

The Wideness of God's Mercy

A Pastoral Letter Reflecting on Evangelization



By Mitchell T. Rozanski, Bishop of Springfield

Do you believe in a God who loves you? Do you believe in a God who forgives? Are you able to offer forgiveness to those who have hurt you? Are you able to ask forgiveness from them? Pope Francis has been teaching us, through his example, that God looks beyond our faults and failings and loves us just as we are. Can we trust in that love?

“You are merciful to all, O Lord, and despise nothing that you have made. You overlook people’s sins, to bring them to repentance, and you spare them, for you are the Lord our God” (Wisdom 11:24, 25, 27).

With the above Entrance Antiphon, the Church begins the holy season of Lent. This is a unique time in which we are all called, individually and collectively, to both “repent” and to call to mind our human frailty and our need to trust in the Lord’s love and mercy “and believe in the Gospel.” It’s a time to regroup ourselves in and share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Lent is a time for mercy and evangelization.

In announcing this Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis stated, “The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. The Spouse of Christ must pattern her behavior after the Son of God who went out to everyone without exception. In the present day, as the Church is charged with the task of the new evangelization, the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father” (Misericordiae Vultus, 12).

In order to truly “live and testify to mercy,” we as members of the Church must acknowledge both our need for God’s mercy as well as our call to be instruments of that mercy to others — to evangelize.



*“To you I express my regret
... and my hope that you will
find a parish community
where you feel welcomed
and happy ...”*

As the Diocese of Springfield, we must acknowledge this need for mercy, and ask forgiveness of God and each other for past sins and offenses. There are many people hurting in our Catholic community from the pain caused by our past failings as a diocese, as well as the grievous actions of some who ministered in our Church. The reality of that pain is that it still echoes many years later, as was given witness in our recent diocesan survey.

So, before I ask anything of you, let me as your bishop be the first to apologize and ask your forgiveness.

First and foremost, I apologize to the victims of clergy sexual abuse, their families and friends, and all those scandalized by the Church’s failure to protect our young people and for any lack of diligence in responding. As one person correctly stated in the survey, “There is no question that the damage to the Church that these scandalous actions caused will take a long time to overcome.” I agree, and in the spirit of

this Jubilee Year of Mercy, it is my hope that working together we can all continue to heal, most especially the victims themselves and their families, from this scourge. We must all continue to be vigilant in protecting our young people.

Some of the hurt, however, was not the result of human failure, rather the painful need to address the reality in which our Church must minister. Key among these was the very real hurt caused by the diocese’s pastoral planning process. Looking at the demographics of the Northeast in general and our diocese in particular, there is little doubt that a process was needed to examine how to combine our resources to best serve our people and the wider community. It is never easy to make a decision to close a parish or school, places where there is so much personal and community history, as well as spiritual traditions. I know that many people have “lost their spiritual home and in some cases, their faith,” as one person commented in the survey.

There is no doubt that even necessary decisions, carried out with the best of intentions, have caused some very real pain and have been the cause for some to distance themselves from our faith community.

To you I express my regret for the pain caused, as well as my hope that you have, or soon will find, a parish community



where you feel welcomed and happy, a place in which you can share your presence, gifts, and talents. Having visited so many parishes already, including many impacted by pastoral planning, I can assure you there is much new growth taking place within our community. Your presence would be most welcomed and a source of continued renewal.

Still there are others who have distanced themselves because they feel unwelcomed. The reasons here can vary, but key among them are race and cultural differences, a sense of gender inequality as well as sexual orientation.

Others have been treated unkindly, impatiently, or rudely by clergy, religious, ministers, and staff of parishes — all which is unacceptable. I ask your forgiveness. I make my own the words of Pope Francis, and say to you, “Believe me, in spite of its slowness, the infidelity, the mistakes, and the sins that may have and may still be committed by those who compose the Church, it has no other sense and aim if not to live and witness to Jesus: He has been sent by (the Father) ‘to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’” (“An open dialogue with non-believers” *La Repubblica*, 9/11/13).

This Jubilee Year of Mercy allows us an

opportunity to acknowledge our need as a diocese for forgiveness and healing from past sins and hurts, as well as to look forward to the future in hope.

That is what evangelization is all about, looking forward to the future with hope, sharing our hope which is the Good News of Jesus Christ with others, regardless the path of life they walk.

“Evangelizing,” as Blessed Pope Paul VI once said, “means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity ... both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18).

The Holy Father went on to explain, that “evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it addresses, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life” (EN, 63).

This fact came across clearly in our diocesan survey. As one person commented, “I believe there is a huge gap between what the priests are doing and what the people need.”

Others noted the need for “priests of the diocese to get out among the people ... where they are at” because

“people are not just going to walk into the churches and rectories.”

There is much truth to these honest reflections; our communities must be inviting and energetic environments, founded both in our traditions but also the reality of everyday life.

Such efforts are not just the responsibility of some of us but rather all of us: clergy, women and men religious, lay faithful ... we are all in this together; evangelization is, for each and every one of us, our call and responsibility as the baptized.

We need to evangelize those who are with us each week for Mass, that they, in turn, may be empowered to become evangelizers themselves.

We need to evangelize those who were once, but are no longer with us: We need you, we need your presence, your gifts and your talents. We need you to complete our community, to enrich it, to make it better and more effective. I would ask you to join with us as a diocese in rediscovering your spiritual roots. While acknowledging disagreements or negative experiences, perhaps we can also reflect on what it was about the Catholic faith you may have loved, what may have brought you comfort and peace, and what you are missing through your absence.

We need to evangelize those who have yet to hear the Good News or who are

unfamiliar with the Catholic Church. We must reach out to them and share our joy, encouraging them to seek a personal relationship with God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — as well as a relationship with a faith community with members who desire to walk with them in mutual support.

“Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? Why or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one” (EN, 21).

This effort cannot be a one-time effort. As a person commented in our survey

Prayer of Evangelizers

*God of life and love,
pour forth Your Spirit
to inspire me with Your
words of compassion,
forgiveness and love.
Stir in me a desire to renew
my faith and deepen my
relationship with
Jesus, Your son.
Open my heart to hear
and live your Gospel message.
Strengthen me to be
a sharer of the Good News
in words and witness
proclaiming your all-inclusive
love, mercy, and grace
in all that I do. Amen.*

that, “the problem with these outreach programs is, you tease people back into the fold with ‘renewal’ promises and eventually people discover nothing has changed.”

Evangelization is not just another program; this is not just our focus for the moment. As we are told at the end of the Gospel of Matthew before the Ascension: “The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. Then Jesus approached and said to them, ‘All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and

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make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt. 28: 16, 18-20).

As we see that evangelization is the mission of the Church from its beginning until the time when Jesus comes again. It must be the mission and focus of the Church of Springfield going forward. In order to do that, and do that well, we must be open to self-examination and change; business as usual will no longer work or be acceptable.

I would ask each parish, as part of their evangelization efforts, to study and examine the needs of their people and local community to determine how they can provide for them. The diocesan survey gave us some areas to focus on:

- “People need to feel involved. It has to be more than just repeating the Mass ritual week after week. You need to feel a connection to God and the parish. You need to feel that it’s important to be there, that someone notices when you aren’t.”
- “I want to come back, but have never been confirmed, nor do I know how to come back, it’s been so long.”
- “Time became an issue. Working full time, raising children, all seemed to be too much to squeeze in religion.”
- “The gay community feels that they

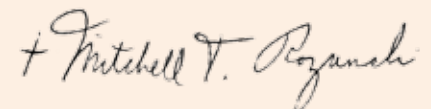
aren’t welcome. They don’t want to espouse another religion; therefore, they don’t attend church at all. Hopefully, a special outreach could be done to them.”

- “In many families due to the economy both parents are working and often working more than one job. This leaves little time and energy for parish activities; many athletic activities which are not parish-sponsored are now scheduled for Sunday mornings. These are some of the problems families are facing today.”
- “What is the Church doing to help those stuck in a cycle of poverty or addiction?”
- “I would go to church more if there were more ways to be involved.”
- “At least half the Church is women. When is the Church going to accept us as equals and value our opinion? They don’t even ask our opinion nor do they seem to want it.”
- “Childcare during Mass and parish activities.”
- “We need to do more social outreach and have more ecumenical opportunities to focus on our similarities and not our differences. Get people of different faiths acting together for the same goals.”
- “Try connecting more than correcting.”

Understandably this is a daunting task, but one we must challenge ourselves to undertake. We must make our parish communities places where people want to worship, meet Jesus, and form community. We must put the love of God foremost in all our efforts. We must walk beyond our parish boundaries, without fear, to demonstrate the faith we celebrate in liturgy takes form in the reality of the world around us.

Let us together engage in our world, empowered by God’s mercy and love.

Sincerely in Christ,



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