

**Homily for Mass and Rite of Opening of the Holy Door of Mercy
3rd Sunday of Advent – Year C
December 12, 2015**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, IL**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: in the middle of the 19th century, an Advent tradition that has become very popular was begun in Germany. This tradition involves the counting of days to Christmas on what is known as an Advent Calendar. These calendars come in various sizes and designs, with some of the more popular versions including small gifts, such as candy, behind a little door for each day. These little gifts are like early Christmas presents as one prepares for the great gift of the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ on Christmas morning.

Today, our Advent journey has brought each of us to another door. This time, it is not a door on a calendar, but the door of this church, in particular, the Holy Door of Mercy which I officially opened at the beginning of this Mass. Passing through this door, we are invited to receive one of the greatest gifts that the Lord has to offer us, the gift of His mercy. Our Holy Father has designated that this coming year be a special

Jubilee Year of Mercy, during which the Church throughout the world will have the opportunity to “rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them.”¹

This past Tuesday, on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Francis opened the Holy Door at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome as a sign of the opening of this Jubilee Year. This weekend, he will open the Holy Door at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Cathedral of Rome. All of the cathedrals throughout the world will be doing the same, thus signifying our communion with one another as we all embark on this journey of mercy together.

The concept of a journey is a fitting one, not just for this Jubilee Year, but for our lives as Christians. Every step that we take is an occasion for encountering God’s love and mercy for us in a deeper way as we travel toward our common destination of Heaven. This journey began for each of us on the day that we were baptized. “The sacrament of Baptism is the door through which one enters the community of the Church.”² It is therefore fitting that one of the first things that we did as we passed through the Holy Door was to be sprinkled with holy water as “a living reminder of this sacrament.”³

As with any journey, constant attention and effort must be made by us if we want to make progress in advancing toward our destination. In anticipation of the beginning of the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis reflected last Sunday on the words of John the Baptist who proclaimed a message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. He said that there is a great danger in thinking that this call to conversion does not apply to us, that since we are already Christians by virtue of our Baptism, we are fine just as we are. The Holy Father went on to say the following:

None of us can say, "I'm a saint; I'm perfect; I'm already saved." No. We should always accept this offer of salvation, and that's what the Year of Mercy is for: to advance farther in this journey of salvation, this path that Jesus has taught us.⁴

This Year of Mercy is an opportunity for us to have a renewed encounter with God's love for us, an encounter which awakens us to our constant need for conversion, casting off those burdens which slow us down on that journey leading to eternal life. The Holy Father invites us to see that this year as an "opportune moment to change our lives! This is the time to allow our hearts to be touched!"⁵ If we let it, this year can be a defining moment of grace that changes our lives for the good.

This prospect of undergoing a life-altering change due to our encounter with God's mercy should stir in our hearts a feeling of excitement and hope. We may find ourselves like those we hear about in the Gospel for today's Mass. After hearing this call to repentance, they ask John the Baptist: "What then should we do?" (Luke 3:10). How should we live this Year of Mercy in order to draw from the rich blessings that flow so abundantly from "God's merciful heart made accessible through the open side of Christ on the cross" (cf. Jn 19:34)?⁶

The first step is to ensure that our hearts are prepared to receive this gift of mercy. While His mercy is indeed powerful, He will not force it upon us. We have to be willing to accept that mercy by first of all recognizing that we are in need of mercy, that we are all sinners.

In an address given toward the end of his pontificate to a group of bishops from the United States, Pope Saint John Paul II spoke about the urgency of confronting the crisis of the loss of a sense of sin. He noted the paradox that "[w]hile the effects of sin abound -- greed, dishonesty and corruption, broken relationships and exploitation of persons, pornography and violence -- the recognition of individual sinfulness has waned."⁷ He went on to say that:

Saint John tells us: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). Sin is an integral part of the truth about the human person. To recognize oneself as a sinner is the first and essential step in returning to the healing love of God.⁸

Coming to this recognition that we are sinners is nothing more than recognizing the truth about ourselves, and as Jesus tells us in the Gospel, “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). This truth is not meant to cause sadness in us. Rather, it should bring us great joy because it will “reinforce in us the certainty of Divine Mercy”⁹ which is “a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace.”¹⁰

Joy is at the heart of our celebration of this Third Sunday of Advent, traditionally called *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for rejoice, and we hear that command given to us by St. Paul in our Second Reading as he says: “Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4). The reason that He gives for this rejoicing is that “the Lord is near” (Phil. 4:5). Not only is He near in His coming at Christmas in just under two weeks, He is near to us at all times, desiring to pour out His mercy upon us at the very instant that we ask for it. Recognizing that we are

sinner, then, makes us aware that God is near to us, and that brings great joy.

Admitting that we are sinners makes us aware of our need for mercy in order to remedy the illness caused by our sin. The Church, in her motherly tenderness for her children, offers us that assistance in a most extraordinary way in the sacraments. In a particular way during this Year of Mercy, we are encouraged to rediscover the powerful gift of healing that is made available to us through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

It is not a mere coincidence that the Holy Door of this cathedral is located right next to the primary place where confessions are heard each day in this church. The Holy Door reminds us that the privileged place to encounter mercy is in this great sacrament of renewal, reconciling us to God and one another through a power that only Christ can exercise. Yet, so many people stay away from this sacrament. I have just addressed one of those reasons, being convinced that we do not have any sin. Even when that lie has been exposed, people still avoid this sacrament due to a variety of fears that they harbor in their hearts.

During this Year of Mercy, I invite you to implore God's grace to overcome your fears and make frequent use of this sacrament of love and

mercy. Maybe it has been several years since you last came to confession. As Jesus said so often in the Gospels: “Do not be afraid!” (Matthew 14:27). The Lord rejoices to grant you forgiveness. Maybe you are in the habit of going to confession only during Advent and Lent. This could be a wonderful opportunity to approach the sacrament with greater regularity and see how doing so can make a profound impact on your spiritual life. Countless numbers of the faithful throughout the history of the Church have experienced a remarkable change in their lives thanks to a personal rediscovery of the power of this great sacrament. The Church is inviting each of us to that rediscovery in our own way. We have absolutely nothing to lose, but everything to gain!

Having experienced the transforming power of mercy in our hearts, we may discover that we feel the desire to do something more. We may find ourselves asking that same question that the crowd asked to John the Baptist: “What should we do?” (Luke 3:10). His response constitutes the other important part of living this Year of Mercy, and that is practicing mercy toward others. Receiving the gift of mercy cannot leave us indifferent to the needs of others. Rather, a true encounter with mercy

opens our eyes to see the needs of those around us and then act to respond to those needs.

Pope Saint John Paul II addressed this issue of the role of the Church in responding to God's mercy in his Encyclical Letter about God the Father, who is Rich in Mercy (*Dives in Misericordia*), in these words:

The Church must profess and proclaim God's mercy in all its truth, as it has been handed down to us by revelation. . . .The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy—the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer—and when she brings people close to the sources of the Savior's mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser.¹¹

In a particular way, we are called to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. These works do not have to be reserved for the poor and abandoned who may be physically distant from us. While it is indeed important to serve those most in need, we should not overlook the opportunities that we have to practice mercy toward those with whom we are closest, those we encounter on a daily basis in our families, our schools, and our workplaces. Everybody whom the Lord has placed in our lives by His Providence is a subject of mercy. It is there where we must start.

Having crossed through the Holy Door together, we have embarked together on another leg of our pilgrim journey of faith, a journey which will reach its conclusion only when we come to rest in the loving presence of God in Heaven. This journey will be hard and demanding at times, while at the same time being a source of great joy. Much energy is required for this journey, and so we are in constant need of the spiritual nourishment that comes to us in the Eucharist. In this Bread of Life, “Christ walks beside us as our strength and our food for the journey”¹² so that we can reach our destination.

In the Eucharist, the Father rushes with mercy to meet everyone who seeks God “with a sincere heart,” continually offering his covenant to mankind and giving us a foretaste of the eternity of his kingdom, where, we pray, “with the whole of creation, freed from the corruption of sin and death,” we may “glorify” the Father forever (*Eucharistic Prayer IV*).¹³

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Homily for Holy Mass and Opening of the Holy Door*, 8 December 2015

² *Rite of the Opening of the Door of Mercy in Local Churches*, §14.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Pope Francis, *Angelus Address*, 6 December 2015.

⁵ Pope Francis, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy *Misericordiae Vultus*, §19.

⁶ *Rite of the Opening of the Door of Mercy in Local Churches*, §12.

⁷ Pope St. John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of California, Nevada, and Hawaii*, 14 May 2004.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 9 December 2015.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, §2.

¹¹ Pope St. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in Misericordia*, §13.

¹² Pope St. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §62.

¹³ *Rite of the Opening of the Door of Mercy in Local Churches*, §15.