

The Bishop's Christmas Message 2015

To the Clergy and People of the Diocese of Lismore, and all who seek the truth in sincerity, peace, and love of God and neighbour:

*“Peace on earth, and MERCY mild;
God and sinners reconciled.”*

CHRISTMAS this year occurs against the backdrop of the JUBILEE OF MERCY which commenced on 8th December last. As Pope Francis himself has pointed out recently, Christmas is truly the feast of God's infinite MERCY, quoting the words of St Augustine:

“Could there have ever been a greater MERCY shown to us unhappy men than that which led the Creator of the heavens to come down among us, and the Creator of the earth to take on our mortal body? That same MERCY led the Lord of the world to take on the nature of a servant, so that, being Himself bread, He would suffer hunger; being Himself replete, He would suffer thirst; being Himself all power, He would suffer weakness; being Himself salvation, He would experience our woundedness; and being Himself life, He would die. All this He did to take away our hunger, alleviate our longing, strengthen our weakness, wipe out our sins and enkindle our charity.”

Looking at this vast scale of God's MERCY towards us, how could we not, even with the smallest faith, be moved to be grateful, grateful to be saved from a fate worse than death, because Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit, was born of the Virgin Mary in the wintry Bethlehem stable.

The Year of MERCY is offered to each of us as a time when the marvel of this stupendous and undeserved gift might sink in a little deeper, and motivate us to respond by becoming ourselves more and more a person who lives, shares and radiates the same MERCY all around.

During this Year there are various ways of being involved in its spirit and practices. The DOOR OF MERCY which will be solemnly opened at the Cathedral on 21st February, (the Tower Door on Dawson Street) will become a place of pilgrimage, for each according to his or her ability, for the whole Diocese during the Holy Year. Next, the “24 Hours for the Lord” will be organised in each parish on Friday 5th-Saturday 6th March. Availing ourselves of God's MERCY in the great Sacrament of Reconciliation is especially intended to be a central personal commitment.

Central also is meant to be the practice of the WORKS OF MERCY, which are, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2447) explains: “charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbour in his/her spiritual and bodily necessities.

“Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY consist especially in feeding

the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.”

For this Christmas I wish particularly to direct our thoughts and works of MERCY to the Christian communities of Syria and Iraq who are suffering so grievously at the present moment. Going back almost to the time of the Apostles, centuries before the appearance of Islam, they have lived in these ancient places that, after the Holy Land, are so much a part of the story of both the Old and the New Testaments.

Now they have been forced to abandon their homes under threat of death or conversion to Islam, see their ancient churches desecrated and destroyed, and huddle together in refugee camps. Tens of thousands have already fled, and have been welcomed to countries such as our own. There is for example a large community of Chaldean (Iraqi) Catholics in Australia, big enough to have their own bishop, a cathedral and parishes. Archbishop Amel Nona, their leader in Sydney, was among the 500,000 people forced to flee in June 2014 from the forces of ISIS.

I would like to commend to your Christmas charity the idea of directly helping to alleviate the terrible plight of the Christians of Syria and Iraq in their homelands. The international Catholic charity dependent on the Holy See, *Aid to the Church in Need* (ACN) is right on the ground in both of those countries and providing immediate and direct help. If you would like to be part of that help, visit the ACN website at www.aidtochurch.org where you can see the facts, watch a video on the plight of the Iraqi Christians and make an online donation. Or you can put it in an envelope addressed to ACN, PO Box 7246, Baulkham Hills, NSW 2153. (Regrettably, such donations are not tax-deductible).

Your prayers also are vital, in the words of Archbishop Nona, “Please pray for the safety of our people and that no one else will be murdered by the terrorists. And we must also pray for those who are persecuting us and for an end to the evil that seems so strong at this moment.”

Finally, I would like to direct again the attention of all to the document of Pope Francis in which last April he set up and explained the Jubilee of MERCY. It is called *Misericordiae Vultus* (“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's MERCY.”) It is published as a booklet by St Paul's Publications or can be found on the website of the Holy See at <http://w2.vatican.va/>

May the peace of Christ our new-born Saviour, and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, remain in your hearts and homes during this Holy Season and throughout the Jubilee of MERCY.

✠ Geoffrey Jarrett, Bishop of Lismore.

