

**2020 National Gathering of the Missionaries of Mercy
USA and Canada**

January 21 – 23, 2020 ~ Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky

Summary of Mercy Gospel Reflections and Panel Presentations

Tuesday ~ January 21, 2020

**Opening Catechesis ~ *Role of Missionaries of Mercy in the Promotion of the
New Evangelization through the Ministry of Reconciliation***

by Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst

In his opening remarks, Bishop reminded us of Pope Francis' chosen motto "Chosen by Mercy" reflecting on the call of "Matthew who was perceived as a public sinner and Jesus looked upon him with eyes full of mercy." Bishop reminded us after the great Jubilee Year of Mercy that the Missionaries of Mercy were called together twice in Rome "to provide a space for mutual fraternity, support, and dialogue as each Missionary of Mercy shares his experience." This indeed was the experience of the Missionaries in Lexington, Kentucky for the first gathering of Missionaries in the USA and Canada.

Bishop reminded us that Pope Francis exhorted his immediate predecessors on their focus on mercy. "Saint John Paul II not only implemented Divine Mercy Sunday for the whole church but also gave us, in his Encyclical of November 30, 1980, *Dives in Misericordia/Rich in Mercy*, a very profound reflection on mercy, as found in the Old and New Testament." Pope Benedict also challenged us to the importance of mercy as the fundamental realization of love." Bishop goes on to say that "Pope Benedict understands and interprets the call and sending of the Church as evangelizing the world within a mentality of mercy. In *Deus Caritas Est/God is Love*, he concludes: "The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man: it seeks his evangelization through Word and Sacrament, an undertaking that is often heroic in the way it is acted out in history, and it seeks to promote men in the various arenas of life and human activity. Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly to man's sufferings and his needs, including material needs. And this is the aspect, the service of charity." (DCE, 19)

At one point, Bishop referred to *Evangelii Gaudium/The Joy of the Gospel* as the *Magna Carta of Mercy*. In this Pope Francis "develops an understanding of mercy as mission, and of mission as living mercy." (EG, 46) Mercy from this perspective conceives the church as a church with *open doors*.

Another important element of his presentation was reflecting on the 2018 Synod on Youth focused on mission. Bishop shared that "The way young people give witness through mercy always has an ecclesial dimension and is related to the Church and its state of always being 'new' and young." He goes on to say, "Every open-minded attitude

of young people that is nourished by their relation with Jesus Christ is a fresh expression of faith. 'Christus Vivit/Christ is Alive' combines the gift of being young with the charism of being missionary."

Bishop shared that the soon to be released General Directory for Catechesis is shaped as a source for "education in mercy." "A catechesis that helps develop such an experience" of being in relationship with, "should be a catechesis performed under the paradigm of mercy." He reaffirms this by calling attention to "Paragraphs 41 and 42 of the Directory address this explicitly and speak about the missionary model of a church that goes forth and that will be present in the outskirts. Such a church requires the practice of mercy and authentic catechesis, a catechesis in action, a strong witness for believers and non-believers."

Bishop towards the end of his presentation reminded us Missionaries, "Missionaries of Mercy engaged in the process of reconciliation should have faces that mirror how the Lord sees us, how the Lord recognizes us, and the Lord loves and touches us."

Mercy in general and in particular is the exemplification of what the Gospel proclaims and proposes for all of us to live. Bishop Franz-Peter

Wednesday ~ January 21, 2020

Witnessing to the Gospel of Mercy through Word ~ Luke 10: 29 – 37

"The one who treated him with compassion...then go and do the same."

Reflection by Fr. John Hurley, CSP

Reminded that the story of the Good Samaritan is not unfamiliar to us, Fr. John shared that in light of our mandate as Missionaries of Mercy, "it is the heart of our ministry." He also reflected on the question many of us have been asked by brother priests, "Aren't all of us priests called to be merciful?" To which he replied, "yes. However, not all are."

Fr. John then led us through what one of the missionaries commented was an "examination of conscience for us as priests." There is a little bit of this Gospel in each of us...the Priest, the Levite and Good Samaritan.

The Priest...is the person who probably disappoints us most for obvious reasons. Afraid of becoming "unclean" he avoids someone in need of mercy, probably a fellow Jew. Yet, a Jew is supposed to help a fellow Jew if they are in need of rescue, even if it falls on the Sabbath. In his national and diocesan roles, he has often received complaints of priests who are hardened of heart when it comes to mercy and the priest says he can't do something and cited examples which were all too familiar to those present. "Being pastoral means tending to someone who is struggling with something in their lives or is experiencing distance from God or the church and they feel marginalized."

The Levite...The lawyer in the story was probably a Levite, an expert in the law. Fr. John shared that growing up as a young child on the Baltimore Catechism, he was taught that

“We must love the Lord our God with our whole heart, our whole mind and our whole soul.” Like the lawyer, we are often compartmentalized. In our hearts, we want to act and in our minds we become cautious and more often than not, we talk ourselves out of acting. He shared with us that if he was writing this answer today for the catechism, he would say we need to “Love the Lord our God with our DNA.” This is the true meaning of conversion in our lives. Our whole being loves God and God is Love and Mercy. How often in our own lives do we hide behind the laws of the Church or the Catechism? Fr. John shared with us a quote from Pope Francis a few months after his election when he met with the opening session of the Roman Rota, “If the laws of the church do not bring people closer to Christ, they are not fulfilling their purpose.”

The Samaritan...the last one you would ever think would stop to help since the one in need was probably a Jew coming from Jerusalem. Yes, the lawyer got more than he wanted in his question to Jesus, “the one who treated him with mercy.”

Fr. John reminded us present that the legacy of this story is alive in the USA. The Good Samaritan Law embraces who is our neighbor, anyone in need not just our next door neighbor. In conclusion, he went through a list of who are the marginalized in our society who are our “neighbors” and invited us to reflect on how we are called to respond as Missionaries of Mercy. He provided us with a reminder of a new image of this Gospel, the picture of the young father and toddler lying face down on the riverbed between the USA and Mexico. “Many are becoming numb to these images, some walk by oblivious, others are caught up in the law and others do something about it.”

Panelists

Building Bridges through Spiritual Direction by Fr. Mark Zacker

In his opening remarks, Fr. Mark shared that he was at a point in his own personal life where he was searching for “more.” He was in many positions of leadership in his diocese and yet there seemed to be a longing and an inner search for going deeper in his spiritually.

Three years ago, his bishop was looking for spiritual directors in the diocese. He found the idea intriguing and went to The Magis Center which focuses on spirituality. This was an eye opening experience for him as his guides were focusing on going deeper and searching for more. In his experience he realized that mercy is always a matter of dialogue with God and oneself. He invited us to just imagine “what we are capable of if we open ourselves to an encounter with Christ?”

Reflecting on the Gospel of the Good Samaritan, he asked us, “how do you read what is written in the law?” He reminded us that encounter and dialogue is where mercy begins and invited us to “slow down, listen and to stop rushing from one thing to another.” Maybe we just need to love ourselves a little more like God loves us.

And, who is my neighbor? This invites us to enter the story and reflect on our ability to accompany someone with all of our “senses.” Fr. Mark now has 27 directees for spiritual

direction each month. In all of these experiences, he realizes how blessed he is to accompany his “neighbors” on their path in life. In many ways he affirms their journey and discernment. He also exhorted each of us to have a spiritual director and to be “cognizant of the light and darkness in our lives.” And, provided several key resources for us to explore.

At the end of his presentation he shared with us the call to speak Spanish. This opened up a whole new world for him in his many encounters with the Spanish speaking community. His “neighbor” took on a whole new meaning and he shared the many blessings of these encounters and how blessed he is in spiritual direction not only among English speakers but now Spanish speakers which is now the majority of his ministry. In conclusion, he reminded us that “when we are most vulnerable, we are most open to God.”

Loving Much: Receiving and Sharing Jesus’ Five-Fold Mercy by

Fr. Roger Landry

Beginning his presentation, Fr. Roger reminded us that the following weekend is Word of God Sunday. Pope Francis is inviting us priests to give particular focus on preaching as we prepare to celebrate it and also reminded us that *Evangelii Gaudium* is “a primer” for this. In *Misericordiae Vultus/The Face of Mercy* in announcing the Jubilee Year of Mercy that we are to be “above all, persuasive preachers of mercy,” and “heralds of joy and forgiveness” who remind everyone in the Church that “God desires mercy.”

The title of this presentation is also the title of a new book he is publishing which is the fruit of his preaching and writing during the Jubilee Year. The “loving much” comes from the scene in Simon the Pharisee’s house and Jesus’ interaction with the sinful woman who washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Fr. Roger shared that in light of this story, “to love much, we must grow in appreciation of mercy.” The “five-fold mercy” comes from his reflection on the phrase as Jesus’ “heart was moved with pity.” And, describes his doing five different things: teaching, healing, feeding forgiving and praying to the “harvest master for laborers and then calling them to be laborers.”

When one focuses on mercy, we also begin to open our eyes and see that “Jesus was constantly preaching mercy.” “He preached about it in parables, he taught us how to pray for it, he showed it in his actions, all meant to form us to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful.”

Providing us with many ways to “preach” mercy, let us not be confined to the pulpit. Mercy can be preached in “the bulletin, social media, pastoral letters, articles, videos, podcasts, TV, radio, uploaded homilies, movies and billboards” to name just some.

He also challenged us that we as priests need to “stress God’s mercy more than man’s sinfulness.” And, cited many examples of this for us in the preaching of St. John Vianney, Fr. Tim Gallagher’s book *Handbook for Spiritual Directors* and Divine Mercy devotion.

In the end, he reminded us that Pope Francis' first Sunday homily as Pope, "proclaimed the beauty of God's undying mercy as not only Jesus' most powerful message but the Church's most powerful continued message to the world" *'Jesus has this message for us. I think, and I say it with humility, that this is the Lord's most powerful message: mercy...The Lord never tires of forgiving: never! It is we who tire of asking his forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace not to tire of asking forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving.'*

Witnessing to the Gospel of Mercy through Worship ~ Luke 15: 11 – 32

Reflection by Bishop Jerry Vincke of Salina, Kansas

A fellow Missionary of Mercy, Bishop Vincke, gave a very compassionate presentation and reflection on the Prodigal Son and also in tandem, the Woman who finds her lost coin and the lost sheep. All, of course, have the same theme running through them.

He began his presentation by sharing that we all know difficult people in our lives, however in light of this Gospel, we must always treat them with gentleness and mercy. He reminded us of Pope Francis' quote in his first Sunday homily after election, "God never tires of forgiving us." And, Bishop continued, "the heart of this Gospel is first the heart of God."

He shared three aspects of God's heart: God's joy when one is found, God's desire for the sinner's return and God's response when the sinner returns. We all know how excited and joyful one can feel when we find someone or something that was lost. However, we must also reflect on the great joy that God has for each of us when we have this experience. This is God's desire and Bishop reminded us of St. Catherine when she says, "God is a mad lover." And, St. John Vianney so says, "It is not the sinner who comes back to God to ask for forgiveness, it is God who runs after the sinner so that he will come back to him." Our heart yearns to find the lost sheep, the lost coin or the father's heart yearning for his son to return home. He asked, "What leads people to the confessional?" And, went on to say, "It is God's heart speaking to the heart of the sinner." "Come to me all you who are labored and burdened (worn out by your sins) and I will give you rest." "It is God's desire to forgive the sinner and this is greater than our desire to receive mercy." "Yes, God's heart is full of compassion" and he reminded us of Pope Francis' words that "the confessional is not to be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with God's mercy." The father welcomed the son home and did not tell him, "I told you so, or how many times did you do this and that." As the Congregation for the Clergy document of *The Priest as Minister of God's Mercy* says, "People should be surprised by the mercy of God."

Bishop shared, "In our encounters with habitual sinners, we are called to remind them that they are a son or daughter of God." And, he reminded us that St. John Paul II said, "We are not the sum of our weaknesses and faults, we are the sum of the Father's love for us."

In conclusion, he reminded us, “God’s heart is full of joy when someone goes to confession, God’s desire for sinners to return to him and God’s response is compassion and mercy. He then shared a personal story of his relationship with his father growing up which was an example of the Prodigal Son in his own life.

Panelists

Confession on the Go-Cart by Fr. Patrick Baikauskas, OP

Many of us in the room heard about this *Confession on the Go-Cart at Purdue University* through social networking. However, it was another thing to meet the Missionary of Mercy behind it.

Fr. Patrick shared with us “If we believe the Sacrament of Reconciliation is important, how do we show that? What message do our people get when we offer the sacrament once a week on Tuesday at 3:00 pm. We have to look for ways that we can increase access to the sacrament – to honor traditions without being hidebound traditionalists. Whether we increase the opportunities in the number or in location, there are solutions available to each of our situations to help people experience God’s mercy in ways that will draw them into the experience. When the Holy Father told us to smell like the sheep, surely that meant we need to go to them exactly where they are – just as Jesus did on the road to Emmaus.”

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a major initiative at St. Thomas Aquinas Center at Purdue and it is not only celebrated on the golf cart. The sacrament is available every day of the week, Monday-Saturday, 11:00 – 11:25 am and 4:00-5:00 pm and, Sunday 8:15-8:45 am, 10:15-045 am and, 4:00-5:00 pm. These times present for students and all at St. Thomas the a variety of opportunities for times to consider this sacrament a major part of their lives.

There were many good questions coming from the missionaries, however Fr. Patrick shared that a golf-cart may not work for you. However, what this experience exemplifies is that each of us need to be creative in figuring out what will work in each of our particular ministries. So, often he said, we hear priests say “no one is coming.” Well, that may be true. The question for us is, what can we do to draw attention to this powerful reminder of God’s mercy and to put as much energy into this sacrament as we do for our celebration of mass.

Fr. Pat shared many of the responses from students and faculty. For all, it is a novel idea. At first, it seemed awkward. However as time moves on many see it as a unique opportunity to be reminded of how much God loves them. This is extremely important with all the stress students experience in their lives today. For some, who may not have known of St. Thomas Aquinas at Purdue, this was a unique way for the priests to share with the students that they are present on campus for them and invite them to the Newman Center/Catholic Center.

Pope Francis exhorted us to think outside the box, well this exciting initiative did just that.

Ministering to the Wounded Healer by Fr. Joseph Arsenault, SSA

The missionaries in the room listened attentively to Fr. Joseph share his personal experience as a missionary and Judicial Vicar in his archdiocese. He began to reflect on how he could exercise mercy mandate outside his ordinary ministry. And, then he got a telephone call from a priest who wanted to see him because he was a Missionary of Mercy. The priest dived over five hours to see him. As the priest was leaving, the priest said to Fr. Joseph that “a weight had been lifted from him that he had been carrying for over 20 years.” (Fr. Joseph did not say one way or another that it was or was not because of the special faculties that the priest came.)

This powerful experience shared with great humility had a profound impact on Fr. Joseph’s life, to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a fellow priest and to encounter a God of Mercy. Other priests began to come to me some even on a monthly basis. It was a profound sharing to realize that sometimes we underestimate the need to be reminded of God’s mercy over and over again. “As priests we often feel that we have no where to turn and we carry our sins.” As an Augustinian, he shared that St. Augustine reminds us, “Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence.” And, Henri Nouwen said, “The greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power but self-rejection.”

At one point, Fr. Joseph was invited to a monastery to hear confessions as a missionary. Again, the power of proclaiming God’s mercy was powerful to the monks gathered. In light of positive feedback to the abbot, Fr. Joseph was invited back to regularly hear confessions. And, it was precisely because of God’s limitless compassion and mercy that even monks need to be reminded of.

Holding on to our sins is not healthy on many levels. And, in light of this we priests sometimes hold on to our unworthiness of the mercy of God. However, by reaching out to the mercy of God we find freedom and experience a great gift...a gift we then want others to experience...God’s Mercy.” He went on to say, “We need others to bring us (priests) the healing gift we cannot give to ourselves.”

Pope Francis teaches us, “We are social beings, and forgiveness has a social implication; my sin wounds mankind, my brothers and sisters, and society as a whole. Confessing to a priest is a way of putting my life into the hands and heart of someone else, someone who in that moment acts in the name of Jesus.”

In conclusion, Fr. Joseph exhorted all of us present, “Be available to our brothers because for some of them our very title gives them hope and courage.”

Thursday ~ January 23, 2020

Witnessing to the Gospel of Mercy ~ Matthew 25:31-46

“I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers and sisters, you did it to me?”

Reflection by Fr. Bruce Nieli, CSP

Fr. Bruce gave an impassioned plea to take this Gospel to heart. It is one thing to preach it, it is another thing to do something in response to it. He exhorted all of us missionaries on this final day to rise to the call of so many searching for hope and light in their lives. Whether it is at the border or in the womb, waiting to act is not an option. He also highlighted various individuals and the need to implore the Virgin of Guadalupe to intercede for us.

Quoting Servant of God and Paulist Founder, Father Isaac Thomas Hecker where he envisioned a “new awakening of the Spirit of Christianity in America.” With great passion, Fr. Bruce said he believed “we are on the eve of such a new *Great Awakening*, and that Catholic Americans in general and we Missionaries of Mercy in particular, have a unique opportunity to be its instruments.”

Quoting Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, the President described America as “conceived in liberty.” Also citing Emma Lazarus, in her famous poem placed at the base of the Statue of Liberty, “A New Colossus” proclaimed America as conceived in mercy: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free!”

He shared that the Corporal Works of Mercy, flowing from Our Lord Jesus’ sermon in Matthew 25:31-46, have been connected to the culture of our time through the consistent ethic of life passages in Saint John Paul II’s “The Church in America” and in Pope Francis’ “The Joy of the Gospel”—that life is sacred and inviolable from conception until natural death, from womb to tomb, and across borders. Closing a powerful and passionate presentation he invoked, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of America and Star of Evangelization, intercede that this ethic be inscribed in the soul of our nation!

Panelists

Mercy is Endless: Strategies that Restore Dignity by Fr. David Caron, OP

Fr. David gave a great PowerPoint presentation which was very pragmatic in its approach reflecting on the support of the Archdiocese of New Orleans and its support for the initiatives of *Mercy*. This presentation was a great because as Pope Francis reminds us, we have to think “outside the box.” Literally Fr. David literally opened a *Toolbox of Resources for the Jubilee of Mercy*. The Archbishop of New Orleans has encouraged Fr. David to continue his initiatives throughout the archdiocese beyond the jubilee year.

This *Toolbox* included: a Letter from the Archbishop • Mercy Prayer Card • list of the Corporal Works of Mercy • Information on GospelFest-*Mercy through Music* • Information on Divine Mercy Sunday • Sample Intercessions and Bulletin Inserts on Mercy • Mercy Bureau List of Speakers and Topics • Pilgrimage Sites • Outreach Opportunities and Mercy Resources for Priests and Deacons.

Interest peaked after seeing these resources and Fr. David sharing what the response has been thus far and how he has pursued continuing to provide these resources with the expanded mandate of Pope Francis for the Missionaries of Mercy. Obviously sharing these kinds of resources provided a great opportunity for dialogue among those in attendance.

Fr. David expanded on some of these resources which were very helpful in expanding our horizons in this ministry of forgiveness and mercy. Resources are provide for priests on how to be a better confessor, for all on how to make a better Confession and how to live as forgiven. He also expanded on very practical ways to do the Corporal Works of Mercy in the New Orleans area which of course could be very easily adapted to any other location. At the end of the presentation, Fr. David shared a couple of Catholic radio spots on *Minute of Mercy*. These were clear and beautiful exhortations of living mercy.

Everyone found this presentation very helpful as we all look for new ways of expanding our own minds and hearts in how to be more merciful in what we do as Missionaries of Mercy, priests and faithful.

Mercy and ICE Raids, Living Matthew 25:31-46 in Central Mississippi by Fr. Roberto Mena, ST

One thing was obvious from the very beginning of this presentation, and that is, Central Mississippi is blessed to have Fr. Roberto as a pastoral leader in three parishes. He portrayed the prophetic role to the challenging times of his flock, and the simplicity of God's mercy to those most in need and to those willing to listen.

All of us present heard about the largest ICE raid in the USA, however it is another thing to put a face of a brother priest at the center of it all. He shared with us, "On August 7 the largest immigrant raid in U.S. history targeted seven chicken processing plants in six small towns in central Mississippi. Early that morning 650 ICE agents arrested 681 Hispanic workers in plastic handcuffs, and transported them to a military hanger to be 'processed.' After a terrifying day, 300 workers, mainly women with small children at home, were released with electronic monitoring devices on their ankles. Most of the other workers were transported to immigration detention centers in isolated locations in central Louisiana, three to four hours away."

This heart wrenching witness to this horrific event left the room in silence. This experience was really about Fr. Roberto's "field hospital for the wounded." As head of this field hospital, Fr. Roberto engaged many who stepped forward from across the U.S. by providing emergency assistance and legal consultation. His gentle prophetic voice

advocated through the media and was sometimes met with confrontation among some of the owners of these processing plants. With most of those affected being from Guatemala and Fr. Roberto also being from Guatemala, he invited and coordinated a visit of Guatemalan Cardinal Alvaro Ramazinni who brought God's mercy and compassion and advocated with Fr. Roberto with government officials on behalf of those affected.

His ministry continues to be focused on pastoral care of those affected by this experience especially the families, many of them now divided. And, the children who are horribly affected are in need of healing and hope to lighten their being afraid.

In the end, Fr. Roberto's presentation left the room in silence as we witnessed one of our own who was so touched by this event yet filled with hope for those entrusted to his pastoral care as one whose message is mercy and compassion. His closing prayer focused on the Good Shepherd. A beautiful testimony as our final presentation.

The Lord never tires of forgiving: never! It is we who tire of asking his forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace not to tire of asking forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving.

Pope Francis