



A MESSAGE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ECCLESIASTICAL ASSISTANT  
March 2016

***At the meeting of the CICIAMS Executive Board held in February 2016, the Board agreed that the International Ecclesiastical Assistant should regularly write to CICIAMS members on spiritual, ethical, or other Church-related topics. This is the first of what I hope will be quarterly messages.***

#### THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY AND CICIAMS

Last December 8, Pope Francis opened the Holy Door and began the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. Perhaps this image of opening the door, as well as two other ideas that Pope Francis has used to describe this Jubilee Year – the idea of mercy itself and the Pope’s favorite image of the Church as field hospital – can help members of CICIAMS reflect on your roles as Catholic nurses, midwives, and other health care workers.

**Mercy.** In declaring the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis said, “We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity and peace. Our salvation depends on it.” Mercy should be an important word for members of CICIAMS. The Latin word that we translate as mercy is *misericordia*. It literally means “having a heart for those in misery.” Isn’t this an apt description of the vocation of the Catholic nurse or midwife? This idea of mercy used by Pope Francis should not be confused with pity. Mercy differs from pity in at least one essential aspect: Pity tends to separate us from the situation of the other; it places us above the other. The opposite is true with mercy. It move us toward the other as sister or brother in solidarity. This is especially important for the Catholic nurse – to be compassionate and merciful, healing not only the body but also the spirit.

There is no real limit to the mercy that we are called upon to show to others. Many of you know that I am a Franciscan priest. Eight hundred years before Pope Francis, St. Francis of Assisi explained to his followers his understanding of mercy. I think his words can illuminate how we in CICIAMS can show mercy during this Jubilee Year. Speaking about the attitude that his followers needed to witness, St. Francis wrote: “If you love the Lord God and me, his servant and yours, there should not be anyone in the world who has sinned, however much they may have possibly sinned, who after looking into your eyes, would go away without having received your mercy. And if they do not seek mercy, you should ask if they want mercy. And if they should sin thereafter a thousand times, love them more than me so that you may draw them back to the Lord.” This might be the

hardest aspect of that mercy Pope Francis (and St. Francis of Assisi) calls us to: Our showing mercy to others is not dependent upon any change of attitude in the other person. Rather it is an attitude in us that moves us toward the other person in love and compassion, even when they fail to respond.

**Field Hospital.** Two images shed further light on the Pope's understanding of mercy, those of the field hospital and opening the Holy Door. In an interview that Pope Francis gave in which he described his expectations for the Jubilee Year, he returned to the image he has used many times since his election as Pope – that of the Church as a field hospital. He explained: "A field hospital after battle comes to mind here: it is the truth, so many people are injured and destroyed. . . . I believe that this is a time for mercy." During his homily at the opening of the Holy Door, Pope Francis added: "This is the mission of the Church: the Church that heals, that cares. I sometimes describe the Church as a field hospital. True, there are many wounded, how many wounded! How many people who need their wounds to be healed! This is the mission of the Church: to heal the wounded hearts, to open doors, to free, to say that God is good, God forgives all, that God is our Father, God is tender, that God is always waiting for us."

As we reflect upon this image of the Church as field hospital and of our role as those who minister to others in this field hospital, it may help to see what Pope Francis said about mercy as a medicine: "Mercy is the first and truest medicine – medicine of which everyone is in urgent need. It flows continually and superabundantly from God, but we must also become capable of giving it to one another, so that each one can live in the fullness of his or her humanity." Are we convinced that one of the strongest medicines we can give to those we care for is this medicine of mercy?

**Opening Doors.** Perhaps more than at any time in recent memory, the opening of the Holy Door has taken on special meaning. Much of the ministry of Pope Francis, both in Rome and in Argentina, has been that of opening doors. In the homily that I quoted above, he asked Catholics "to heal the wounded hearts, *to open doors*, to free, to say that God is good, God forgives all, that God is our Father, God is tender, that God is always waiting for us." Can we, as members of CICIAMS, open doors that now seem closed? For some of us, that may mean working toward greater access to our health care institutions, especially for the poor. For others it may mean doing what we can to cut through bureaucratic red tape. For still others it might mean simply a more accepting attitude on our part towards those in our care.

This Jubilee Year of Mercy calls all of us who are part of CICIAMS to enter even more deeply into what it means to be a Catholic nurse, midwife, or other health care worker. It calls us to put into practice the beautiful words of the CICIAMS Prayer: "May your love shine forth in our lives. Let our minds, hearts, and hands always radiate that love in lessening pain and in bringing comfort, joy, peace, and healing wherever needed. . . . For the power, the mercy, the glory and joy are yours. Amen."

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