

**THE YEAR OF MERCY: OPENING OF THE HOLY DOOR OF MERCY  
ST PATRICK'S, DONEGALL STREET, BELFAST  
GAUDETE SUNDAY – 13 DECEMBER 2015**

**I The Extraordinary Year of Mercy in God's plan of salvation**

The symbolic rite of opening the Holy Door of Mercy resonates with the liberation of the Exodus. In every diocese throughout the world this rite underlines the special opportunity for mercy and forgiveness offered by this Extraordinary Year of Mercy. This year enables us to re-live and make present the boundless mercy at the heart of God's plan of salvation as that plan is revealed on the pages of the Scriptures - in the lives of all kinds of persons and in the history of the Jewish people.

This Year of Mercy "is itself a gift of grace", to use the words of Pope Francis, as he opened the Holy Door at St Peter's basilica in Rome. It plunges and immerses us, with the entire Church throughout the world, into the dynamics of conversion and forgiveness, of healing and renewal, seen at work on the pages of the Old and New Testament scriptures.

In the words of the prophet Zephaniah, taken from the first reading of the liturgy of the Word for this Gaudete Sunday: *he [the Lord your God] will renew you with his love*" (Zp 3.16).

**II Divine Mercy the seat of God's judgement**

Pope Francis announced the Year of Mercy on the 11 April past, the Feast of Divine Mercy, with *Vultus Misericordiae*. There he describes the mystery of God's mercy, seen in the face of Jesus, as **"the wellspring of joy, serenity and peace"**.

When opening the Holy Door of Mercy at St Peter's in Rome on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the same Pope Francis gave us food for thought, when, drawing on St Augustine, he remarked, : **"how much wrong we do to God and his grace when we speak of sins being punished by his judgement before we speak of their being forgiven by his mercy"**. He then went on to say : **"we have to put mercy before judgement, and in any event God's judgement will always be in the light of his mercy ..... let us set aside all fear and dread ... instead let us experience the joy of encountering that grace which transforms all things"**.

There it is again in slightly different words: **God's mercy – the wellspring of joy, serenity and peace!**

### **III A Year with a programme**

The Year of Mercy will provide times, places, events to experience and celebrate God's mercy in the sacrament of Reconciliation, to explore and come to appreciate more fully the working of God's boundless mercy as revealed in the Scriptures, in history and indeed in so many ways in our own lives. We thank the members of the Working Group who has prepared this liturgy and will furnish us with events and initiatives as we move through the coming twelve months.

### **IV The Year of Mercy and the societal impact of the Gospel**

True to God's revelation in history and in the person, life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, when proclaiming this Year of Mercy, Pope Francis also profiled the **social dimension of mercy** and asks that as Christians we strive to “***eliminate every form of close-mindedness and disrespect and drive out every form of violence and discrimination***” ( M.V. 23.2). In our precarious times there is much work for Christians on this front, both here in this land and, for those who can, on international and global platforms.

### **V Mercy, Ministry and the significance of the renewal of the Second Vatican Council**

In the concluding lines of his homily on 8<sup>th</sup> December past, Pope Francis linked the opening of the Holy Door of Mercy to the opening of the Church to the world marked by the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago. **Here there lies a challenge and an imperative of the new evangelisation for us all, especially for those who exercise any ministry in the life of the Church.**

As we cross the threshold of the Door of Mercy, as pastors and people, we are called by Pope Francis in the year ahead to revive our appreciation of the significance of the Second Vatican Council's work in the unfolding history of salvation.

And for those of us who are priests, pastors, deacons-to-be, ministers of welcome, ministers of the Word, minister of the Eucharist, sacristans, choir

members, the words of Pope Francis deserve meditation and concrete follow-up in the year ahead:

**“Before all else the Council was an encounter. A genuine encounter between the Church and the men and women of our time. An encounter marked by the power of the Spirit, who impelled the Church to emerge from the shoals which for years had kept her self-enclosed so as to get out once again, with enthusiasm, on her missionary journey. It was the resumption of encountering people where they live ..... The Jubilee challenges us to this openness, and *demands that we not neglect the spirit which emerged from Vatican II, the spirit of the Samaritan*, as Blessed Paul VI expressed it at the conclusion of the Council.**

May this Year of Mercy be a time of grace, reconciliation and renewal for all of us, for the parishioners of our diocese, for the Church and thus for all Christians and for the family of peoples, the apex of God’s creation.

Amen.