

What I Learned from the Jubilee Year of Mercy

Pope Francis' Jubilee Year of Mercy, which started on December 8, 2015, is drawing to a close on November 20, 2016.

In convoking this Extraordinary Jubilee, the pope wanted to direct our attention “on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s actions in our lives . . . a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective.”

Well, a year later, I have to ask myself what have I done during the Year of Mercy? Will it have come and gone like another New Year’s resolution gone bad? Or has it really changed by life for the better?

To answer that question I come back to Moses and the Burning Bush.

According to the Book of Exodus, God speaks to Moses through a burning bush on Mount Horeb. At the encounter, God appoints Moses to lead the Israelites out of captivity, out of Egypt and into Canaan.

“As Moses looked on he was surprised to see that the bush though on fire, was not consumed. So Moses decided: I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why this bush is not burned” (Exodus 3: 2-3).

The burning bush attracts Moses as something mysterious. It becomes the earthly symbol of the Mystery of God.

I love what happens next!

“When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’”

Paying attention. Notice it’s only when Moses does a double take and pays attention that only then does God speak to Moses. Maybe the burning bush was always there. But Moses failed to notice.

God always speaks. My problem is that I tend to do most of the talking and oftentimes fail to pay attention to what God is saying. I busy my life and miss the burning bush opportunities when God so wishes to speak to me.

Back to the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

I so need mercy in my life.

And when I was really trying hard to listen to the voice of God, I was blessed with not one, not two, but three graced moments of mercy in the same week! Talk about paying attention to the burning bush.

One. I had met some new friends and we were trying for months to get together for a meal. They were born in Ukraine but had lived in Canada for years. I was curious about their story. Finally, I ran into them unexpectedly and asked them if they were free for supper the next evening. They surprised me by asking if I was free right now; get in the car, we’re going out for supper! And so we did. Over supper, I learned that both were of Jewish heritage and had escaped the Holocaust, eventually finding refuge in Canada. Both were very young when their families were killed by the Germans, and they feared that they would be next. Their stories were heart-wrenching.

I had never met Holocaust survivors up front and centre. I knew their tragic story from school and what I learned later as an adult, but I have never had the experience of listening first hand to the

horror that this then young teenage girl and boy endured. And yet where I expected to find lingering pain and unforgiveness, I heard only gratitude and love for life and freedom. Mercy in action. I can't explain it any other way.

Two. That same week, I had the pleasure to attend this year's Knights of Columbus Supreme Convention in Toronto. Canada hosted, a rare opportunity. I arrived in Toronto on the Monday and had arranged to have supper with one of my best friends, a bishop from the United States. When he didn't show, I called learned that he had experienced some last minute health issues and had to cancel (he's ok now!). I called another friend, but he was already out on the town with friends for supper. I called another friend; he had just flown in from Krakow and World Youth Day and was going to bed. I gave up (I only have two friends!) and went to the hotel restaurant. I sat next to a couple from Vietnam. They were wearing Knights of Columbus nametags and we struck up a conversation.

As we were enjoying our supper and talking, I had this uncanny feeling that I had met the wife before. Sure enough, she had spoken at the 2008 International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec City (Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, was also a speaker!). She spoke about her brother, Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, who died in 2002. (Rather coincidentally, I attended his funeral in Rome while at "Baby Bishop's School"). Under the communist government the Cardinal was imprisoned in a re-education camp for 13 years, nine in solitary confinement. His crime? He was a Catholic. In 2007, when Pope Benedict XVI began the beatification process for the Cardinal, he wrote:

"During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that [the Cardinal] could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope – to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude."

Mercy in action.

Three. At the same Knights of Columbus Convention, I ran into a friend, Father Brian Kolodiejchuk. Father Brian is a Ukrainian Catholic priest from Winnipeg. Where it gets interesting is that in 1997 he met Mother Teresa of Calcutta and was associated with her until her death in 1997. He became a member of the Missionaries of Charity Fathers and his claim to fame is that he served as postulator of the cause of canonization of Mother Teresa. At the canonization this past September, Father Brian stood next to Pope Francis during the ceremony and presented her cause to the Holy Father who declared her to be Saint Teresa.

Over a meal, Father Brian and I spoke about Pope Francis' desire to canonize Mother Teresa during the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Father Brian sees this as fitting, since Saint Teresa is seen both inside and outside the Church as an icon of God's mercy to those in need. Mercy in action.

Well, as you can see, I was blessed just in one week to have encountered three privileged moments of mercy. And that's only because, like Moses, I was paying attention. And how many more did I miss when I wasn't?

In any event, this has been for me a most beautiful Jubilee Year of Mercy. Thank you Pope Francis for your gift.

And you, how is God's mercy and compassion changing your life?

God bless!

Bishop David