

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL



PASTORAL LETTER 2016

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CHAPTER ONE

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

1. INTRODUCTION:

"Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures' forever. Oh give thanks to the God of gods, for his mercy endures forever. Oh give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his mercy endures for ever... Oh give thanks to the God of heaven for his mercy endures forever." (Psalm 136:1-26)

RETROSPECTION AND GRATITUDE

The Psalmist in the above psalm 136 captures my inspiration and disposition as we join The Holy Father, Pope Francis and the Universal Church to celebrate the Holy Year of Mercy. With grateful hearts we offer our thanks and worship to God for the prodigies He wrought among and for us, for the wonder of His graces and mercies on us this past year as a family of God on mission – the local Church, as a people living together in a state and nation, and individual sons and daughters of God. My brother bishop, priests and my beloved people of God, among the many grace-filled events of the last year for which our Archdiocese and indeed the Nigerian people are immensely grateful to God, we must include, the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the Episcopacy of His Eminence, Francis Cardinal Arinze – the first of such in sub-Sahara Africa. Our gratitude recalls God's gift to our local Church and the Universal Church of such a prelate, and for making it possible for him to serve his people and the universal Church as a Bishop for 50 years. This is a very peculiar grace especially given its rarity. Today, Francis Cardinal Arinze is one of the 40 most senior Bishops by ordination in the whole world. He is also one of the 9 Cardinal Bishops in the world. Again, within the year the number of our priests golden jubilarians increased and the diocese now has five priests who have served in the vineyard of the Lord for fifty years. While we thank God for the gift of Cardinal Arinze and our golden priestly jubilarians, we also thank him that within the year on May 1, 2015, an Auxiliary Bishop; Most Rev. Denis Chidi Isizoh was ordained for our diocese. His ordination is a special grace to the Church in Onitsha and it enables us to double our efforts in witnessing to Christ and fulfilling the mission to which he called all of us. We equally thank God for the elevation of four of our priests to the rank of papal chamberlains, for the 130th anniversary the arrival of our hero missionaries and for the completion and commissioning of an Episcopal residence in Aguleri in honor of our saintly priest- The Blessed Michael Cyprian Iwene Tansi. To God be all glory and honor for his merciful love. However, it is with heavy hearts that I recall the fatal accident that claimed the lives of scores of persons during a tanker accident at Asaba Motor Park, Upper Iweka Onitsha, on Saturday May 30, 2015. We pray for the peaceful repose of the affected brothers and sisters, divine consolation on the living, and for the fortitude to bear the loss on the families. We pray also that from the fallen grains that God would bring forth new and great yield for the affected families.

Still on a note of gratitude, we shall not fail to thank God for the positive reception of the pastoral letter of 2015. It was based on the Christian teaching and democratic politics. Our country was

reaching a threshold and it was important to emphasize our obligation di Christians to ensure that our faith permeate aspects of our lives. Politics is a central plank in our daily living as human beings since it affects almost every aspect of our life. We are grateful to God that while some people were predicting that our country will hit the rocks in 2015, that year witnessed one of the best elections in our democratic history where a ruling party lost a presidential election and accepted its loss most gracefully. Our country witnessed for the first time a transition of the Federal Government from a ruling political party to an opposition party without violence and without court cases. It is our dear hope that in this manner our political engagement will continue to more and more wear the Christian look, and cease from being a do or die affair in which the end justifies the means be they good or evil.

2. CHOICE OF TOPIC

In his teachings, Pope Benedict XVI, advised that “in our time, humanity needs a strong proclamation and witness of God's mercy”. (Benedict XVI, Angelus message, September 16, 2007). Earlier, during the glorious pontificate of St. John Paul II, much emphasis was laid on divine mercy in his teachings especially in his 1980 pastoral letter, the Encyclical; *Misericordiae*, which was on the Mercy of God Recently on the 2 anniversary of his election to the chair of Peter, March 13, 2015, Pope Francis announced an extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy On April 11, 2015 the Pope issued the Papal Bull. *Misericordiae Vultus* directing that the Holy Year of Mercy a special time of grace will open on December 8, 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. To mark the commencement of the Jubilee year of Mercy, the Pope opened the Holy door of mercy in St. Peter's Basilica Rome, and enjoined all local Churches to do the same at their Cathedrals and some privileged places of worship. We recall that this day 8th December, Feast of Immaculate Conception, is very significant since it also marked the Golden anniversary of the end of Vatican II. At this very significant council, the Church made a Spirit guided effort to open up from its traditionalist leanings to the new world. It was in all a great argionamento, a renewal of every aspect of the Church's life and we are grateful to the council Fathers for responding positively to promptings of the Holy Spirit. In line with this Spirit, Pope Francis chose to proclaim a Jubilee year devoted to the often neglected Virtue of Mercy which remains nevertheless central in Christian life. To highlight this centrality all the further, the Pope published his first papal book on January 12, 2016 with the title: *The Name of God is Mercy*. This book reveals the Pope's vision of God's mercy in a series of interviews. In the words of James Carroll, Pope Francis book, "offers a tough reflection on an urgently needed public virtue". (The New Yorker, Jan 12, 2016).

3. In line with the aims of the Jubilee of Mercy, I have chosen to reflect with you on mercy to deepen our understanding and practice of mercy in our Christian life, especially as it patterns to our local context. The invitation of Pope Francis and the proclamation of the Jubilee of mercy has intensified my inspiration and quickened my resolve to focus on Mercy. I have decided to base my reflection on the title: *Blessed Are the Merciful*. It is our intention to reflect on this urgently needed Virtue with the grand aim of disposing us to obtain the blessings of this unique beatitude where

the merciful will be the recipients of mercy. Our reflection will start by an effort to highlight the meaning of Mercy and its centrality to the Christian life and Mystery. The biblical background and foundations of mercy will be examined. We will then consider how Mercy is an attribute of God, and its relationship to forgiveness and justice. A look at some sacraments will reveal our encounter with God's mercy in them through forgiveness and reconciliation. A brief highlight of the frequency of the prayers for mercy in the Church's worships will lead us to see the implication of mercy in our everyday life in our local context in Nigeria, especially how our behavior in public service can sometimes be a contradiction of the obligation of mercy. This will lead to a consideration of the Christian communities as seats of mercy, our Blessed Mother, Mary as mother of mercy, and finally some senses in which the merciful are blessed.

CHAPTER TWO

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPT

4. Mercy as a concept is better described than defined. The meaning of mercy is revealed in the scriptures especially in God's relationship with humanity and more with His chosen people.

However, we can make the concept very simple to understand by explaining that in the preaching of the Prophets, mercy signifies a special power of love. (cf. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no.4). According; to St. Thomas Aquinas, when love and misery meet, there is born mercy which is one of the essential forms of charity, situated in the very heart of Christianity. (*Summa Theologiae* 2a, 2ae, 30). If mercy is an essential form of charity that is, it is an aspect of love, then mercy is part of the nature of God who is love. St. John tells us that God is love (1Jn4:8). We can also give a simple definition of mercy as the Virtue which enables a person to make a genuine effort to relieve misfortune of others, whatever is its form. In fact we can say that mercy is the best way to fulfill the second commandment to love our neighbor. (cf. Matt 22:36-39).

5. Mercy is proper to God's nature and the true sons and daughters of God also exhibit mercy since God made us in his own image. Mercy is therefore divine and human. Jesus affirms that mercy is not only an action of the Father it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. (Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, no. 9).

The scriptures show divine mercy as that power of love which is compassionate, which forgives offences and sins, which liberates, which does not keep record of wrongs, which reinstates from abnormal to normal status, which looks for the lost and provides for the have nots. God's merciful love is his response to human misery. He responds because he cares, he is compassionate, he is merciful. The greater the human misery, the more abounding is God's mercy. No wonder God reveals his name and identity to Moses as merciful and compassionate.

6. Mercy is a Virtue. It is compassion in action. It is a good habit which enables one to have real passion with another one who suffers, inspired by the true love of God who always enters situation

in order to make it better. Mercy is an action of the Blessed, an attribute of the graced. Mercy is beatitude.

CHAPTER THREE

MERCY: IT'S CENTRALITY IN THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

7. In very simple terms, mercy is kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly. This sense which is one of the widest senses of our use of the word entails that the receiver of mercy somehow deserves to be dealt with in less compassionate way. It is often the case when someone is obviously guilty of some misdeed on account of which he deserves some retribution. That is why mercy is also defined in line with this as, compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one's power.

8. Mercy is also defined as, kindness or help given to people who are in a very bad or desperate situation. In this sense there is no implication that the receiver of mercy is an offender. In a way the definition exaggerates the context of mercy by describing it as “bad or desperate”. But the situation that can elicit the act of mercy does not need to be so negative. Mercy can thus be seen as help rendered to someone in need of some help. It is all the more praise - worthy when the giver of help is not necessarily obliged to render the help. A learned adult who sees a young school child trying with difficulty to do his homework and decides to assist him to understand and master what he is required to do is not necessarily moved by the desperation of the young one, but by a desire to be of help or to make the task less difficult than it would otherwise have been.

9. Generally however, proper understanding of mercy entails that there must be some essential factors that surround its practice. One of these is that there must be a situation of lack. This can be in the form of an offense committed by somebody who in the process loses his innocence. This lack can also be in the form of weakness, some inability to achieve certain goals or conquer certain situations by one's own power. All these are on the side of the object of mercy. The giver of mercy must on the other hand be in position to dispense the act of mercy. He must have the power or ability to pardon an offender for instance or to help someone in need. There must also be some readiness on his side to do the act of mercy. This readiness is often described as compassion which etymologically means to suffer with (*cum passere*). That is why Joseph Delaney in the old Catholic Encyclopedia described mercy as “a Virtue influencing one's will to have compassion for, and if possible to alleviate another's misfortune.”

From Delaney's definition, it stands clear that mercy does not necessarily always entail concrete acts though there must be some readiness to act. It is not only those who perform the corporal or spiritual works of mercy that are really merciful. Even though most often a will moved to have compassion will most likely assist the object of compassion where the possibility is present. But merciful feeling and willingness to help can also exist without the subject having the means or

being in position to help. What is clear however is that where the possibility exists, mercy will entail both the compassion and the actions to alleviate the misfortune, the weakness or generally the lack.

10. From the forgoing it is quite clear that mercy and charity are very much related, but the two while related are not to be confused. For St. Thomas Aquinas mercy is a spontaneous product of charity, but it is reckoned to be a special Virtue that can be sufficiently distinguished from charity. In addition to joy and peace, mercy is one of the fruits of charity. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 1829).

Scholastic thinkers consider mercy to have much to do with justice. It shares the qualities of justice because like justice it controls relations between persons. Mercy like justice is *ad alterum* (ie towards another). Its real moving force is the misery which one person sees in another person, especially in so far as this situation is considered to be involuntary. The works of mercy, especially the corporal ones coincide with the various forms of almsgiving. Almsgiving is itself founded very much on mercy. And, etymologically the word alms is a corruption of the Greek word for mercy: *elenmosyne*.

11. It is this mercy directed towards our fellow human beings, who are all the children of God that links mercy so directly to the Gospel message. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “the Gospel is the revelation in Jesus Christ of God's mercy to sinners”. (Ccc. no. 1846). Ordinarily the fall of man should foreclose his relationship with God. At creation God bestowed on him all that he created, and which he found very good. He made him master of them all. He created him in his own likeness and bestowed on him a dignity that was not accorded to angels. The fall was like a rejection of the goodness of God; a machination to acquire the splendor of the creator, and a lack of humility and gratitude that aspires to supplant the origin of life, or at least be his rival. God's justice expelled our first parents from paradise, but the history of salvation indicates very clearly that His mercy followed them. His plan was not the total damnation of the human race. He chose Abraham and his direct descendants, and made a covenant with them so that they became a stepping stone to the eventual conquest of the devil by the descendants of Adam and Eve.

12. God's relationship with the people of Israel was like a preparation for the ultimate salvation of the human race and ultimate triumph over evil. It was by no means an easy relation which was countlessly repudiated by the people of Israel and their rulers. But the faithfulness of God and his mercy for all his children entailed that after each episode of repudiation, God's mercy and compassion ensured a renewed beginning and re launching of the covenant history. It was a process that came to its eventual fruition in Christ. Christ's mission is primarily that of compassion.

13. To save humanity Christ became Emmanuel - God with us. A man like us in all things but sin. Christ's life, his teachings, his mission in general epitomizes the mercy of God. Hence "mercy is revealed as a fundamental aspect of Jesus' mission". (*Misericordiae Vultus*, no. 20). His mission was generated by God's mercy for his children who were sinners, and his willingness to save them and make them his own again. Christ exhibited this in the countless acts of mercy recounted in the Gospel. When the people of Israel wanted to stone a woman caught in adultery, Christ did not agree with the justice of their law which prescribed capital punishment. His mercy was the liberating factor to the woman who went with Christ's instruction to avoid the allure of sin. Even at the foot of the cross he was quick to grant mercy to the repentant thief forgiving him and promising him paradise. His ministry is underlined by the proclamation of God's readiness to grant mercy and forgive. "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice". (Matt. 9:13). And, he showed the example of mercy to sinners even when they were not repentant: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do"

Christ's mission is moved by his mercy on sinners which went as far as laying down his life for them. It is on account of the centrality of this mystery that the Supreme Pontiff, Francis, proclaimed that "the time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call for mercy once more (*Misericordiae Vultus*, no. 10). This call is at the root of the mission of Christ and consequently at the pivotal point of the Church's Witnessing. It would be a grave responsibility for the Church and its members to check. By fulfilling this mission the Church reaches the height of authenticity. Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life (*MV*, no. 10) Pope Francis reminds us while quoting his predecessor John Paul II, that "the Church lives an authentic life when she proclaims mercy- the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer" (*M.V*, no. 11;*D.M.*no. 13).

CHAPTER FOUR FOUNDATIONS OF MERCY.

4.1 Biblical Foundations of Mercy

4.1, a Mercy in the Old Testament

14. The saint Pope John Paul II asserts that "the concept of "mercy" in the Old Testament has a long and rich history". We have to refer back to it in order that the mercy revealed by Christ may shine forth more clearly" (*Dives in Misericordia*, no. 4). The whole of the Scriptures, we can say, is like a drama of God's merciful love for His people. The biblical doctrine of creation of the world suggests that nothing and no one compelled God to create except his merciful love. (cf. Christoph Schonborn, *We Have Found Mercy*, p. 28-29). After creation and the fall of our first parents Adam and Eve, God responded with mercy (cf. Gen. 3:15). In the land of Egypt the Lord God saw the affliction of his people who were reduced to slaves, he heard their cry, He knew their sufferings,

and out of mercy he decided to deliver them. (cf. Ex. 3:7ff). The Lord revealed himself to Moses as “God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”. (Ex 34:6).

The covenant between God and his people Israel was often broken by the people. But whenever Israel became aware of her infidelity, She appealed to God's mercy. Some examples include; The beginning of the history of the Judges, (cf. Jug. 3;7-9); the prayer of Solomon at the inauguration of the temple, (cf. I kgs. 8:22-53); part of the prophetic work of Micah, (cf. Micah 7:18-20); the words of Isaiah, (cf. Isaiah 1:18; 51: 4-16); the cry of the Jews in exile, (cf. Bar 2:11-3,8) and the renewal of the covenant after the return from exile in the book of Nehemiah. (cf. Neh. 9") (cf. D.M., no.4).

In the book of Psalms, the nature of God is depicted as most merciful. According to Pope Francis, “the Psalms, in a special way bring to the fore the grandeur of God's merciful action” (Misericordiae Vultus, no, 6). Many texts of the Psalm witness to the veracity of the above statement. Some Psalms readily come to mind like: “He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy” (Ps 103:3-4). Another Psalm further states: “He secures justice for the oppressed, he gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free, He opens the eyes of the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the Fatherless...” (Ps. 146:7-9). The Psalmist has many other expressions like “The Lord heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds...” (Ps. 147:3ff). (cf. Misericordiae Vultus, no. 6).

It is significant to note that the whole of the Old Testament is like the history of God's merciful love to his people and their unfaithful, fluctuating response, followed by God's consistency of greater love and renewed mercy. Thus God reveals his merciful nature through such statements like, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I give you over, O Israel... I will not destroy Ephraim, for I am God not man, the Holy One in your midst” (Hosea 11:8-9). Even when God who is just admits anger for his people, his merciful love overcomes his anger. (cf. Hos 11:7-9; Jer 31:20; Is 54:7ff) Finally God's expression of his mercy comes to a climax in the incarnation of his Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ who is the visible merciful face of the Father.

15. 4:1,6 MERCY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

Jesus Christ: the Face of God's Mercy. In the words of Pope Francis, “the mission Jesus received from the Father was that of revealing the mystery of divine love in its fullness. God is love (1Jn 4:8,16), ... this love has now been made visible and tangible in Jesus entire life. His person is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously... Everything in Jesus speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion”. (cf. Misericordiae Vultus, no. 8). In the same vein for John Paul II, “mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive

power of his Mission". (Dives in Misericordia, no. 6). In the actions and teachings of Jesus mercy is profoundly revealed. At the wedding feast in Cana, through the intercession of Mary, the mercy of Jesus was experienced by a young couple who were saved from embarrassment and shame by the first miracle of Jesus. (cf. In 2:1 11). While Jesus was teaching and crowds of people followed him, he had compassion on them when he realized that they were suffering like sheep without a shepherd. (cf. Matt. 9:36) His compassion showed itself in merciful action as he healed the sick (cf. Matt. 14:14), and fed hungry crowd (cf. Matt. 15:37). He also raised the dead as he had compassion and mercy on a widow who lost an only son to death (cf. Lk 7:15).

As Jesus interacted with people, as he went about doing good, everything about him exhibited mercy and compassion. Even his looks expressed mercy. Thus passing by the tax collector's office, Jesus looked on Matthew with merciful love and called him. (cf. M.Vno 8).

16. In his many parables and teachings, Jesus reveals God the Father as a Father of mercy; a father who forgives and seeks the lost (cf. Lk 15:1-32). This is the parable of the prodigal son and merciful Father. A Father who pardons and expects the pardoned to do the same (cf. Matt. 18:33). This is the parable of the unforgiving servant. A father who forgives, saves and converts or transforms the offender (cf. Jn 8:3 -11) as in the case of the woman caught in adultery. A Father who seeks the lost being happy when he finds one (cf. Matt. 18:12-14) as in the case of the lost sheep. A Father who provides even for the ungrateful and for the enemy (Matt. 5:38-48) as in the teaching which directs: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you... For God, your Father is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your father is merciful.

17. The apostles of Jesus, the Fathers of the Church and many saints up till our own time have followed and lived out the teachings of Christ on mercy.

Evidently, mercy has strong foundations in the Bible. In the New Testament we can say that salvation rests on God's mercy as executed in and through the Christ-event. In the letters of St. Paul, the role of Mercy in the salvation of man is so important to Paul that he described the heirs of Salvation as "Vessels of Mercy" (Rom. 9:23). In fact, throughout the entire New Testament, it is clear that God's mercy is the foundation of our salvation and this mercy is made manifest in the person of Christ.

4. II: ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MERCY.

18. Mercy is very dear to human nature. "The relationship of mercy is based on the common experience of that good which is man, on the common experience of the dignity that is proper to him". (cf. Joseph Ratzinger, Homily at the Mass in the Papal Chapel, Monday 18th April, 2005). The mystery of man is properly understood in Christ who is both new and the perfect man in whose image we are created. Humans yearn for justice, yet, with the accomplishment of that, he yearns for more. Every justice met is an anticipation of something more, of an extra. Every justice yearns

for more, indeed for mercy. This experience reveals a truth about our nature as humans. We are not merely content with our due strictly speaking; we look forward to an extra, for a favour, for grace. True Justice resonates and seeks affirmation in mercy. It can be said that true justice is fulfilled and perfected in mercy. We always expect to be received or to be treated more than from the criteria of justice. In life we always hope that nature, people, circumstances and God would be kindly to us and grant us what is good for us even beyond our merit. This is a testimony of how mercy is intimately linked to our nature as humans. We always desire grace and mercy for that is our nature.

Also, one who desires or receives mercy has to give mercy. He has to be merciful. This is a truth that roots mercy in anthropology. It agrees with the golden rule, the first law of morality which is to do to others what you would want yourself.

4. III: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MERCY

19. The golden rule says, “Do onto others what you would want them to do unto you”. This rule is more or less based on justice and fair play. But life is greater than this rule. Humans thrive more in munificence than in meanness. People often yearn for what is more than their due. Without justice there is no peace, there is anarchy while without mercy there is no joy, there is no meaningful life. We are all co-responsible with others for the common good. Humans are called to be mothers and fathers to others, to be merciful to others, to care about others and help them to be happy. Because of our human interdependence we are called to be our brothers' keeper. This is above and beyond justice, it is the philosophy of mercy.

4, IV: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MERCY.

20. In Jesus Christ, God abundantly manifests his mercy and offers salvation and liberation, not just to Israel, but to the whole human race. Thus the redemptive act of God in the Old Testament the Exodus event, and the paschal mystery of Christ are interrelated. “In reality it is only in the mystery of the word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling” (Vat II, Gaudium et Spes, no. 22). Christ, the Divine Mercy incarnate, as the face of the Father's mercy and ensemble of what it was to be man reveals by HIS life, teaching and example that humans are not only capable of mercy, but that it is the only way that leads to life. Therefore he invites us to be "merciful as the Father". “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk. 6:36). Christ is the heart of God's mercy. He is the face of the Father's mercy, the incarnation of mercy. Christ is the dwelling of God among men, Emmanuel and the perfect man. The same Christ has insisted on love as the identity of his disciples, love as the

distinguishing mark of his followers. But there can be no full love without forgiveness and true forgiveness is based on mercy. Thus, mercy has a strong theological foundation.

CHAPTER FIVE

MERCY AND THE NATURE OF GOD

21. The reflections of the finite mind on the nature or attributes of God are bound to be limited or problematic. Human finitude cannot really comprehend totally the infinity of God. And since no person speaks from nowhere, what are usually attributed to God are the good qualities that human beings also find in their own nature. But there must be special manners of attributing qualities to God. God is all good and is infinite and so all the qualities that are attributable to him must be infinitely good. He is designated as omnipotent, omniscience, all loving and also all merciful.

22. The mercy of God is seen in his act of creation. He created out of nothing. He is not only our creator, he is also our sustainer and our providence. It is really “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God created each human person and gave him the dignity of freedom. Freedom entails the capacity of humans to choose between good and evil, even when rationally they are expected to embrace the good. This supposition of rational choice had in history not always been fulfilled. Man's inability to opt for the good is like the abandonment of his nature and his well-being. This, for Aquinas is traceable to the consequences of the fall, where the will revolted against the reason since it could not stick to its God-given good. It means that the human being is constantly in a fallible situation. It is through the mercy of God that the hope of salvation or return to eternal bliss becomes realizable. God's mercy is thus ingrained in his nature. Again his mercy is gratuitous since he sent his only son to save us even when we were still sinners. It is thus not on account of our merit but thanks to his ways, which indicate for us his nature.

23. At the beginning after the fall of our first parents and having found themselves naked, it was God himself who made clothes for them from skins (Gen. 3:21), to shield them from the shame of nakedness. After killing his brother Abel out of envy and God administered punishment on Cain which he considered too severe, God in his mercy still protected Cain to prevent him from being killed by others in his wondering, (Gen.4:15). Thus even a murderer of the like of Cain was not strange to God's mercy, When Abraham was in distress on account of his failure to beget a child, God listened to his plea. making of him a great nation and the father of multitudes. God also saw the sufferings of the people of Israel in Egypt and went forth to deliver them through Moses his messenger. “I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers”, (Exod. 3:7). God dealing with his people in the Old Testament after their liberation from slavery in Egypt was marked by his mercy to his people and his readiness to forgive their offenses. It is no wonder that the Psalmist in Psalm 136 chants the refrain of the everlasting mercy of God.

24. Christ's mission in the Gospel was specially marked by actions which reflect the mercy of God on his people. His decision to teach the people who looked like sheep without a shepherd was moved by his compassion for them. His decision to feed thousands who had listened to him and who were hungry, his unwillingness to send them home without food are all strong indicators of his deep compassion. The cure of ill-health and the raising of the dead, especially of the son of the widow of Nain was a welling from the deepest fount of mercy. It is on account of all these that Pope Francis links mercy directly to the nature of God. "Mercy is real, it is the first attribute of God. Theological reflections on doctrine and mercy may then follow, but let us not forget that mercy is doctrine" (cf. The Name of God).

25. Mercy is the first attribute of God in the sense that it is through human experience of God that man can assign attributes to him. Of these attributes mercy stands out as the one which is somehow at the foundation of God's plan of salvation. He decided to save us because of his pity for our sinful and abandoned state. The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us. It is this mercy, this concern that enables us to have the privileged position we enjoy as his children. And so the Pope is right when he says that, "mercy is the key word that indicates God's action towards us". (M.V. no 9). Thus God's mercy flows from his nature since *agere sequitur esse* (action follows from being). It is therefore most fitting that the motto of this Holy Year of Mercy is "merciful like the Father", (Lk 6:36). It is equally fitting that Pope Francis names his book: The Name of God is Mercy. All Christians are urged to strive in a special way to imitate God's mercy by realizing how deeply it is imbedded in his nature. It goes without saying that as children of God we share in our little way in God's nature since we are made in the image and likeness of God. We should therefore be merciful like our heavenly Father. "Mercy is God's identity Card. God of mercy, merciful God. For me this really is the Lord's identity" (cf. The Name of God.).

CHAPTER SIX

MERCY AND FORGIVENESS

26. At the request of the Disciples of Christ to their master to teach them how to pray, Christ delivered what has come today to be known as the Lord's prayer. Today this prayer is recited as direct prayer especially in the mainline Christian Churches. The Lord's prayer is a form of prayer. It is also a guide that helps us to properly redirect our priorities in prayer. We are therefore instructed about what to pray for and how important these aims should be as points of prayer.

The Lord's Prayer contains seven requests or intentions, three of which are mainly directed to God, and the rest directed to human needs both spiritual and material. We are enjoined to make praise our priority, and to desire for the coming of his kingdom through the doing of his will. These are all primarily God-regarding but they are also the best situation for the human being since God's reign is the ultimate destiny of reality including humanity.

27. The first of the human needs is for very important nourishment, mainly of the corporal body, and then there is the prayer for forgiveness. 'Forgive us our trespasses'. God's readiness to forgive points to how boundless his mercy is. God's mercy is clearly illustrated by Jesus in the three parables of mercy in the Gospel of Luke: The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son or prodigal son (Lk. 15:1-32). The special lesson of these parables is that God goes out of his way to look for his children who are distressed because they have lost their way. Even the prodigal son did not yet express remorse before his father ran up to him to embrace him, and welcome him into his house, it is with the same confidence that the prodigal son returned to his father, that each person should ask for forgiveness from God, trusting in his mercy and his power to sustain our good intentions of becoming better children of his.

28. God's forgiveness is based on his mercy and love. He has deep solicitude for the well-being of all his children. Thus the three parables of mercy contain also the three losses, the sheep, the coin, and the son. It shows that without God's mercy our loss would become permanent, without God's mercy we will be shut off from the fount of grace and source of life. The Lord's Prayer points to the fact that the human being is a responsible actor. He is an accredited agent in making the kingdom of God and his will come in a faster and surer way. He is not only a receptor of forgiveness but also an agent of forgiveness. The dramatic parable of the wicked servant who could not pay his debt and received mercy from his master is a very good case in point. He could not extend the same treatment to his own debtor. The severity of his punishment points to how much God is dissatisfied with those who lack the ability to exercise mercy and forgiveness. "That is how your heavenly father will treat you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35).

29. Forgiveness arises from the Virtue of mercy. If one is to make narrow and legal justice his standard, then all will be subject to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. In that case there will be nothing like forgiveness. In his preaching on love and mercy, the Lord intends to convince his Interlocutors that he had come to fulfill the commandment by raising the standard of the law much higher than the Old. "I give you a commandment" the commandment of Love. Mercy is one of the fruits of this love and it is the foundation of forgiveness. The Lord's Prayer indicates that while we seek forgiveness from God we have an obligation to extend the same forgiveness we receive to those who have offended us. It means that we must have a constant spirit of mercy towards our fellow human beings. The fourth request of the Lord's Prayer is presented as a "quid pro quo" or a "do ut des" (I give so that you may give). We are asking God for forgiveness and pointing to our acts of forgiveness towards other human beings. It means that he who seeks God's mercy must also be merciful in order to be able to forgive and then again God's mercy. "For Christians forgiveness is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves" (M.V, no. 9). It is important to add that like God's nature the range of mercy and forgiveness is boundless. Christians should imitate this attribute of God by their readiness to forgive their brothers and sisters always since we are also deeply in need of forgiveness from God. They should also approach the sinner with mercy and understanding while condemning sin itself. They should refrain from judging their fellow human

beings and develop the Virtue of mercy towards them. “If anyone wants to avoid judgment he should not make himself a judge of his brother and sisters”. (M.V. no. 14).

CHAPTER SEVEN MERCY AND JUSTICE

30. At face value justice would appear to be a hindrance to mercy. Justice in this sense is understood as the law taking its course irrespective of particular circumstance. A thinker like Immanuel Kant excludes human nature, inclination and particular human ambience from all moral considerations, highlighting ethical imperative that will be applicable to all human beings. To talk of mercy in such conception will almost be meaningless. With the Church, the Holy Father Pope Francis speaks of cheer legalism as something negative. “Mere justice is not enough” and “Love is the foundation of justice” (M.V., no 21). Justice is not mere legalism. Aquinas defines justice as giving everybody his due (*justum cuique tribuendi*). But the actual practice of justice involves determining what exactly is one's due in each case. It is in this manner that justice departs from mere letters of the law. John Rawls sees justice as based on principles that ensure preferential treatment for the poor and distributing inequalities in a manner that the weak are taken care of through equal opportunity. Rawls' theory has much in common with the Biblical Golden Rule which enjoins the moral actor to behave towards others as he would like them to behave towards him. (Lk 6:31).

31. On the natural level, justice is the foundation of our co-existence. It is the “raison d' etre” of our public institutions and our socio-political order. It is not a Virtue to be trifled with. But mercy completes and perfects justice. God is presented in Christian Theology as a just God. As God, he is supremely just and there is no contradiction between his justice and his mercy. God's mercy flows from his nature. It springs from his supreme knowledge of human limitations and weakness. God's mercy arises from the fact that he is a father who does not abandon his children, and as a father each and every child is dear to him. He does not therefore foreclose his mercy on account of justice. That is why God's justice is his mercy. His justice includes giving to his children his boundless compassion and love, and granting them his mercy whenever they seek his face. It is thus not by our merit but rather by God's nature that we are privy to his mercy. That is why Christ died for us when we were still sinners. That shows more than anything else the boundlessness of God's mercy, offering his only son to die for sinners. God's justice manifests eminently his mercy.

CHAPTER EIGHT MERCY IN THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP

32. The Church is constantly conscious of itself as the recipient of God's mercy. She is grateful to God for his acts of mercy which is the origin of the whole history of salvation. Mercy is also the background of the mission of Christ since God's love for his children and his compassion for their sinful situation is the origin of the story of salvation. The children of God express gratitude for this

immense love of God which is a source of confidence that evil will not triumph over good. The whole community of the faithful both collectively and individually continually prays for mercy as a way of countering the malaise of sin, and expressing hope and confidence that God's will be done on earth. They constantly ask for God's mercy in their various acts of worship. This is seen in all prayers for forgiveness and especially in penitential services. The litanies of the Church all start with repeated requests for God's mercy. The Holy Eucharist begins with a penitential service in which we ask for God's mercy as a way of purifying ourselves for the grace-filled celebration. The Gloria contain prayers for mercy. Again, prayers for mercy are constantly said in the canon of the Mass, the Lord's Prayer and after, Before communion the Lamb of God is recited asking for God's mercy in order to purify the faithful for communion which is union with their divine Lord and with one another.

CHAPTER NINE

CONFESSION: THE SACRAMENT OF MERCY

33. God's boundless mercy manifests itself in a dramatic way in the sacrament of reconciliation also called the sacrament of Penance or Confession. St. John Paul II says that "In this sacrament each person can experience mercy in a unique way, that is, the love which is more powerful than sin" (John Paul II, DM, no. 13). Sacramental Confession is the seat of God's mercy, the sacrament of penance is a wonderful and visible assurance of reconciliation with God by receiving God's mercy. In spite of the multiplicity of Christian denominations and sects, it is only Catholics whose faith includes penance as a sacrament and whose tradition and life include the practice of sacramental confession. It is a great privilege for which we should always be thankful. The confessional is the highest expression of God's readiness to dispense his immense compassion to his children. In this sacramental encounter, the penitent accuses himself or herself of offending God and his children and goes to celebrate this sacrament of mercy.

34. The Confessor should make as manifest as possible the mercy implication of the celebration of reconciliation. The confessional should be the supreme context of compassion, and the priest should see it as a thing of joy that a sinner is seeking God's mercy, and should feel humbled for being the instrument of this mercy. He must avoid unnecessary questions (M.V., no 17). Care must also be taken to ensure that Catholics continue to cherish the experience of confession, and continue to enjoy the inner freedom from sin on account of God's boundless mercy. Receiving requests for mercy in the confessional should also lead the confessor to think of his own sin and his need for forgiveness and mercy. The Holy Father recalls, "when I heard confessions I always thought about myself, about my own sin and about my need for mercy, and so I tried to forgive a great deal". (cf. The Name of God).

35. The Supreme Pontiff describes the Church as a field hospital for sinners. A field hospital is mobile, dispensing medication wherever it is needed. In the same manner the Church should follow

the sinners with compassion irrespective of the circumstances of their lives. This is on account of “mercy that searches out sinners and offers them pardon and salvation”. (M.V. no 20). Pope Francis speaks of “the gift of confession”, and the season of Lent as “privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy”. (M.V.no 17).

36. It is good to note that the power to forgive sins belongs to God alone. This power is infinite, no human sin can prevail over it or limit it. But Christ through the Church has established an ordinary means for the remission of sins through the sacrament of reconciliation. After his resurrection, the Lord Jesus gave his Apostles the power to forgive sins. He said to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you. And when he has said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive are forgiven them and whose sins you do not forgive, they are not forgiven” (Jn. 20:22 23). This power given to the first Apostles have passed on to their successors. This is according to the mind of Christ who promised to be with the apostles till the end of time.

37. Today there are many doubts or criticisms about this sacrament of mercy. Such should not be since Christ who has the power to forgive has given the authority and power to his apostles and their successors. We recall that in the time of Christ such a doubt was put to rest when Christ healed the paralytic and said to him” courage child, your sins are forgiven”. Some Pharisees and scribes thought that that was blasphemy of unprecedented magnitude. But Jesus asked them, “why do you have these thoughts in your hearts”? He went further to say; to prove to you that the son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth, he said to the paralytic, “I order you, get up, pick up your stretcher and go off home”. The people were astonished as they praised God saying, "we have never seen anything like this”. (cf. Mk. 2;1-12). Therefore, we should avail ourselves of the great privilege of this sacrament.

38. Some important facts to remember about in sacrament are: First and foremost it is Go forgives. The priest no matter how holy is only God's messenger and instrument. Again the penitent must always have sincere sorrow and firm purpose of amendment. The sacrament is not an encouragement to sin but gives the grace to the sinner to sin no more. Finally confessors are there not to increase the guilt of the penitent but to show the merciful love of the Father.

CHAPTER TEN

IMPLICATIONS OF MERCY IN DAILY LIFE

(Re-Our Local Context)

39. The worship of Christians should point of reference and a guiding influence; daily life. As Christians we cannot ex the immense love of God, for exam remaining without love. God is a merciful We have seen that mercy is one of his attributes and that Christ's mission on earth is to manifest God's mercy to human beings. Pope Francis tittles his book; The Name of God is Mercy. We are saved on account of the mercy of God and we should be emissaries of the Good News of

salvation which we have all received on account of the mercy of God. It therefore goes without saying that mercy should in a deep and special way mark our lives as Christians.

The concept of mercy includes a lacuna or lack of some sort. This lack may not always be the loss of innocence on account of sin. It may be the absence of some good that necessary to achieve some wholeness. Mercy is needed by people who are deficient in some manner. Human deficiency manifests in very many ways. Our society is full of people who are deficient in several respects: the poor, the needy, the sick, the aged, the homeless, the hungry, the jobless, those whose work is hard and unrewarding, those under enslaving tutelage, the old, the prisoners, those who have no faith, the disillusioned, the frustrated, the hopeless, those suffering because of sin, etc. Such sins may not always be personal sins. Communal sins are often not less injurious to human beings and may be more pernicious and less susceptible to eradicate.

40. Those who have received God's mercy are expected to live with this consciousness. They should not only show mercy in their actions; they should also be instruments for dispensing God's mercy to their fellow man and women. When in public office for example, they should be well aware that their actions have more telling effects on thousands of people who may for the moment remain faceless. Their acts of irresponsibility can be the decisive watershed for regress and can affect incalculable number of people. These people that can be possibly negatively affected are part of our objects of mercy.

41. Mercy includes for instance, our treatment of workers. It is easy to refer to the experience of the Israelites in the book of Amos where the rich can buy up the poor with a pair of sandals. But are we not too dangerously near that scenario when the salaries of many of our unemployed or privately employed graduates cannot purchase one of the four tires of a normal car? Many other workers, especially those employed in our private sector earn so little that one wonders how they are able to survive. Employers of labour are morally not bound to employ anybody, but they are bound to be just to those they employ. In a situation like ours where there is astronomically high unemployment and where people are ready to work for mere stipends, it is morally obligatory to insist on just wage. The Virtue of mercy can play a very positive role in this regard. An employer of labour who in addition to mastering the operative economic situation has also imbibed the Virtue of mercy, one of the fruits of charity, should be careful to ensure that those working for him are well paid.

12. There are also many other societal habits which are only possible where people do not take thought of the convenience or the future of their fellow human beings. We refer for example to the situation of some of our public schools in many parts of the country. In many of these schools, especially those located in some rural areas, many teachers posted to teach in them are so infrequent in attendance that their pupils learn almost nothing. In a world as sophisticated as our present world, such behavior makes a mess of the future of our children. It is in such matters that our sense of mercy should play a vital role. Even when the structure in place cannot ensure enough

discipline on teachers to do their work efficiently, individuals involved should on account of mercy ensure that they give those in their care enough to fit properly into life in the future.

43. There is in general a noticeable complacency with what one can describe as heartlessness in our public service. It would seem that the guiding rule is what is possible, not what is right or just. While public servants often complain of their leaders, many of them are not willing to dispense the service for which they are paid. Service to the public is done with grudge where at all. It is done with the aim of swindling the system wherever possible. As a consequence what belongs to the public domain is where inefficiency is rife leading to eventual collapse of whatever structure that existed in the past. That is why our public educational system is generally inefficient such that all who can afford it send their children to private schools, leaving the poor to go to schools where they, the rich, the educated, the elite have run down. The Virtue of mercy when allowed to influence our decisions is one antidote to such irresponsible behavior.

44. What is important is that our Christian should pull back from what has been called the "privatization of morality", where only personal sins are taken seriously while public sins are not. In the Papal Bull, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis names two public sins which are so pernicious in the human society, namely membership of criminal organizations and corruption. The Pope describes corruption as "a grave sin crying to heaven for vengeance because it threatens the very foundation of personal and social life". (M.V. no.19). Corruption strikes at the foundation of our public institutions and gradually destroys the sense of righteousness and transparency. A society mired in corruption cannot make any serious progress in any field of human endeavor. It is like a death sentence on the society and its future progress and a terrible legacy for the young. Those who are involved in corruption belong to the biggest enemies of the society. Pope Francis has especially strong words against corruption: "if it is not combated openly, sooner or later everyone will become an accomplice to it, and it will end up destroying our very existence". (M.V., no 19). What is important is that corruption is like stealing what belongs to all and more to the poor for oneself alone. It is contrary to the attitude of mercy which should go out of its way to help the needy.

45. Helping the poor and the needy involves the works of mercy in Catholic tradition. "The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities". (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2447). The corporal works of mercy include: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned and burying the dead, The spiritual works of mercy include; instructing the ignorant, advising or admonishing sinners, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving injuries, and praying for the living and the dead. What is important is that these works of mercy are the yardstick with which our Christianity will be measured. They are the criteria for judgment when the Lord comes as it is

recounted in the passage on the last judgment (Matt. 25:31-46). The reason for this is that God himself, Christ himself is present in each of the so-called little ones. Therefore, works of mercy directed to them are as good as directed to Christ himself. "I was hungry and you gave me food". This entails that those living in the fringes of the society have special claim on our mercy and their cry should be our cry.

Pope Francis underlines that Jesus introduces these criteria "to know whether or not we are living as his disciples and again "we cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged". (M.V., no. 15).

CHAPTER ELEVEN WORKS OF MERCY

46. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "the works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities". (Ccc, no, 2447). We have already listed the spiritual and corporal works of mercy but for emphasis we revisit them to explain their importance and biblical background.

IMPORTANCE OF THE WORKS OF MERCY

47. The works of mercy help us to build blocks of a community of faith, a civilization of love and a culture of truth and fairness. Faith shows itself in good works of love. On its part, true love obliges us to works of mercy. Both love of God and love of neighbor flow from God and flow back to God through our encounter with our neighbor, the human persons. In this way we can say that works of mercy lead us back to God and keep us united with him. Again the importance of the works of mercy include its Eucharistic nature. It is Eucharistic. The Eucharist urges all who take part in it to be an oblation of thanks to God through service to others. The works of mercy are linked to the meaning and mission of the Eucharist as it directs us to do the same, to serve God through service to others.

48. With respect to origin, it is good to note that all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy are rooted in the bible. We read from the Epistle of St James where the blessings of admonishing sinners are listed (James 5:19-20) to the Gospel of Matthew where most of the corporal works of mercy are listed as constituting the last judgment. (Matt. 25:31-46). (Also Cf. Prov. 28:23; Ezra 7:25; Dan 4:1-24; Jn 21:19-38) (Cf. Heb 12:1-4; Matth:12; James5;16; 2Mac. 12:38 46).

For easy reference we hereby state again the works of mercy.

49. A: The Corporal works of Mercy

1. Feed the Hungry

2. Give drink to the thirsty
3. Clothe the naked
4. Shelter the homeless
5. Visitor comfort the imprisoned
6. Visit the Sick
7. Bury the dead

50.B: The Spiritual works of Mercy

1. Admonish sinners
2. Instruct the ignorant
3. Counsel the doubtful
4. Comfort the sorrowful
5. Bear wrongs with patience
6. Forgive injuries or offences
7. Pray for the living and the dead.

The works of mercy help us to practice the Virtue of mercy which leads to a life of goodness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AS SEATS OF MERCY

51. The Church is most appropriately defined as the people of God. (cf. Lumen Gentium). In Christ, God exhibits himself in the gospel of John with the symbol of a tree. (cf. John 15). I am the tree you are the branches. The Church is also described as the body of Christ and as his bride. The Christian community is therefore so intimately inscribed in the being of God, one of whose numerous attributes is mercy. His relation to us is manifested through his mercy, his first attribute and in fact his name. It means that as Christians and especially as a Church, this all important attribute must be manifested in our organized life. If the Christian community is true to its origin and its root, it must reflect the attributes which as human we speak of God. In declaring the jubilee year of mercy, Pope Francis intends to centralize the attribute of mercy which appears to have been somehow sidelined in theological reflections. To achieve this end, it is directed that “every particular Church... will be directly involved in living out this Holy year as an extra-ordinary moment of grace and spiritual renewal” (M.V., no3).

52. The involvement of particular Churches should descend to all Christians, all Christian communities, parishes, institutions, schools, congregations etc. They should all brainstorm on various ways to realize the intentions of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, such that they express and experience the mercy of God and make it a habit in their Christian life. It is therefore an important responsibility of the leaders of all Christian communities to find specific and effective ways of

making the year of mercy as successful as possible because “mercy is the foundation of Christian life”. Some of the ways can be contextual and others can be general.

53. Let us just mention a few:

12:1 Organizing the Christian Community to participate fully and effectively in pilgrimages to the “Gate of Mercy”, the Holy Door of Mercy at the Basilica.

12:2 Taking up corporal and spiritual works of mercy in an organized manner. Since this is very important in our Christian life, Christian communities should be made to make the care for the poor a constant aspect of their pastoral engagement. Works of mercy should not be limited to Lenten period, Easter and Christmas celebrations.

12:3 Showing sympathy to those in trouble and coming to their help in various ways. In this regard our Christian communities very often show little or no sympathy to those who fall into grave difficulties. For some, situations like 'unwanted pregnancy' have been seen as occasion to deliver public punishment. The Jubilee Year of Mercy is an opportunity to reflect in line with the Pope's intentions and see how such difficult situations can be turned into situations of spiritual grace.

12:4 Bereavements have been terrible burdens to many families not just because of the absence of the dead, but sometimes more because of the economic implications of organizing “befitting” burials. Hence, Christian communities should find ways of showing mercy to those that are Mourning instead of seeing such occasions as a great chance for merriment at the expense of the bereaved.

12:5 Widowhood practices have been corrupted in many communities and families such that sometimes the properties of deceased relatives are shared by their siblings depriving the widow of the means of sustaining her children. This practice which is not supported by our culture nor by justice or fairness arises from greed and lack of mercy and compassion.

12:6 Organized and sympathetic welcome to those who have strayed in their faith or those who have other difficulties. Home visitation and discussions can go a long way in assisting and accompany those who need our help both communally and individually.

12:7 Refraining from the condemnation of those who have strayed can be a way of showing mercy. The Holy Father, Francis reminds us, that the Church does not exist to condemn people, but brings about an encounter with the visceral love of God's mercy (cf. The Name of God).

There are many more actions that the Christian communities can undertake to expend their understanding and practice of mercy. Of particular importance are those measures that arise from the context or from the special problems of the community. It is in this way that we increase the relevance of our faith to daily living as Christians and really make our faith part and parcel of our daily existence and culture.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MARY: MOTHER OF MERCY

54. Mary prays in her song of thanksgiving, “for the Lord has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant; surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed” (Lk. 1:48). The mystery of Mary's election is a profound manifestation of God's mercy. She is a beneficiary of God's mercy. In and through her the Church glimpses the gratuitousness of God's election and expression of His justification. God chose and justified her. According to Christoph Schonborn, “Mary's election is pure grace, completely undeserved, a sovereign act of God's mercy”. (Christoph schonborn, *We Have Found Mercy*, p. 123). In addition to receiving mercy from the Holy One who has done great things for her, Mary is in addition the Mother of Mercy- Incarnate, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. No wonder for many centuries, Christians all over the world have respectfully invoked the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Mother of Mercy. In her prayer, the Church addresses Mary as follows: Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope... The Sacred Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church have recognized in Mary a unique role in receiving and dispensing God's mercy. Walter Kasper, in his work; “Mercy: the essence of the Gospel” states that “Holy Scripture and the Church do not speak only abstractly and theoretically about God's mercy. The theology of the Scripture, like that of the Fathers of the Church is a theology of images. In the person of Mary, they present us with a concrete image, indeed a mirror image of divine mercy and an archetype of human and Christian mercy... This conviction has been deeply rooted in the religious consciousness of the Church since the first centuries down to the present day in the Catholic and, Orthodox Christianity” (Walter Kasper, *Mercy... chap IX*, no3)

56. In fact many reasons present Mary as a model and Mother mercy. In the first place, through her Immaculate Conception, God blessed her with an exceptional gift out of his mercy. According to Blessed John Paul II, “Mary is the one who obtained mercy in a particular and exceptional way, as no other person has. At the sometimes, still in an exceptional way, She made possible with the sacrifice of her heart her own sharing in revealing God's mercy” (John Paul II DM, no. 9). The special mercy of God on Mary is the reason why the angel Gabriel could say to her, “Fear not, Mary, for you have found favour with God” (Lk. 1:30). She found divine favour not because of her merits but because of God's mercy shown to her. In this mystery God the Father of mercy took the initiative and gave his gratuitous gift.

57. Again following the Immaculate Conception, God prepared Mary to be the Mother of His Son, The Divine Mercy Incarnate. By being the Mother of Christ, Mary is truly the mother of Divine mercy. In the words of Blessed John Paul II, “Mary is the Mother of mercy because her son, Jesus Christ, was sent by the Father as the revelation of God's mercy...” (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* no. 118). In short, Mary as Mother of our merciful Savior, rightly qualifies to be called Mother of Mercy.

58. In addition, during her life on earth Mary many ways revealed her merciful heart. When she learnt from the angel that her cousin Elizabeth had conceived, she quickly travelled through the hill-country to visit her, and in her merciful love she stayed with her for three months- just to help her (Lk.1:36-56). When they were at the wedding feast in Cana, Mary mercifully intervened to make sure the couple who wine had finished were not embarrassed or ashamed. She told her Divine Son, “they have no more wine”.

59. Mary is truly a model and the Mother of mercy. She is also our Mother since Christ entrusted us to her maternal tender care at the foot of the cross. (In 19:25-27). She is always there to obtain for us divine mercy. Recall that she told Maria Faustina, “I am not only the Queen of Heaven, but also the Mother of Mercy, and your Mother”. (Diary of St. Faustina, 130).

CHAPTER FOURTEEN BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

60. The Lord and Master Jesus Christ while delivering one of his great teachings made a declaration and a promise, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy”. (Matt. 5:7). Going through his teachings we discover that mercy is the proper response expected from those who have received mercy themselves. Giving that we have all received mercy from God and from fellow humans from time to time, to be merciful becomes not just one of the options before us but an obligation, a responsibility, a duty. In the words of St. John Paul II, Pope, “We must note that Christ, in revealing the love and mercy of God, at the same time, demanded from people that they also. should be guided in their lives by love and mercy. This requirement forms part of the essence of the messianic message, constitutes the heart of the Gospel ethos. The Teacher expresses this both through the medium of the commandment which he describes as the greatest, and also in the form of a blessing, when in the Sermon on the Mount he proclaims: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (John Paul II, *DM*, no 3).

61. The Early Church was convinced that salvation was God's great act of mercy. St Paul, for example, was always conscious of the tremendous mercy of God in his life. He was rescued from the life of persecuting the Church to a life of membership of the Church due to God's mercy. (1 Tim 1:13-16). Paul's behavior deserved judgment but God in his mercy bestowed salvation. Even the right to participate as a minister of the Gospel was entirely God's mercy. “God in his mercy

has given us this work to do” (2Cor 4:1). This consciousness of God's mercy influenced every aspect of St Paul's life and ministry such that he wanted to share this mercy with others. In his letters the greetings often included mercy. Paul and other believers saw themselves not only as recipients of God's mercy but also as vessels of God's mercy to others.

4. The proclamation of blessedness on the merciful in the beatitude in Matthew 5:7 is an indication that mercy is one of the marks of true discipleship. It is a sign of the redeemed and the essence of spiritual living. The absence of mercy on the contrary is a sign of spiritual emptiness Jesus took up this point to reprimand and denounce the legalistic practices of the Pharisees. He urged them to “go and learn the meaning of the words, I desire mercy not sacrifice”, (Matt. 9:13). Pope Francis commenting on the above text which of course refers to the Prophet Hosea “I desire love and not sacrifice” (Hos. 6:6) insists that the followers of Christ must place mercy at the centre of their actions and rule of life. Mercy springs from love which is the fulfillment of the law. Mercy raises us above the letters of the law to the level of love. beyond law to love. Mercy draws us closer to God, Our merciful Father.

63. The Jubilee Year of Mercy reminds us of Jesus Statement, "Blessed are the merciful... (Matt. 5:7). This jubilee invites all of us to deepen our exercise of mercy and also to prepare ourselves to receive the mercy of God. By our attention to mercy we are drawn very close to God since it is by mercy that he forgave our sins and sent his only son to deliver us by his incarnation, his life, his ministry, his death and his resurrection. God's mercy is boundless, and it is our privilege to open up ourselves to receive this mercy. It is also a big chance for us to imitate our heavenly Father by exercising mercy by many means and by works of mercy which are the criteria for our salvation in the scriptures.

64. The merciful are declared blessed because they themselves will receive mercy (Matt. 5:7). This recalls to us the forth request of the Lord's Prayer where we ask God for forgiveness backed by our readiness to forgive those who offend us.

65. The merciful are blessed because they are happy. Mercy is traditionally regarded as one of the fruits of love, and love tends to beget love. The merciful are blessed because like God they seek the happiness of their fellow human beings and thus will not lack their own happiness.

66. The merciful are blessed because they share in God's nature whose mercy is boundless (Ps. 36), and who has been manifested as rich in mercy.

67. The merciful are blessed because they will receive the blessing of paying heed to the injunction to be merciful as our heavenly Father I merciful (Lk. 6:36).

68. The merciful are blessed because “without knowing it” they have been merciful to Christ himself who is present in each of the little recipients of their mercy.

69. The merciful are blessed because they are veritable children of God who follow in the footsteps of their Father whose mercy is boundless.

70. The merciful are blessed because they will receive the goodwill and benevolence of fellow children of God who have received their mercy. The merciful are blessed because they will receive the fulfilment and reward of having given to others, what they receive from God.

71. The merciful are blessed because their sins are forgiven since mercy is the foundation of forgiveness which they ask from God for their failings.

72. The merciful are blessed because theirs is the kingdom of God. They are the heirs of God’s kingdom having dispensed the work of charity on the children of God and in so far, doing the same to Christ himself.

73. All these and more beatitude will also be our own if we decide to be part of the blessed of God. The Jubilee Year of Mercy is intended to make each and every one of us blessed in this and many more senses. It is therefore a fundamental Christian obligation to be merciful. And the special jubilee year is intended to ingrain the habit of mercy in our life as Christians. It is only with God’s grace that we can achieve such an aim, which is so central to our Christian life. And, we ask Him, God the most merciful to direct our good intentions, reinforce our little efforts and grant us success in internalizing the demands of mercy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PRAYER:

74. Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in your unbounded mercy you have revealed the beauty of your power through your constant forgiveness of our sins. May the power of this love be in our hearts to bring your pardon and your kingdom to all we meet. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

(From the alternative collect of the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time).

Given in Onitsha, at the Cathedral Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity, on 10 February, Ash Wednesday, in the Year of Our Lord 2016.

MOST REV. VALERIAN M. OKEKE
Archbishop of Onitsha.