s advocacy is driven not by a particular economic or political view but by a moral imperative; our focus is on the need for ethical decisions, for raising our consciousness of the issues and our consciences about doing what is right and just.

For the graces and new insights which have come to us in this Year of Mercy, we give thanks. To the possibilities that open up before us as we seek to widen Mercy’s circles, we say “Amen”.

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

You’re invited to end this reflection by pondering, either alone or with someone who shares your commitment to Mercy, on these questions...

- *What are the gains that have come to the Mercy ministry in which you are involved as a direct result of this Year of Mercy?*
- *What steps could be taken to ensure that these gains are maintained or developed further?*
- *Who are the partners who work most closely with your ministry to achieve the works of mercy, and how might this partnership be strengthened?*

– **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer

Ancient mercy, ever new

*E Te Atua, atawhai kaha tonu,
God of unfailing mercy:
in every age you breathe new hope,
with the promise of life in abundance.*

*As this Year of Mercy ends,
confirm us once more in our calling
to serve you in our sisters and brothers
who turn to us in their need.*

*Give us ears to hear their cry
and the cry of Papatūānuku,
our mother Earth that is so burdened
from humanity’s greed and misuse.*

*Fulfil your promise in us
that we may choose more wisely
and care more deeply,
that those who follow in times to come
will find reason to hope
from the choices we make.*

Amen.