

FOUNDED ON MERCY

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No one who has ever pondered the parable of the Prodigal Son can doubt the foundation of all Christian life: the mercy of God. The image of the Father, staring longingly over the landscape, searching for just a peek of his profligate son's return, stands at the heart of all who experience the God of Jesus Christ. "Be merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful," resounds the voice of Jesus. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall see God," he states. "Do not judge and you will not be judged."

No church, then, can claim the legacy of Jesus Christ unless it acts with mercy at in its deepest heart. Every Christian must have forgiveness as part of its basic vocabulary. Every Christian church must make forgiveness part of its basic agenda.

What, after all, would be the alternative? Since every one of us sins, fails, makes mistakes, blunders, forgets and gives in to vices that we have long fought, every one of us needs forgiveness. Mercy is not just what I have to do for the other; mercy is what God does for all of us-because all of us need it!

The Catholic Church's ministry of mercy, which evolved almost a millennium ago into the outline of our present Sacrament of Reconciliation, received a lot of scrutiny after the Second Vatican Council. The Church made efforts to take confession "out of the box" and put it into a context of dialogue, healing, prayer and clear gestures of forgiveness. The long lines of Catholics waiting on Saturday afternoons, many preparing to confess the standard list of peccadillos, has given way to shorter lines of those seeking personal strength and conversion, and to larger celebrations of the whole parish where, as a community of faith, we confess our sinfulness and celebrate God's mercy.

Yet no celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation makes sense without a process of reconciliation. Confessors and theologians have long known that the work done before and after the sacrament is celebration is an indispensable part of the process of healing and forgiveness. Reconciliation needs a long-term perspective.

The Paulist Fathers, in their 140 year history, have made reconciliation a keystone of their ministry. The old form of the parish mission, which generations of Paulists preached through innumerable journeys in thousands of parishes for over a century, had the celebration of Reconciliation as its centerpiece. Column after column in old records of these parish missions lists the numbers of times Catholics came to confession. The mission, and the coming of the missionary preacher, was just such a larger context for celebrating God's reconciliation.

Today, with modern society's loosening of a sense of religious identity, Catholics find themselves with very profound needs for reconciliation. Not only have Catholics sinned; many

have also drifted away from the practice of their faith and find themselves feeling isolated, apart, unconnected, away. Reaching these Catholics, as every church leader acknowledges, involves more than celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It involves outreach with a broad and clear message of mercy.

"Landings," the brainchild of Fr. Jac Campbell, CSP, grew out of just such a perception of the unconnectedness and alienation of many Catholics. What would a ministry of mercy be like for these millions of Catholics who, for all practical purposes, have stopped practicing their faith for any number of reasons? In the Pacific Northwest, and later in the New England area, Fr. Campbell espoused a direct method of sharing mercy through small-group interaction using the proven methods of structured sessions, opportunities to share personal stories, occasions to share and witness to faith, personal and group prayer, and an invitation to reconciliation.

"Landings continues in the great Paulist tradition of reconciliation, of proclaiming a God of mercy

through a message so effective that people are able to experience restoration and new life. "Landings" is a singular tool which can be adapted by virtually any parish, with only some important and basic training, to begin to extend God's message of forgiveness effectively and personally.

The US bishops, in their plan and strategy for evangelization entitled *Go and Make Disciples*, speaks eloquently of the need for this mission. To the millions of their brothers and sisters who are separated from the Church for one or another reason, the bishops say, on behalf of all of us: "We want to let our inactive brothers and sisters know that they always have a place in the Church and that we are hurt by their absence - as they are. We want to show our regret for any misunderstandings or mistreatments. And we want to help them see that, however they feel about the Church, we want to talk with them, share with them and accept them as brothers and sisters."

These powerful words will mean little unless they are embodied, by dioceses, parishes and individual Catholics, in ministries of mercy. "Landings" is a compelling instance of just this embodiment of an invitation to mercy. Would that its vision could be at the heart of every parish!