

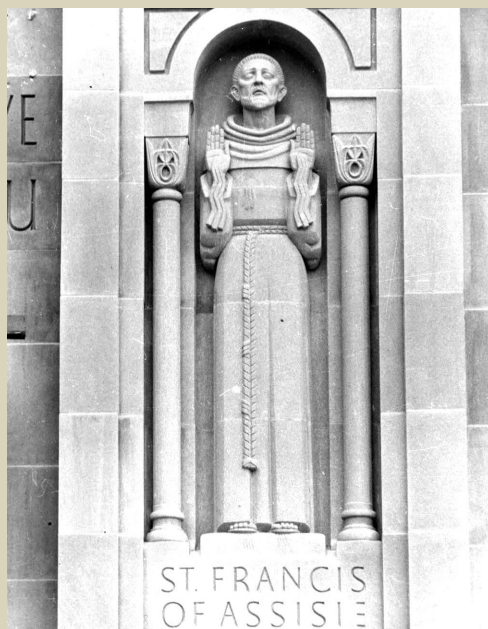
A Holy Year, A Holy Visit, A Holy Man

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On October 11, 1962, Pope (Saint) John XXIII solemnly opened the Ecumenical Vatican Council II. In his address to the bishops of the world, Pope John stated that the purpose of the council was not solely to defend and promote Church doctrine or even to “repeat at length” what was already handed on to us. The teaching of the Church was already known for its ability to oppose errors in every age, sometimes “with the utmost severity.” It was this next sentence however, that caused those present to take notice: “In the present day, the spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than the weapons of severity.” It was the connection between mercy and truth; a new style of proclamation and practice in the church that was “primarily pastoral in character.”

Pope John XXIII believed “Mercy” to be the most beautiful name and attribute of God. It was only after his death in 1963 that the depth of this life-long belief came to light. The spiritual diary of John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, contains several profound and inspiring reflections on this divine virtue. The following is one such entry written by a 18-year-old Angelo Roncalli (John XXIII) while in the seminary and on retreat during the Holy Year 1900. “Who can plumb the depths of [God’s] mercy? Let whosoever desires, exalt your other divine attributes ... but for my part, I will never cease to sing of your mercies” (cf Ps 89:1-2). This is followed by a litany of questions, “Is mercy ... not above all your other works? Are you not the Father of mercies? ... Was it not you who said you desired mercy not sacrifice? ... And I, I myself ... am I not a sign, a miracle of your mercy?” Continuing with a recitation of parables, including that of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, the reflection concludes, “May we all, gathering under the shadow of your adored Cross, praise your mercy for ever!”

Pope John XXIII and Vatican II were important in the spiritual formation of



Jorge Mario Bergoglio. To what extent was made clear after the conclave of 2005. During their post-conclave musings, a fellow cardinal asked Bergoglio what name he would have taken, had he been elected. Without hesitation, he replied: “I would have taken the name John, after *il papa buono* [the good pope], and I would have been totally inspired by him.” Eight years later, Cardinal Bergoglio became the first pope who was a *product of* rather than having been a *participant in* Vatican II. The name he chose however, was not John but Francis. Was there a change in “inspiration?” While the catalyst for the name “Francis” may have been the “Don’t forget the poor” comment of Cardinal Hummes of Brazil, his surprising and bold choice bears all the markings of someone still “totally inspired” by John XXIII. Like “the good pope” and the saint from Assisi, Bergoglio had spent his ministerial life among the people, a servant of all; he was a shepherd who “smelled of the sheep.” Like the convocation of Vatican II by John XXIII, the choice of the name “Francis” by Cardinal Bergoglio was a new wind that filled the sails of the Barque of Peter.

On the second anniversary of his pontificate (March 13, 2015), Pope Francis announced his

intention to convoke the first "extraordinary" jubilee in the third millennium. An extraordinary jubilee occurs outside the "ordinary" twenty-five year cycle and is proclaimed by the Holy Father to highlight special events in the life of the Church. The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, which will open on December 8, 2015 and close on November 20, 2016, commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of Vatican II. The Bull of Indiction or the official "explanation" of the Holy Year, *The Face of Mercy* (*Misericordiae vultus*), outlines the practical features of the jubilee and encapsulates the "essential" Pope Francis. Emphasizing the theme of "mercy" Pope Francis cites the remarks of Pope Paul VI in 1965, who pointed out how charity and mercy had been the "principal religious feature of this Council" and how "the old story of the Good Samaritan [had] been the model of the spirituality of the Council" (MV, §4, see also *Mary's Shrine*, Fall/Winter, 2014, "The Tiara of Pope Paul VI").

In mercy, love becomes authenticated; in mercy—not wrath—the Being of God is revealed; in mercy, the holy essence of God finds expression. Mercy, the Holy Face of God, is the essence and spirit of this extraordinary jubilee and the foundation stone of the papacy of Francis.



A Holy Visit

The defining image of the west portico of the National Shrine is the Parable of the Good Samaritan, rendered in mosaic (Francis Scott Bradford, 1959). It is flanked by two tympana depicting the Sisters of Charity tending the wounded in field hospitals during the Civil War and chaplains

dispensing the sacraments to the wounded soldiers of WWII. From the saints who stand watch—including Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul, and Don Bosco—to the remaining two mosaics of Damian on Molokai and the Little Sisters of the Poor, the ministry of the Church is mercy or as Pope Francis

said, "taking responsibility for the people, accompanying them, and showing mercy like the Good Samaritan who washes, cleans, and raises up his neighbor. It is pure Gospel." In an interview six months after the inauguration of his Petrine ministry, Pope Francis used the metaphor of the Church as a "Lazaretto" or battlefield hospital, a channel of mercy and healing. This metaphor is from the epic Italian novel, *The Betrothed* (Manzoni, 1827), which his grandmother read to him as a young boy and which has been a part of his personal library. The Holy Father has committed portions of this novel to memory.

The west façade of the National Shrine looks out over two historical sites where mercy and charity were practiced and "proclaimed": the land where the Harewood field hospital once stood during the Civil War (1861-1865), and the cottage at the National Soldiers Home where President Abraham Lincoln penned his final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863). The location, view, and theme of the west façade was planned. Its harmony with this papacy is Providential.

A little more than a quarter of a century before the birth of Jorge Mario Bergoglio (December 17, 1936), Bishop Thomas J. Shahan penned his dream of a great church for America; a church that would reflect a story of faith and





the people who held that faith. People, who, like Mary, confidently submitted to the mercy of God, remembering it “is on those who fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50, NRSV). This national votive church became a visual curriculum, a course of study in salvation history, ecclesiology, and Mariology. In its art and architecture alone, it is a wonder. Yet, it is in the sacraments here celebrated and the devotions prayed in a wealth of languages that this “hymn in stone” takes on flesh. As Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians (12:12): though many parts, we are one body.

A Holy Visit

On September 23, 2015, Pope Francis will be the third reigning pontiff to visit the National



Shrine. At that time the Holy Father will declare and define Blessed Junípero Serra “to be among the saints with God” and worthy of veneration by the universal Church. This will be the first time that a canonization will be celebrated in the United States and at the National Shrine. This “first” will occur on the 95th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone, the “first stone” of this national church, by James Cardinal Gibbons on September 23, 1920. In the Upper Sacristy where the Holy Father will vest for Mass, there is a stained glass window that includes Blessed Junípero Serra and James Cardinal Gibbons.

On the east porch, where the canonization will be celebrated, the center tympanum, *Christ the Teacher*, defines the theme of the east façade. It is surrounded by mosaic tympana (John de Rosen, 1959) that tell the story of the evangelization of this new world by men



like Blessed Junípero Serra: Servant of God Eusebius Kino, SJ, and Stephen Badin.

One could say that the papal visit to the National Shrine on its 95th anniversary, the canonization ceremony on the east porch just yards from a mosaic depicting the arrival of Junípero Serra at Monterey (June 3, 1770), the location of this church, its art and architecture, is nothing more than serendipity. One could say that the convergence of the life of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Vatican II, the pontificates of Saint John XXIII and Blessed Paul VI is simply coincidence. One could say that were it not for the whisperings of the Spirit and the God of History, whose mercy is known from generation to generation. ☪

