



September 16, 2015

Feast of Saint Cornelius (Pope) and Saint Cyprian (Bishop)

**LOVE IS OUR MISSION:
BE MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER**

A Pastoral Letter to all the Faithful of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Manchester

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I write to you today, on the feast of the beloved and venerable martyrs St. Cornelius and St. Cyprian; beloved because of their steadfast call for mercy in the face of great opposition and venerable because of their holiness of life and death as pope (St. Cornelius) and bishop (St. Cyprian).

As we approach the beginning of the Holy Year of Mercy called for by His Holiness Pope Francis, I want to recall with you that there was a time in our Church's history when horrible and sometimes inhuman persecution threatened us as Christians. As an infant Church during the reign of Nero until the time of Constantine—a span of approximately two hundred and fifty years—anyone who was found to be Christian was liable to imprisonment, torture and death. Imagine how many generations of Christians in two hundred and fifty years knew nothing but fear, yet they still sought Baptism and the promises of Christ! In spite of what they knew could happen, still they believed in Christ and in these neighbors called Christians who followed the Shepherd of Mercy, Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead. The stories of these heroes of our Faith are many and inspiring; they are stories of a courage founded on love and faith in God's promise.

We must be realistic, however, and know that there were many people who, though they wanted to be Christian, just couldn't withstand the persecutions. When called upon to declare whether or not they were followers of "Jesus of Nazareth, called 'the Christ'" they said publicly that they were not. To mark their denial, they most often had to pay homage to Caesar as god and

offer incense in his name or make some such public declaration that they were not, in fact, Christian.

Some, as a result of this, left the Faith for good, but some (apparently a great number), if the persecution subsided for a time, wanted once again to be considered Christian. Known as “lapsi” in the language of the day, these “lapsed” Christians sought return and became the focus of serious contention in the Church.

Pope Cornelius appealed to Sacred Scripture and saw that the mercy of God favored the granting of forgiveness and re-admittance of these “lapsed” ones. In a fury, a bishop by the name of Novatian became so adamant that these people had forever lost their baptismal grace for denying Christ that he set himself up as pope in defiance of Pope St. Cornelius. Coming immediately to the true pope’s defense, Cyprian the Bishop of Carthage, seconded Pope Cornelius in his call for mercy. In his younger days a lawyer and now as a brilliant theologian and writer, Cyprian wrote compellingly for the reconciliation of those who sought return through penance.

In his *Treatise III* “On The Lapsed”, Cyprian faces the issue squarely. He is not timid as he recounts the seriousness of the sin of even simulating the giving up of the Faith. He contrasts the wounds of those tortured for their belief and the perceived wounds of the lapsed. He does this to help the healing process of the one who seeks return to communion in the Faith. He says that it does no good to gloss over that which will come back as a personal feeling of guilt at a later time. Instead, he demands of his priests the compassion of penance in guiding the penitent to wholeness, and he demands of the people of the community an embrace of peace in return for this true reconciliation, for none of us is without sin and all are in need of mercy.

St. Cornelius the pope and St. Cyprian the bishop are hailed and venerated in the Church to this day and their names are recited aloud at Mass whenever we pray Eucharistic Prayer I. The Church never forgets its history and is keenly aware that history always seems to repeat itself.

In these days our Holy Father Pope Francis is seeking out the lost sheep, the lapsed, the person who wants to come back, but needs to find the way. Pope Francis, not unlike Pope Cornelius, appeals to Sacred Scripture as he calls us to this ministry with him, “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.” The Holy Father recalls, I am sure, the difficulties faced by his very early predecessor, but I am sure, too, that he recalls St. Cyprian, the bishop who seconded the pope’s call.

The Holy Father’s calling of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, his attendance at the *World Meeting of Families* in Philadelphia, the coming *Synod on the Family* in Rome and the proclaiming of the *Holy Year of Mercy* are all very immediate signs of a healing ministry aimed at reconciliation of individuals and a whole Church as the Body of Christ in the world.

We, for our part, will share in the Holy Father’s work. Our diocese is sending a delegation of more than two hundred pilgrims to Philadelphia and over thirty pilgrims to Washington D.C. to attend both the *World Meeting of Families* and the Apostolic Visit of Pope Francis.

In meeting with representative priests of our diocese, we have agreed to continue the Holy Father's work long after he returns to Rome. As a diocese and as local parishes we will observe the Holy Year of Mercy in the following ways:

- I. A novena of preparation to begin on November 29 for the opening of the Holy Year on December 8 marked by special prayers and opportunities for Confession
- II. December 7 – Evening Prayer at the Cathedral in Manchester and at those churches designated as pilgrimage churches in our diocese
- III. December 8 – The solemn opening of the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica
- IV. December 8 – Evening Prayer in Cathedral and pilgrimage churches
- V. December 12/13 – Opening of Holy Doors in major Basilicas of Rome and throughout the world
- VI. December 12/13 – The solemn opening of the Holy Doors designated in our diocese
- VII. Conferences for Priests, Deacons and Consecrated Religious Men and Women
- VIII. Conferences for all our Laity
- IX. A diocesan-wide directive for the manner in which the Holy Season of Advent is to be celebrated this year
- X. Days of special fast and opportunities for Confession
- XI. The Chaplet of Divine Mercy is to be offered regularly in all parishes and institutions
- XII. Divine Mercy Sunday will receive special attention this year
- XIII. Three opportunities for Pilgrimages
 - i. Rome and Assisi
 - ii. The Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C.
 - iii. Five churches designated as places of pilgrimage with a Holy Door
- XIV. Enthronement of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in homes and Consecration of the Diocese of Manchester to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary
- XV. Re-introduction of the "Prayers after Mass" as we pray for the conversion of hearts and return to life in the midst of the many sorrows, persecutions, wars, addictions, tragedies that so often harden hearts rather than open them to God's mercy
- XVI. Continued purposeful work through collaboration with Catholic Charities and all Diocesan charitable endeavors to alleviate the sufferings and needs of the poor

My very dear people, the coming *Holy Year of Mercy* is an opportunity to return to the Lord in a most conscious way. If we observe the true spirit of this opportunity, then, not unlike the pardon that was won for all by St. Cornelius and St. Cyprian in the Third Century, the pardon that will be won for our own sins and the sins of others will live and be effective long beyond this Twenty-first Century. As the Body of Christ in the world wounded by sin but restored to life through Christ's Resurrection we have every grace and blessing as a people and as a diocese to accomplish great things for God.

St. Cyprian once wrote:

“God’s merciful design has warned us that the day of our own struggle, our own contest, is at hand. By that shared love which binds us closely together, we are doing all we can to exhort our congregation, to give ourselves unceasingly to fasting, vigils and prayers in common. These are the heavenly weapons which give us the strength to stand firm and endure; they are the spiritual defenses, the God-given armaments that protect us. Let us then remember one another, united in mind and heart. Let us pray without ceasing, you for us, we for you, by the love we share we shall thus relieve the strain of these great trials.”

*(as found in Office of Readings for
the Feast of Sts. Cornelius and Cyprian)*

In union with the Holy Father and with all of you, our very dear brothers and sisters, as we look forward to the great mission entrusted to us by our Holy Father Pope Francis, may I remain

Faithfully yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Peter A. Libasci
Bishop of Manchester