



A Compassionate Response



Most Reverend J. Terry Steib, S.V.D.
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Memphis in Tennessee

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For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.¹

Brothers and Sisters:

What an exciting time to be Catholic! The visit of Pope Francis to our country has sparked flames of renewed faith and commitment across our land. For the first time in a long time, Catholicism has taken a place of pride, not only in the media but in the hearts of all Americans. Pope Francis laid the groundwork with a renewed vision of church and the gospel way of life. His words and his example challenge all of us to make that vision a reality in our life. The Jubilee Year of Mercy is the perfect invitation for every one of us to offer our heart to all people. In the decree inaugurating the Year of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis declared:

“The Church’s first truth is the love of Christ. The Church makes herself a servant of this love and mediates it to all people: a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of oneself. Consequently, wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.”²

Thus, we who live under the gentle yoke of the gospel are called to adopt the Father's stance of mercy as our own.

Undoubtedly, life in the twenty-first century presents new challenges in almost every arena, whether personal or within the wider margins of civic and church communities. In the spirit of the Year of Mercy and of the Holy Father's visit to our country this past September, I would like for us to reflect on a number of particular challenges that we now face.

Over the past half-century, our culture has gradually redefined and reconfigured marriage and family life before our eyes, so that what we find within our faith tradition no longer coincides with that of the culture in which we live. In light of all this, we want to affirm our faith in the tradition that has been handed on to us concerning marriage and family life; and standing squarely within that same faith tradition, we want to likewise affirm its clear and undeniable call that we respond in mercy to the struggles that many people face in this regard.

The Church gives thanks for the witness of faith demonstrated by many among us who, day-by-day, live out the vocation of matrimony. Their counter-cultural commitment to life-long fidelity and their openness to the gift of life serve as an example to all of us. The Holy Father has spoken eloquently of the need for the Christian community to encourage those families who struggle with economic hardships and the tensions of a throw-away culture that places no value on permanence.³

The Church will always remain committed to supporting those called to the vocation of matrimony and for the domestic churches they establish. Nonetheless, contemporary society no longer seems to share many of our values. For this reason,

questions concerning divorce and remarriage, and the legalization of same-sex unions, are uppermost in the minds of many—hence the challenge taken up in the recent Synod of Bishops on the topic of marriage and family life.

In his homily during the closing Mass of the synod, Pope Francis referred to the gospel story of Bartimaeus, saying:

Jesus' disciples are called to act like Jesus did with Bartimaeus, even today, especially today: to bring people into contact with the compassionate Mercy that saves. When humanity's cry, like Bartimaeus', becomes stronger still, there is no other response than to make Jesus' words our own and, above all, imitate his heart.⁴

I wonder how often we miss those opportunities to, "bring people into the compassionate Mercy that saves."⁵ Do we recognize those sacred moments when the Spirit is at work in an individual who is sincerely seeking God—an individual who may look to any one of us for support, for understanding, for accompaniment on the journey of faith? Do we, like Jesus with Bartimaeus, see their yearning and open the door to God's love and compassion; or are we more likely to point to the reasons we believe they do not yet measure up?

In the eyes of the townspeople, Bartimaeus didn't measure up. In fact, he was an embarrassment! Yet, Jesus saw through the externals and recognized a person in need, a person the Father was calling into his own embrace. To Bartimaeus, Jesus offered that embrace. How numerous are the opportunities given to us to imitate Jesus' heart!

This Gospel account is not just about Bartimaeus. It is about each one of us. There are folks like Bartimaeus everywhere, but often we would rather not see them or hear them or have to deal with them. We fear they will remind us of our own

vulnerability or of the flaws in our social system and in ourselves. The struggles of Bartimaeus are within each one of us, but we drown them out with a million distractions every day. How frightening it is to be reminded of that same desperation that lurks in us all!

Fear. It is most often the culprit that keeps us from a loving, compassionate response. Fear. It shows up when our natural tendency to reach out to someone is paralyzed by misunderstanding and misconception. Fear. It undermines our freedom to trust that God is at work in another human being, and to recognize that our first and overall response must be to love and respect the invitation of God to and in that person.

Pope Francis knows well how fear lurks in all of us, and how much we need each other precisely as the Church in order to live out the gospel command. In his address to the joint session of Congress last September, Pope Francis lifted up four Americans who went beyond their fears to become models of courage and compassion: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton.

The Holy Father's understanding of our current struggles shines forth, as well in his attentive and discerning leadership, during the recent synod and in calling us to the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Imagine that—a Year of Mercy! What better time to cast aside the fear that paralyzes us and risk embracing an open heart and a compassionate response to the serious challenges facing us in marriage and family life.

As we await the Holy Father's summary and response to the synod, we look forward to much guidance. Indications seem to point to the Church adopting a new approach which affirms the teaching about marriage and family that has been handed on to us

from the ages, but with a more compassionate approach. An example of this new approach would be the substantial revisions already made to the annulment process, revisions that make the process more responsive to the genuine circumstances of persons in the world today.

But divorce and remarriage are by no means the only issue. The Supreme Court's June 26, 2015, ruling on same-sex unions raises many questions. To be sure, in the face of this ruling, the Catholic Church continues to uphold the vocation of matrimony as a free and loving union of one man and one woman in a relationship of permanence and fidelity that is open to children.

At the same time, we, the Church, uphold an ongoing commitment to the dignity of all persons, including those with same-sex orientation. Referring to persons with same-sex orientation, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that, "They must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided."⁶

Our challenge, our responsibility and our privilege in every life circumstance is to cultivate the oasis of mercy to which Pope Francis has called us. Whether we are at home, in a classroom, at work, at the ball field, in the grocery store or in church; and especially when we encounter those who find themselves on the margins of society such as the poor, the homeless, refugees and immigrants, the unemployed, those in nursing facilities, and hospice care—wherever the suffering Christ is incarnate in our midst today, we are charged with creating and expanding an oasis of mercy.

In his address marking the 50th anniversary of the synodal process,⁷ Pope Francis challenged everyone in the Church to embrace a pastoral stance of "walking together—laity, pastors, and the bishop of Rome," which the pope said is, "an easy concept to express in words, but is not so easy to put into practice."⁸ The pope went

on to explain how the synodal process coincides with and expresses the heart of the Church's call to be both mother and teacher. Clearly not a top-down movement; rather, "... it is like an upside down pyramid with the top on the bottom, which is why the ordained are called 'ministers'—they serve the others."⁹

The pope extended this line of thinking to speak about the diocesan church, pointing to the bishop as "the vicar of the Jesus who, at the Last Supper, knelt to wash the feet of the apostles." The pope exhorted all never to forget that in such a servant church, "the only authority is the authority of service; the only power is the power of the cross."¹⁰

Rooted in this vision, Pope Francis pointed out that if the Church is to be a teaching church, it must also be equally and at the same time a learning church. "The '*sensus fidei*' (*sense of faith*) makes it impossible to rigidly separate the '*ecclesia docens*' (*teaching church*) and the '*ecclesia discens*' (*learning church*) because even the flock has a 'nose' for discerning the new paths that the Lord is opening up to the church."¹¹ Here the pope shines a light on the call of a pilgrim church to move forward into new territory, and with open eyes, to see a new horizon ahead. Such a mission, he insists, must be thoroughly collegial at all levels. This is essential in creating the oasis of mercy.

Sisters and brothers, how do we do this? How do we become a learning as well as a teaching church? We begin right where we are, wherever we live our lives—in the home, in the classroom, at work, in the parish, and in the wider civic community—we begin and we listen.

Perhaps the first virtue of listening is a profound humility, acknowledging that, for the time being, we "see in a mirror dimly,"¹² and that at the moment, "... we know only in part."¹³ Because of this, we set aside our fears, our prejudices, and our hard-

heartedness and ask God’s help as we learn to listen with an open mind and gentle heart to one another, especially to those who may not have been heard before.

If we turn once again to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we find that it affirms this call to be a humble, listening church as it explains the need for development and growth in both doctrine and pastoral practice. The Catechism states that, “...the understanding of both the realities and the words of the heritage of faith is able to grow in the life of the Church”¹⁴ This teaching about the development of doctrine, explains that while the fullness of divine revelation has been given to us in Christ, we must always seek to increase our understanding and expression of that revelation both in our words and in our deeds.¹⁵

We are an *ecclesia discens* (*learning church*) precisely because of this principle of the development of doctrine which trusts that the Holy Spirit is still at work in the Church leading us forward. Following from this we realize that an effective teaching and ministering church must be a humble, listening church—genuinely rooted in the tradition, yet attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This is exactly what the pope is doing, and he challenges all of us to do the same at every level of church life.

Thus, we seek to understand the tradition anew and express it in a way that mirrors the mind and heart of Christ. To do so, we wish to listen to and acknowledge some voices that may have been overlooked and include their perception as part of the larger *sensus fidei*. In this way, we honor the call of the Holy Father to walk together.¹⁶

Sisters and Brothers, as the year unfolds from one season to another, I am reminded of the spiritual seasons described in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Winter is not simply

about the cold; it is also a season that provides a threshold to the new life of spring. Likewise, I believe we are on the brink of a new season in our church:

- ❖ a season characterized by the visible, tangible love of God being central to all that we say and do;
- ❖ a season of authentic listening and dialogue which includes respect and awe for the work of God in others;
- ❖ a season for nurturing in ourselves a faith that makes room for compassionate response, no matter the situation;
- ❖ a season for wholehearted welcoming of all;
- ❖ a season for profound appreciation for the role of discernment—acknowledging that God can and does deal directly with individuals through their inner lives; and
- ❖ a season for respect for the informed conscience as the final arbiter in the life of individuals and their relationship with God and the world around them.¹⁷

A Year of Mercy! The invitation to God's mercy is extended to all. The first invitation is that each one of us will take this opportunity to rediscover Jesus at the center of every activity, every thought, and every word, on each and every day. Such personal transformation opens us to extending the invitation to God's mercy to all, regardless of culture, finances, social status, and religion, as well as marital status, and sexual orientation.¹⁸ It matters not whether one is liberal, conservative or independent in their political stance. Jesus opens His arms wide enough to include every single human being on this earth. In the words of Pope Francis, “**True defenders of doctrine are not those who uphold its letter, but its spirit; not ideas, but people; not formulas, but the free availability of God's love and forgiveness.**”¹⁹

As we venture into unknown territory, God invites us to new depths of holiness—a holiness measured by loving God with our whole heart and mind, and loving others as we love ourselves. In every encounter, let us take a moment for internal reflection, asking not “What am I going to say,” or “What am I going to do?” but, “Who am I about to encounter; and who am I going to be in this encounter?”

Sisters and Brothers, as Church, who are we going to be? Asking that question I cannot help but recall the words of our founding bishop, Carroll T. Dozier, in his homily at the birth of this local church:

As we look to the future, and we are future bound, to the months and years that lie before us, what kind of church shall we be? What kind of church do we want to be? One in union with the Vicar of Christ, one dispensing the grace of God to all, one anointing sorrow with sympathy, one of love and human kindness, a Good Samaritan on the banks of the Mississippi. Is this not what we, this new Diocese of Memphis wishes to be? By the grace of God, so shall it be!²⁰

Bishop Dozier spoke those words to us some forty-five years ago. They were remarkably prophetic, especially in light of the call of Pope Francis today. Looking out on the horizon of this Jubilee Year of Mercy, how will we live out his vision in this new era? It is a question that remains incumbent upon all of us to answer each and every day. The Spirit continues to draw us ever more deeply into the heart of God. We can do no less but respond with loving and generous hearts.

And so we end as we began, by reflecting on the words of St. Paul, “. . . *for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.*”²¹

It is, indeed, a challenging yet exciting time to be Catholic. May our prayer lead us to renewed trust in God's work among us—a deep trust that makes room in all of us for the work of the merciful, compassionate God we serve, “as the good Samaritan on the banks of the Mississippi,” and in the land between the two rivers—the Diocese of Memphis, the church of West Tennessee!

In the Divine Word,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Terry Steib S.V.D." with a cross symbol to the left of the name.

J. Terry Steib, S.V.D.
Bishop of Memphis

ENDNOTES

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12

² *Misericordiae Vultus*, #12

³ Pope Francis, General Audience, Saint Peter's Square, Wednesday, 29 April 2015
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150429_udienza-generale.html Accessed 1/22/2016 3:53 PM

⁴ Pope Francis, Homily at the Closing of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Vatican Basilica, 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 25 October 2015
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20151025_omelia-chiusura-sinodo-vescovi.html Accessed 1/22/2016 3:25 PM

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2358

⁷ The Synod of the Bishops provides both a structure and a process for the bishops of the church throughout the world to collaborate with the Pope, advising him in his ministry as shepherd and teacher. The structure was established by Pope Paul VI in 1965 after recommendations from several prominent prelates of the church, in particular Cardinal Silvio Oddi, Cardinal Alfrink and Patriarch Maximos IV. The Synod helps the Pope to be in touch with the concrete universality and catholicity of the church. Pope Francis himself explains the importance of the synod when he says: "Through the Synod Fathers, the bishop's act as authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses to the faith of the whole Church, which they need to discern carefully from the changing currents of public opinion." (Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Saturday, 17 October 2015

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html Accessed 1/21/2016 1:16 PM

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 1 Corinthians 13:12

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #94

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops

¹⁷ "Conscience is the most intimate center and sanctuary of a person in which he or she is alone with God whose voice echoes within them." *Gaudium et Spes* #16.; "People grasp and acknowledge the precepts of the divine law by means of their own consciences, which they are bound to follow faithfully in all their activity so as to come to God, their end. They must, therefore, not be forced to act against their conscience. Nor must they be prevented from acting according to it, especially in religious matters." *Dignitatis Humanae* #3; "In forming

their consciences the Christian faithful should give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ, the teacher of truth.”

Dignitatis Humanae #14

¹⁸ To those with same sex orientation, Pope Francis said this in a 2013 interview: “In Buenos Aires I used to receive letters from homosexual persons who are 'socially wounded' because they tell me that they feel like the church has always condemned them. But the church does not want this. During the return flight from Rio de Janeiro I said that if a homosexual person is of good will and is in search of God, I am no one to judge. By saying this, I said what the catechism says. Religion has the right to express its opinion in the service of the people, but God in creation has set us free: it is not possible to interfere spiritually in the life of a person.” And later in the interview, Pope Francis went on to say, “A person once asked me in a provocative manner if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: ‘Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?’ We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. It is necessary to accompany them with mercy. When that happens, the Holy Spirit inspires the priest to say the right thing.” Spadaro, Antonio, “*A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis*” America, September 2013, 24-26

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Homily at the Closing of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

²⁰ Dozier, Carrol, T. Homily preached for the Mass of Establishing the Diocese of Memphis, January 6, 1971, Memphis, TN

²¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12