



Edmund Rice Christian Brothers North America

A Province of the Congregation of Christian Brothers

**Pastoral Letter
on
Beyond the Year of Mercy**

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February 21, 2017*

In November 2015, Pope Francis announced an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in the Universal Church. The *Year of Mercy* began on December 8, 2015 and concluded on November 20, 2016. In announcing this year, Pope Francis stated:

How much I desire that the year to come be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God.

This call to mercy by Pope Francis, which goes beyond the calendar year, is very much in keeping with our 2014 Nairobi Chapter Call:

To be in right relationship as Brothers with each other, with people made poor and with the whole Earth community, conscious that being Brother is our pathway to our being evangelized and transformed.

For more than two years now, the Congregation Leadership Team, the Province Leadership Team and the Province Life and Renewal Team have offered pamphlets, articles and guides to aid us in reflecting on the Nairobi Chapter Calls in light of our present day Congregational and Provincial realities. These documents have provided us with theological reflections focused on bringing us together as Brothers in community to share with one another our joys and sorrows, as well as our hopes and fears. It is only by being open and honest with one another in community that we are able to bring our best selves to those we encounter in our various ministries.

During the *Year of Mercy*, Pope Francis called us to:

Look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates.



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He reminded us that:

God comes to us in our weakness and that day after day, touched by God's compassion, we also can become compassionate towards others.

Edmund Rice lived a heart-centered spirituality that allowed him to be a compassionate presence to the poor and marginalized of his day. The *Year of Mercy* invited and still invites us to take a compassionate stance toward the poor and marginalized of our day wherever we may encounter them.

We, Brothers encounter the poor in many places: schools, outreach ministries, local neighborhoods, hospitals and care facilities, local parishes, retreat centers, and on immersion experiences and mission trips, to name but a few. Each time one of our Brothers reaches out to assist someone in need, he brings God's compassionate love to those encounters. This is what the *Year of Mercy* called us to do – to give witness to God's mercy and to be instruments of God's compassion.

Pope Francis goes on to say:

Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism.

In a recent letter I wrote for **NorAm: The Edmund Rice Christian Brothers North America Advocacy Newsletter**, I stated:

For the past few years the United States has given witness to the high profile killings of young black men at the hands of our police and law enforcement agents who have the very difficult job of protecting and ensuring the safety of all of our citizens. Parallel to these killings, but often much less publicized, are the almost daily killings of young black men on the streets of our cities across the country. Gun violence, gang activity and widespread drug use often play a role in these senseless killings. Economic disadvantages, educational shortfalls, blatant discrimination and racism are also leading factors that too often lead to violence. Frequently, the lack of justice in our criminal justice system and other inequalities, persist in our society and aid in perpetuating a seemingly never ending cycle of violence. Clearly, the present system is broken and undoubtedly biased against our black brothers and sisters.

In this letter, I encouraged our schools to:

Move beyond service and charity toward true advocacy by speaking out on matters of race and discrimination that can lead to systematic changes in our society and help to bring about a more just and equitable treatment of our black neighbors.

I concluded:

My friends, we have an opportunity here to be bridge builders and healers on an issue that is relevant to all of us. Let us make the most of it by acting as strong advocates for justice and equality.

Brothers, is this not what the Pope is asking of us when he asks that we “open our eyes and see the misery of the world?” Thus, as we move beyond the *Year of Mercy*, I encourage us to be attentive to this and other issues facing our society today.

One other such issue which I wish to expound upon is the ever-growing worldwide concern regarding refugees and immigrants. Our Nairobi Chapter document reminds us that:

The world is experiencing unprecedented human population growth with demands on food, housing, water and energy. There are inequities to people’s access to power, wealth and resources whereby the rich are getting richer and poor people are being made poorer. With increasing areas of unrest and military intervention, religious conflict and persecution, there is a surge in the number of people seeking asylum.

It goes on to state:

It is the agenda of the world that sets the mission direction of the Church and our Congregation. It is in deep listening to the groaning earth and her suffering people that the Church and Congregation experience God calling them to be agents of change, hope and transformation.

Many of the ministries of our Province are in areas where refugees and immigrants are in crisis. Several of our school and outreach ministries quietly attempt to serve these dislocated populations. Now more than ever, I urge our Brothers to play a leading role in our local communities by standing up for the rights of immigrants and those who have been displaced from their homes and their countries with nowhere else to turn. Let us advocate for the rights of immigrants and refugees in Congress and Parliament, lending a voice to those who cannot speak on their own behalf. The Nairobi Chapter Call “to engage in advocacy with the voiceless, the marginalized and all that are oppressed” challenges us to do no less. Let us speak up and speak out for those suffering from these injustices and let us heed the words of Pope Francis to be:

A poor Church with the poor – a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out in the streets.

And finally, during the *Year of Mercy*, Pope Francis called upon us to incorporate the spiritual works of mercy into our lives. He suggested that we offer forgiveness to those who have wronged us; that we comfort the grieving; that we pray for the dying; etc.

It seems to me that we need not look very far to find opportunities for forgiving, comforting and praying for others. We can begin in our own communities and with our own Brothers. What better gift can we give one another as we move beyond the *Year of Mercy* than to attend to each other as Christian Brothers committed to being the compassionate, merciful and loving witnesses of God’s love to which the vowed life calls us.