



Pastoral Letter for Respect for Life Sunday 2015 - the Year of Mercy

Today is the inauguration in the Diocese of Stockholm of the Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis. And we too will open the Door of Mercy in our Cathedral. This coincides with our celebration of Respect for Life which always occurs on the third Sunday of Advent. Everything in our Christian faith is impressed by God's mercy. When the Father sends His Son to us it is to show us His infinite love which He offers to each one and which leads Him to send His Son for our sakes. It is the great task of the Church to proclaim this mercy and to try and convince all of us that we are called to receive this mercy and be transformed by it. The first step is always to receive wholeheartedly the good news from this merciful God.

"Enable us, we pray, to attain the joys of so great a salvation and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing" as the Collect Prayer for today puts it. Advent offers us a golden opportunity to grow in prayerful longing to meet God who became Man for our sake. This way Jesus Christ can become more and more present in our souls and thus we can radiate more and more His mercy.

"The Lord is at hand" (Philippians 4:5) says Paul as does the prophet Zephaniah: "...*The Lord is in your midst.*" (Zephaniah 3:15). Through baptism we are a temple, where the triune God makes his abode. We must, therefore, learn to live according to this great dignity bestowed on us. We must allow the mercy of God to find expression in the way we act, talk and think. *"What then must we do"*, we can ask like the people do thrice in today's Gospel (Luke 3:10, 13, 14). How can we transmit God's mercy? This is a question for the conscience of each one of us. We must deal with this question daily during the Year of Mercy. It should be a great joy that we can and may proclaim God's mercy to those we meet. God has such great confidence in us, his beloved children, to allow us the privilege to communicate to others His innermost reality. *"Rejoice in the Lord always"* (Philippians 4:4). It is not a heavy burden to be merciful, rather a joy unlike any other when we fully realize what a grace it is to be Godlike in this way. We are claimed by God to spread what is good, truthful and genuine around us. Thus our lives become more meaningful and have a clearer goal.

But what then must we do? How are we to show that we take mercy seriously? First, we must become aware whether we are excluding some individual or group from our expression of mercy. Is there anyone near us from whom we are closed? Is there anyone we consider unpleasant or difficult? Often God waits for us there if we manage to overcome our antipathy and indifference. Is our comfort, our time or our money more important than our will to spread God's goodness around us? An honest examination of conscience is important.

Is there any group we shun? It is common, unfortunately, that we knowingly or unknowingly close our hearts to some category or group of people. In our society unborn children are often not seen, not wanted and not welcome. But like everyone else they have an inviolable value in the eyes of God regardless of whether they are wanted by society or not.

Even though Sweden has generously opened her borders for so many refugees, there are, unfortunately some who do not want them. We must see through the eyes of faith that it is Providence and the logic of God that the year of Mercy coincides with this flood of refugees. We do not have to look for people who need our mercy. I am very grateful to all the parishes, who have listened to my appeal to do what they can to help the refugees God sends to us. We must never forget that our Church in Sweden has to a large extent been built by refugees who have come in batches to our country. From the time of the white buses with refugees direct from the concentration camps, new people have come and contributed to strengthen the Catholic presence in our country. We can only thank God for them. At the same time we must pray for peace, justice and reconciliation in the home countries of the refugees and actively work for this so that they do not need to leave on a long and often dangerous journey.

We must not close our eyes to the antagonisms that exist in our society between different groups. As believers it is important that we point out that religion should never lead to divisions and conflict. Sadly, there are those who blame many wars and injustice on religion. It is fifty years since *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration of Vatican II on non-Christian religions was promulgated. It says there "*The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, (to engage in) dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love*" (no 2) and "*We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God*" (No 5). The same message was conveyed in the call of the Interreligious Council of Sweden, published in *Dagens Nyheter* where I was also one of the signatories: "*We invite everyone, regardless of religious and cultural affiliation, to stand up, now and in the future, for the equal dignity and value of all people.*"

Finally, I adjure all the faithful during Advent to receive the sacrament of mercy and reconciliation. Confession makes it possible for us to be transformed by the forgiveness of God and to experience His mercy in an exceptional way. "*Again, I say Rejoice!*" (Philippians 4:4). The good news becomes concrete in this sacrament, where we are transformed from sinners to holy ones so that we in our turn can sanctify the world and spread the mercy of God to everything and everyone.

With my prayers and blessings to all of you!

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