

**In the Heartland
With Bishop Pates**

Open to God's Mercy

Pope Francis has come to be known as the pope of surprises who works for the God of surprises.

On April 11, 2015, on the Sunday of Divine Mercy, the Holy Father made the unexpected announcement that he was declaring a holy year to be titled "Jubilee of Mercy." This year will begin on Dec. 8 on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and close on the Feast of Christ the King, Nov. 20, 2016.

December 8 will mark the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, one of the most significant events in the 2000 year history of the Catholic Church. Pope John XXIII, who called the council, wanted to communicate the message of the Good News of Jesus to the contemporary world in a medium in which it could be truly understood. At the opening session of the council in 1961, he said: "Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity . . . The Catholic Church, as she holds high the torch of Catholic truth at this Ecumenical Council, wants to show herself a loving mother to all; patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness toward her separated children."

Pope Francis sees this vision accomplished in the Church's exercise of mercy. In so doing, she is revealing the face of Jesus to the world. In the papal letter introducing the Jubilee of Mercy in the first paragraph he boldly proclaims:

"Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. The Father, 'rich in mercy' (Eph 2:4), after having revealed his name to Moses as 'a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Ex34:6), has never ceased to show, in various ways throughout history, his divine

nature. In the ‘fullness of time’ (Gal 4:4), when everything had been arranged according to his plan of salvation, he sent his only Son into the world, born of the Virgin Mary, to reveal his love for us in a definitive way. Whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (cf. Jn 14:9). Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person [1] reveals the mercy of God.”

In the past, the highlight of the Holy Year was a pilgrimage to Rome and the visit to the four principal churches and the passage through designated Holy Doors through which the indulgence, the mercy, the profound love of God was experienced. A pilgrimage to Rome will continue to be a feature of this Holy Year but far more important to Pope Francis is for each person to realize God’s mercy in all its fullness in one’s natural habitat where God is forever present. What the Holy Father wants to convey is that God’s mercy is accessible to all no matter their current circumstances and where they live.

To highlight this emphasis on the local presence of God, the pope has asked that churches in each diocese be designated Holy Year churches to which the faithful can easily visit in pilgrimage and thus benefit from the rich blessings of this special time.

The churches designated as Holy Year Churches in the Diocese of Des Moines are:

Des Moines Region:	Cathedral of St. Ambrose
	Basilica of St. John
	Our Lady of the Americas
Council Bluffs Region:	St. Patrick, Council Bluffs
Adair Region:	St. Patrick, Bayard
Osceola Region:	
Portsmouth Region:	St. Joseph, Earling
Red Oak Region:	

On Dec. 6th the Holy Year doors will be sealed in each of the above designated churches and will be formally opened on Sunday, Dec. 13 in each location. Thereafter, pilgrimages will be organized to visit each of these churches. Pilgrims will walk through the Holy Year doors and

into the welcome arms of a merciful God. Following instructions and rendering with heartfelt sincerity the prescribed prayers and practices they will be blessed with a plenary indulgence communicating the abundant mercy of God in the total forgiveness of our sins.

In the course of the year, I encourage pilgrimages of families, of school children, of religious education children, of parish, pastoral and finance councils, of Knights of Columbus and all other organizations be made to these churches to highlight once again the central reality of our faith – God’s loving mercy which is always present, always accessible.

In the course of the year the Holy Father has encouraged other activities to make real this Mercy of God. Among these are:

- Reading and discussing the papal letter “The Face of Mercy” introducing the jubilee. The words contained therein are highly inspirational. I encourage our parishes to organize small faith sharing groups during the season of Lent beginning Feb. 10, 2016 and to meet weekly thereafter. The letter is divided into different sections with discussion questions. It is ideal for the weeks of Lent. The papal letter is available on the diocesan website at: <http://www.dmdiocese.org/jubilee.cfm>.
- “24 Hours for the Lord.” The Holy Father is urging that the sacrament of reconciliation, ever so rich in mercy, be available in each parish for 24 hours on a particular day in Lent. Obviously, this will require parishes and priests to work together in organizing such an initiative so that it can occur at each parish.
- Special emphasis during the Holy Year is to be placed on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. As each of us has been transformed by God’s mercy, we go forth to be agents of that mercy in the world so often cold and indifferent.
- Pope Francis emphasizes the accessibility of God’s indulgence right where one is at. Thus, the indulgences of the Holy Year will be available to prisoners, to those incapacitated or homebound, literally to all in whatever situation. They need simply follow the prayers and practices designated, which I will distribute through the diocese to be in touch with God’s mercy. Indeed, God’s mercy has no bounds.

I encourage each parish to conscientiously organize its participation in the Jubilee of Mercy in such a manner that the parish family be tangibly engaged in this outpouring of divine care. May the experience be so penetrating that it will necessarily spill over to the peripheries as we reach out to the poor, to the abandoned, to the discriminated, to the lonely, to those in mourning, to those caught in the web of evil, as God's love is experienced through our hands and hearts.