While the priests formally commissioned by Pope Francis on Ash Wednesday as "missionaries of mercy" have specific responsibilities associated with the Jubilee of Mercy, their mission reminds us all of our responsibilities not only as confessors in the sacrament of penance but as ministers of Word and Sacrament and witnesses to the Gospel in our daily lives.

Consider these characteristics of the “missionaries of mercy” as described on the Jubilee of Mercy website. These people are to be:

• a living sign of the Father’s welcome to all those in search of his forgiveness;
• facilitators for all, with no one excluded, of a truly human encounter, a source of liberation, rich with responsibility for overcoming obstacles and taking up the new life of Baptism again;
• guided by the words, “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all”;
• inspiring preachers of mercy;
• heralds of the joy of forgiveness;
• welcoming, loving, and compassionate confessors, who are most especially attentive to the difficult situations of each person.

How are these characteristics reflected in our daily ministry?

Take a look at how often the word “all” appears in that list of characteristics. In a way, it’s easy to be a “living sign of the Father’s welcome” to one’s favorite category of penitent, whether that’s school children or adults who have been away from the church for five or ten years or more. But it’s harder to be patient and welcoming to other penitents—the “regulars” who confess the same sins week after week, scrupulous people who delight in detailing every aspect of what they perceive as sins, or those who listen carefully to an explanation of why what they’ve confessed is not, in fact, sinful, but then respond: “Well, I’d still like to confess it as God sees it.”

What would be involved in making sacramental reconciliation—and any sacramental celebration, for that matter—a “truly human encounter” and a “source of liberation”? One place to start, of course, is not to think too highly of ourselves. Using an image first described by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, spiritual writer Father Henri Nouwen (1932–1996) titled one of his most insightful books The Wounded Healer (1979). In this book, Nouwen proposed a theology of service that begins with the
realization of fundamental woundedness in human nature. Emphasizing the broken humanity common to both minister and believer, Nouwen suggested that, like Christ’s wounds, our own woundedness can serve as a source of strength and healing. It was his contention that ministers are called to recognize the sufferings of their time in their own hearts and make that recognition the starting point of their service. For Nouwen, ministers must be willing to go beyond their professional role and leave themselves open, like Christ, as fellow human beings with the same wounds and suffering and then, as he did, healing from their own wounds.

That heartfelt recognition that all of us are in need of mercy, all of us are recipients of divine mercy, should inspire our preaching and make us “heralds of the joy of forgiveness.” Some years ago, a faculty member at St. Mary’s Seminary and University in Baltimore spoke with some friends about his experience visiting parishes to listen to deacons preach. This was part of the evaluation required during their pastoral placement. He said that in these homilies he heard three kinds of preaching. Most of the time, it was what he called “watered-down seminary theology,” that is, something that you could almost reference with footnotes from class texts but “simplified” for a lay audience (that is, for a group that might include people with multiple doctorates or presidents of large companies or parents who have learned to care for a disabled child or who visit a child of theirs in prison). Sometimes, this faculty member said, he heard a monastic theology in the preaching—a style he considered authentic and one that sounds like the approach the missionaries of mercy are to adopt. In such homilies, one would hear that life is hard and we all fail and must, therefore, rely totally on divine mercy. The third kind of preaching he heard—and the rarest—revealed a theology arising from the experience of most members of the Church: the laity. In these homilies, the faculty member heard something like a variation on the monastic style of preaching. These homilies echo with the sound of backyard barbecues and children at play and having to get up early to go to work. In this context, one hears the “welcoming, loving, and compassionate” approach to which the missionaries are called, the sense that we’re all in this together and we’re all trying our best, but we all need help.

In the Preface for priestly ordination, the Church prays that God may bring the newly ordained priests “to lead your holy people in charity, to nourish them with your word and strengthen them with the Sacraments . . . to be conformed to the image of Christ himself and offer you a constant witness of faith and love.” In other words, the missionaries of mercy are us, writ large. May it be so.
By now you’ve received the brochure for the 2016 NPM Annual Convention (July 11–16) in Houston, Texas. Its focus on a multilingual and multiethnic Church will be of great benefit to priests and musicians in many parishes. In order to present this convention, NPM has reached out to other organizations (Southwest Liturgical Conference, Region X Unity Explosion) to enrich the offerings in this program. Take a careful look at all there is to offer, not only during the regular convention week but also in the Multicultural Intensive that begins on Thursday evening, July 14, and ends on Saturday afternoon, July 16.

The riches of the whole program include a focus on the parish and its leadership, especially pastors, and there are special parts of the week addressed especially to clergy participants. The Clergy Interest Section Meeting takes place on Monday afternoon; it gives clergy members an opportunity to express their needs to the Association and to propose ways to meet those needs as we move into the future.

Breakout sessions include workshops on the celebrant’s “art” (A-03); starting and leading a “youth” Liturgy (A-09); ministry of consolation (A-11); chants of The Roman Missal (A-14, B-13, C-13); the role of a parish Liturgy committee (B-03); Liturgy and community building (B-07); preaching in a multicultural/multilingual community (C-03, H-01); Hispanic priest in an Anglo parish or vice versa (D-03); working with youth (D-09); the importance of spirituality in celebrating Liturgy (D-12); unity in diverse parishes (E-03, I-03); sources and wellsprings of “Catholic” (E-05); clergy and music minister working together (F-03); Roman Catholic worship today (F-05); and Eucharistic
devotions (J-11).

Consider asking the priests in your diocese to contribute toward the participation of one or more seminarians in this year’s convention. The seminarian registration fee is just $100 by March 4 and $135 between March 5 and June 10. If you collect more than that, you can help the seminarian(s) with travel and housing.

Be in Houston to toast NPM’s forty years and to kick off the next forty!

**Clergy and Musician Duo Discount**

Clergy members and musicians who register for the convention together, and in advance, receive a deeper discounted rate. The one clergy member and one musician must be from the same parish or institution. NPM Parish Membership must be current. **Registration and payment for both clergy and musician must be included together in the same envelope** and be postmarked on or before the Early Bird or Advance registration deadline. (Sorry, this discount is not available online).

**Parish Group Discount**

NPM is pleased to offer discounts to member parishes that send five or more people from the parish as full convention attendees. This schedule outlines parish savings for the 2016 NPM Annual Convention based on the member advanced registration fee of $345.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendees</th>
<th>Discount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5–9</td>
<td>5% discount ($328 each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–19</td>
<td>10% discount ($311 each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>20% discount ($276 each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 or more</td>
<td>30% discount ($242 each)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stipulations**

1. Parish must have a current NPM membership.
2. Parish discount is limited to members of one parish—no grouping of parishes permitted.
3. A registration form with complete information filled out must be enclosed for each and every registrant.
4. No discount on youth, daily, or companion registrations.
5. Only one discount will be given per registrant (that is, the parish group discount cannot be combined with the chapter or clergy-musician duo discount).
6. All convention forms and fees must be mailed together in one envelope.
7. Registrations must be postmarked by May 27, 2016.
8. No additions can be made to the group’s registration once the registrations have been mailed to NPM.

Mail completed registration forms with payment before May 27 to: NPM Convention Parish Discount, PO Box 4207, Silver Spring, MD 20914-4207.