

MISERICORDIA

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We Carmelites represent a living way of seeing Salvation History as “our story”, as well as God’s story, throughout the ages. Thinking about our role in an ever changing world I can see our presence, and our ability to be continuously reformed, entering a new place in time and within our church as Pope Francis guides us into this “Year of Mercy.”

As an order within the Church which claims no technical “earthly” founder, we have a history of living in and off the land of our labors. As Carmel entered on the European scene, and throughout

the years, Carmel has encouraged, lived into, and fostered reform in many ways. Carmel lives an Incarnational refining as the Church has new ages as well as new forms of our witnessing to the Good News of Jesus.

Entering the new year will mean our exposure to a further nuance of our vocation in Carmel, no matter which branch or order of Carmel we belong to. The Holy Father has instituted a “Jubilee of Mercy” for 2016.

Having just celebrated Teresa of Avila's

presence in Carmel for 500 years, preparing to celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy this year, and looking forward to our opportunities to be Christ to our brothers and sisters as they celebrate the beginning of the Reformation in 2017, we have a beautiful and much needed time to share the Incarnational Love of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit with *all* our neighbors. We must *be* the Love of Christ which urges us to share Him with *all* we meet.

This opportunity is a dynamic continuation of the process begun at Vatican II, continued through the reign of St. John Paul II, and being brought to a new and active direction as Pope Francis calls us into relationship with, and in, the Holy Face of Jesus.

The Pope's letter to all the Church is simply titled “Misericordiae Vultus”, or “The Face of Mercy”. Pope Francis spends much time in outlining what it means to gaze upon the Lord. He speaks to us of the Incarnational Christ when he notes “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy” and “Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth”. The Holy Father reminds all of us that “at times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives.” And again, “Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.”

We have a wonderful heritage of great Carmelites who have seen the beauty and the power in the Face of the Son of God. In reviewing our call to gaze upon the Face of Mercy, you may wish to reread the history and the amazing stories of the *Holy Mandylion*, *The Holy Face and Golden Arrow*, and *The Man of the Shroud of Turin*. In the devotion to the Holy Face, it is the Carmelites who have fostered greater understanding and devotion to gazing on the Face of Jesus as seeing not only Mercy, but love unfettered and complete. Part of our understanding of the Face of Mercy is the testimony of our St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face. It is she who spells out, in her own words: “Until my coming to Carmel, I had never fathomed the depths of the treasures hidden in the Holy Face...I learned to know these treasures...I desire that, like the Face of Jesus, my face be truly hidden...” (Ms A 71r Carmel of Lisieux).

St Thérèse entered into the understanding of the Holy Face, the Face of Mercy. She knew her life would be hidden in a convent in France, but her soul would be set free to be a missionary, to be a spiritual writer, even a Doctor of the Church, all while being the Face of Mercy around her. Whether it be another sister in the laundry purposely splashing Thérèse, or the sister that rattled her rosary beads to distraction, Thérèse looked at the Face of Mercy and love and let that love shine as a mirror to others around her and in her writings and prayers.

The very substance of the Year of Mercy is the radiating love of God shown through the death of the Son. Mercy is here and now, is available to all, and the Church is proclaiming it to all. Pope Francis wants all to share in the depths of Jesus' love for us. While acknowledging the place of justice, the Holy Father makes sure we all understand Mercy is the Face of God and extended to all sinners. The Holy Father urges all of us to be “merciful like the Father” that we may emulate the Shepherd seeking the one lost sheep, to be Jesus, to care, to rescue, to dialogue, to be the heart, hands and feet to everyone. To understand our commitment as part of Carmel is our daily task. Can we relate our purpose of prayer, service, and community into a vocation of being Mercy? As we approach another year, are we open in our lives to seeing the face of God, the face of Jesus, our own faces as we encounter the “other?” Again, Thérèse in brevity of purpose tells us, “Make me resemble you, Jesus!” (Pr 11 Carmel of Lisieux).

This Year of Mercy allows us to enter more into our combined ministry and action as active and contemplative, entering into the world, but not being overcome by it, and living our shared common humanity.

Completing our circle back to Vatican II to find our historic meaning, let me quote St. Pope John XXIII: “Now the bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up the arms of severity.”

Let this be our 'call to arms'; let us embrace mercy in the Face of Jesus; let us, as the people of the wadi, bring our gifts and hearts to this Year of Mercy in our prayers, in our community, and in our service. ☩