

## ***What Are We Doing and Why in this Holy Year of Mercy?***

Pope Francis called for a Holy Year of Mercy only last April, but its roots reach all the way back through Popes Benedict, Paul the Sixth, and John Paul II to the Second Vatican Council and Pope John the Twenty Third.

Less than three months after his election as pope in 1958, John XXIII gave notice of his intention to convene an Ecumenical Council. Recognizing that the Church in his day had grown very closed in on itself, and in many ways out of touch with the world of the mid-twentieth century, he wanted a Council *“to throw open the windows of the Church so that we can see out and the people can see in,”* and so be better able to present the gospel message more effectively to the modern world. Acknowledging that the Church has often spoken and acted far more harshly toward people than Jesus ever did, Pope John said that *Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than the arms of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations.*

Using the *medicine of mercy* and speaking to the *needs of the present day* were much on the minds of the world’s Bishops when Vatican II began in 1962, and they spoke of the Church’s duty to *read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel...and present that Good News in language intelligible to each generation.* Pope Paul the Sixth emphasized that the Church exists to make that Good News known in the world, to evangelize, and has the responsibility to do so as meaningfully and effectively as possible.

However, Pope John Paul II noted that we have not always done a very good job making the Gospel known to the modern world, because there are *entire groups of the baptized who have lost a living sense of the faith, for whom the practice of their faith is more a matter of habit and routine than personal conviction, and who even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel.* He spoke of the need for a *new evangelization* of a very specific group of people: fallen-away Christians. For most Catholics in the western world, we see the need for this type of a new evangelization all around us. Everyone – most painfully, parents - knows someone who was once baptized, but who no longer practices the faith. John Paul II wanted all Catholics to clearly recognize this problem and try to solve it. Pope Benedict continued the mission of the new evangelization in his ministry. In 2010 he established a special Vatican office for the New Evangelization, and in 2012, there was special meeting of the world’s Bishops to discuss the New Evangelization.

In his first teaching document, On the Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis also speaks of the Church’s need to be more effective in our work of evangelization, recognizing that there are many *baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism, who lack a meaningful relationship to the Church, and no longer experience the consolation born of faith. The Church tries to help them experience a conversion which will restore the joy of faith to their hearts and inspire a commitment to the Gospel.* In calling for the Year of Mercy, Francis, quotes Pope John’s words about the *medicine of mercy* as the best way to speak to – to evangelize – the people of today. He tells us directly what he is doing and why in holding this special year of grace where he says: *At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives. For this reason I have proclaimed an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy as a special time for the Church, a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective.*