



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Bishops Commission of Relations with Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islanders Peoples

Like the old man in the opening story we need to face our personal challenges, and embrace the mercy of God while at once being merciful to others. In the merciful love we experience in this Godly encounter we have the opportunity to embrace those around us who perhaps are not coping or who are weighed down with the terrible disappointments of life.

The peoples of Australia's First Nations are famously resilient and in their own words they are survivors. Notwithstanding the vagaries of government policy or the faulty efforts at work to close the gap, or the dreadful prejudices evident in racist attitudes so notoriously on display even in the public forum in recent times, Aboriginal and Islander peoples so often live the name of mercy in their lives. Ever might it be so and ever might they seek solace in the compassionate warmth of God's embrace. In their prayers and in their loving communion may they continue to enrich the Church in Australia so that it will be "fully the Church that Jesus Christ wants her to be". As we celebrate this Aboriginal and Islander Sunday in 2016 so we might echo with one voice the thoughts in psalm 66: "Let The Earth Cry Out To God With Joy And Compassion For All".

References:

Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy* (Random House 1st Edition 2016)

Pope Francis, *Why He Leads The Way He Leads. Lessons from the First Jesuit Pope* (Loyola Press. A Jesuit Ministry 1st Edition 2013)

Pope Francis, *the Church of Mercy – A Vision of the Church* (Loyola Press. A Jesuit Ministry 1st Edition 2014)



WE NEED Mercy

Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander
Sunday 2016

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are respectfully advised that this publication may contain the words, voices, names, images and descriptions of people who have passed away.

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GOD HAS BEEN
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In the Kimberley, a couple of decades ago, lived an old man who, despite his small stature, stood tall among his fellow travellers. By the way he lived he demonstrated an almost infinite patience and boundless forgiveness for those commonly dismissed by many as 'down and out' or even 'no-hopers', 'basket-cases' or 'social misfits'. He was an alcoholic himself who for the last decade and a half of his life was 'dry'. He had grown up on a remote Catholic Mission and after leaving school had taken jobs all over the state as a Drover. This was a rough and tumble sort of life that compounded the many disappointments he experienced in a variety of relationships that weighed heavily upon him. He started a family of his own but by middle age his family life had been left in ruins as a result of his drinking

and his anti-social behaviour. His tendency towards violence was renowned throughout the region while the friends of his youth had long deserted him in the face of his boozing habits so that the scourge of great loneliness added to his troubles. But he found in AA a way to live with his Chemical dependency and the faith nurtured in his young years and in the family home on the Mission, sustained him in his efforts to remain 'dry'. He was an avid devotee of the rosary and the beads were seldom out of his hand and never out of his pocket. An enduring picture is him sitting on the concrete curb in a dusty northern town with his arm around one of the village drunks reassuring the "broken-down man" and supporting him in a merciful embrace that promised acceptance and forgiveness. In many ways the old man was an apostle of mercy and most certainly an Ambassador of Mercy as encouraged in the words of Francis, the Holy Father. Interestingly enough the favourite phrase uttered by the old man time and time again, almost as a mantra was; These words find a resonance in an address by Pope Francis to prisoners when he said: "Here stands before you a sinful man who has been forgiven by God."

The Year of Mercy proclaimed late last year by Pope Francis is a blessing for each of us to treasure because, to put it simply, it offers us new opportunities to see how we might live in right relationship with the Lord our God and with each other. The opening of the Holy Doors in Rome, and in so many other places throughout the world, was a symbolic



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action that marked the beginning of the Holy Year. To pass through the Holy Doors the Pope suggested is to "rediscover the deepness of the mercy of the Father who welcomes all and goes out personally to encounter each of them. It is He who seeks us! ...This will be a Year in which we grow ever more convinced of God's mercy".

The word "encounter" used so frequently by Francis demonstrates that the Mercy proclaimed in this Jubilee Year is not a one-way street. Our meeting with Christ Francis tells us is authentically an encounter. It is an exchange in which the outpouring of a generous love made present in Christ evokes in us a loving response, given freely and generously. The Pope further reminds us too that in our dealings with our brothers and sisters a genuine relationship is based on an encounter of persons. For instance, in meeting the poor we do not see the opportunity merely to practise charity but rather we are faced firstly with the gift of encountering the person and in that encounter a respectful love is engendered, the foundation of a rightful relationship.



Pope Francis tells us that humanity is deeply wounded and for this reason is in need of mercy, a mercy proclaimed by God and tenderly shared among people. People are wounded by a variety of factors – not only by social ills, by poverty, by social exclusion or by "one of the many slaveries of the third millennium". And further, he notes, "we add to the tragedy by considering our illness, our sins, to be incurable, things that cannot be healed or forgiven. We lack the actual concrete experience of mercy. The fragility of our era is this too: we don't believe that there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet. We need mercy."

The Church we belong to, Francis tells us, is a 'field hospital' which serves people in need of healing. However, it is each of us singularly and all of us collectively who are capable of being ministers to our brothers and sisters in need. And there-in lies the challenge.