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“ET IN ARCADIA EGO.”

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Front cover artwork: Photograph of Statue of Pope Pius IX, Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome
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Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy

The Catholic Studies Program at Seton Hall University, in celebration of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, sponsored in 2016 its first essay contest open to all students in Catholic high schools in New Jersey.

Students were asked to write an essay sharing a real-life story of mercy that has inspired them to live out at least one of the virtues of Love, Charity, and Forgiveness each day. The more than 500 essays submitted were truly inspiring, each showing how its author’s particular story highlights the need for mercy in our world today. We are pleased to share with you the winning essays for the 2016 contest.

2016 Essay Contest Winners

Grand Prize: Mark McGuire
Saint Joseph High School

Second Prizes: Allyson Swartzberg
Mary Help of Christians Academy

                        Isabel Velarde
                        Mount Saint Mary Academy
Pope John Paul II: Emissary of Mercy

By: Mark McGuire – Saint Joseph High School

Mercy is an exemplary quality, one which, in this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, has been summoned to the forefront of reflective Christians’ minds. In this age of modernity, such a noble trait seems to be in ever short supply as the thirst for retributive justice continues to burgeon. There are figures who have defied this trend; however, and the best exemplification of this in the contemporary age is, in my opinion, Pope John Paul II, arguably the truest enfleshment of Christ’s love to have walked the earth in my lifetime.

Pope John Paul II is credited with many great achievements, including improving interreligious relations among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, as well as playing a pivotal role in liberating many European nations from Communist rule. Though such grandiose feats are indeed laudable, Pope John Paul II’s greatest moment of triumph stems not from events similar to these, which are considered momentous victories, but from a moment during his papacy widely considered one of the darkest instances in all of history. May 13, 1981: that was the day, the day Mehmet Ali Ağca opened fire on the pontiff in St. Peter Square, lodging four bullets into the Bishop of Rome and shaking the world to the core. This event of horror and panic laid the groundwork for what would come to be recognized as one of the most significant demonstrations of mercy ever recorded. This, what I consider to be one of the most daring examples of mercy ever to have transpired, occurred a short two years after the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II’s life, when the Vicar of Christ traveled to the prison where Ağca was incarcerated and conversed with his
would-be killer, forgiving Ağca for his wrongdoing and extending to the assassin an offer of peace and friendship. Here, in this moment, I can only sit and marvel in awe at the illustration of forgiveness that Pope John Paul II excogitated and performed with such humility and love.

Still today, Pope John Paul II’s message of mercy reverberates across the globe, eliciting a powerful response from both Christians and non-Christians alike. Personally, this profound instance of unadulterated mercy has inspired me to be more loving, charitable, and forgiving throughout my everyday life, due largely to the fact that this occurrence brought about in me a particular realization: that these three ideals are not three whole, separate entities but rather, a trinity of principles, working in collaboration with one another. For, so often we as humans accede to this preconceived notion that we can be charitable, loving, or forgiving, but not all at the same time. We love our friends and family, but we hold grudges. We give generously to the poor, but we do not embrace them with the same spirit of love as we do those closest to us. We forgive those who have done us harm, but we do not wish to associate with, or assist, such people. Pope John Paul II, however, shattered these notions by providing a powerful rebuke to this division and categorization of virtue, instead embodying and actively exercising his real, godly leadership in an effort to show how such virtues can regularly, and unfailingly, work in tandem to better the world.

Therefore, Pope John Paul II, through his Christ-like actions, facilitated a shift in the way I utilized the prism of my perception to view the virtues of love, charity, and forgiveness, enabling me to better myself and those around me through my steadfast application of an atti-
tude that promotes action, wherein, all virtues are employed. For, in this time of ever volatile global instability, where countries and peoples increasingly refuse to share their resources, to seek rapprochement with one another, and to allow our common humanity to unite us rather than to divide us, Pope John Paul II’s actions highlight the possibility of, and the need for, the exercising of genuine mercy in the modern, present-day world. In this way, the living organism that is the Roman Catholic Church, the Bride of Christ, can unite the people that comprise the very entity, so that the Church, rooted in love, charity, and forgiveness, can truly be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi, Piazza Navona, Rome
Mercy and Love Intertwined

By: Allyson Swartzberg – Mary Help of Christians

When most people hear the word “sick,” they experience many emotions, including sadness, sympathy, and compassion. Sometimes sickness even causes us to be patronizing. Because of my grandparents, those are emotions I no longer feel when I think about visiting the sick. My grandfather, Jim, was an amazing man, perhaps the best man I’ll ever meet. For as long as I can remember, my grandpa had Alzheimer’s disease. I’ve heard it said time and time again that when someone has Alzheimer’s, he becomes a different person. In my experience, the opposite is true. When I think of Alzheimer’s, I will always think of love, mercy, and compassion, and that’s all thanks to my grandma and grandpa.

My grandmother, Diva, cared for her husband at home as long as she could. When that was no longer possible and he moved to a nursing home, my grandma went to be with my grandpa every day. She never once complained that he had forgotten her, nor did she ever decide to stay home and let someone else take care of him simply because it was easier for her. She could just as easily have let the nurses care for him in her stead, but she wouldn’t dream of it. Diva would go and feed my grandpa, even if it took hours. I remember days that my mom would take me to see my grandfather at the nursing home, only to find my grandma leading my grandpa in a slow dance, just as he had once led her. She was never impatient with him, nor was she spending time with him out of pity or to give herself a sense of fulfilling her duties. My grandma went, not out of duty, but because she wanted to be with him. Up until my grandpa’s
death, Diva and Jim were the definition of “relationship goals.”

I may have been young when my grandfather passed, but when I think of love, Jim and Diva are the first people that come to mind. Love is selfless, it is entirely self-giving, and that is what my grandparents had. From the first time I watched my grandma care for my grandpa, I knew without a doubt what it meant to love someone completely. I learned that love isn’t jealous. It isn’t self-servining, nor is it a give and take. True love for others is a complete and total giving of oneself, without worry about what you may or may not receive in return. When you put someone else’s needs before your own, you free yourself from the pain of expectation.

My grandpa spent his life helping others, first as a helicopter pilot in the army and later as a working father of five and loving husband. Not once did my grandpa ask what he would get in return for his support and charity, and because of his selfless love, he was anything but alone at the time when he was most vulnerable. For the years that he was totally dependent on others because of his disease, he didn’t need to rely on paid caregivers to nurse him through the pain; everywhere he turned, there was another family member or friend waiting to help him. He never asked for anyone’s help, but because he had been so loving and selfless to others, he found himself surrounded by compassion, kindness, and tender care.

My grandparents have shown me what mercy really is: love for your neighbor. To show mercy to another is to love another, regardless of whether you’ve known the person for a day or a decade. When you truly love someone, you care not about what you might get, but rather
what you might have the chance to give. Jim and Diva showed me what I could only dream was real; they showed me that true love does exist. I know now that true love isn’t just something you see in the movies and that it can exist between more than just a “cute couple.” True love is the ability to know that you may get nothing in return, and still want to give all that you have to another, whether he be a stranger or someone you’ve known all your life. Mercy is love, and if we all show mercy, we can change the world.
Mercy for Overachievers

By: Isabel Velarde – Mount Saint Mary Academy

Saint Augustine unlocked the secret to true mercy when he said, “Since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special attention to those who, by accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you.” Saint Augustine’s timeless words shed light on an important issue that hinders the works of true mercy. People believe that the only way to change the world is through grandiose actions: sweeping policy changes, glorious revolutions, super-duper-mega organizations that are ready to tackle the next, most talked-about social issue. I myself used to be one of those people. This mindset can stop people from performing little acts of mercy that provide the foundation for great change, as mercy is in daily sacrifices and small acts of love, not just in big, showy proclamations.

For most of my life, I did not know the true meaning of mercy. I was passionate and hopeful that I could create a better world. The catch was that I wanted to do it all myself. Solve world hunger? Check. End domestic violence? You got it. Make the world environmentally sustainable? Of course! Then, as I got older the pressure to act began to mount because I was running out of time. Soon I would have to go to college and find a job, and I would have no time for my lofty aspirations. I had to get started, I had to move fast, and I had to get things done. Every day, my to-do list would list all of my plans. It would go something like this:

1. Figure out how to be a U.N. Ambassador.
2. Don’t forget to start your research on curing cancer!!!
3. Do all homework.
I never once managed to cross those “to-dos” off of my list. The fear that I would never accomplish my very “doable” plans piled on, and I began to lose sight of why I made all of those plans in the first place.

This realization struck me when one day I told my dad, casually, “I’d like to join the Peace Corps someday…what do you think?”

He responded, perplexed, “But honey, you’ve never even volunteered at a soup kitchen. It’s so close, you know.”

Clearly, the fight to make the world a better place had become more about myself than about actually making the world better. Even if I wanted to change the world, I wasn’t doing anything to change what was around me. I had been swamped with worry about myself, my plans, my time—not others’. I emerged from this swamp with a concise resolution to give more of something that all of us can afford to give: Love.

The world is like a bank. Love is our dollar. Right now, the supply of love is low and the demand is high, making even the smallest bit of love very, very valuable. I could give these priceless little bits to my family, even when I was feeling grumpy. I could listen more, judge less, serve more, and demand less. Changing the world was so simple and I had refused to see it because my pride was in the way. The world needs more of this silent, humble mercy. Now that’s a doable plan.
Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment

In 2018, the Catholic Studies Program essay contest invited students to reflect on the 2018 Synod of Bishops theme: Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment. The students in Catholic high in New Jersey who entered wrote essays answering the questions: How does or how should the Catholic Church listen to young people? What do young people really ask of the Catholic Church?

The following essays showcase the wisdom and insights of the young Catholics of New Jersey. Their faith and dedication give us reason for hope that the Church will persevere in sharing God’s message of love throughout the world.

2018 Essay Contest Winners

Grand Prize: Elizabeth Kilgore
Academy of Saint Elizabeth

Second Prizes: Andrew Bower
Immaculata High School

Leo Melancon
Immaculata High School
The Key to Becoming the Best Version of Oneself

By: Elizabeth Kilgore – Academy of Saint Elizabeth

It took six words to change the lives of each student in my eighth grade class: “Be the best version of yourself.” The phrase was introduced to us in religion class by the Catholic motivational speaker Matthew Kelly through his interactive program Decision Point, and we adopted it as the keynote of our final year in middle school. Three years later, it remains the bedrock of my faith and that of many of my former classmates. The words challenged us to reflect upon our lives and discern whether our daily choices truly manifested our faith. This call to unearth my best self brought me closer to the Catholic Church and revealed my vocational discernment, and I am fully confident that it can do the same for other young people.

To embrace the mission of the Catholic Church is to become the best version of oneself. When individuals open their hearts to God’s call, they undertake a way of life based on stewardship and give of themselves through service to others. In the Bible story of Jeremiah’s call, God appoints young Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations, but Jeremiah fears he is too young to fulfill God’s command. But no one is too young to spread the word of God through his words and deeds. Like Jeremiah, all youth must accept the vocation that God has intended for them, for no one is too young to answer the call to be the best version of himself. Adhering to the teachings of the Catholic Church reassures us that God will work through us if we are willing to answer his call.

It is important to distinguish the best version of oneself from perfection. An imperative aspect of one’s journey towards his best self is that it will inevitably be marked
with mistakes. Adolescence is the most opportune time to make mistakes and to learn from them. The Catholic Church must continue to emphasize that God is enormously forgiving of our missteps. It is only through the recognition of our mistakes and the reception of God’s absolution that we discover that we can do better. Perhaps the Bible never explicitly states “be the best version of yourself.” Yet it implicitly does so multifariously—the message is expressed in Saul’s conversion, in the Good Samaritan’s kindness, in the Prodigal Son’s repentance. Such stories give us hope that God’s goodness prevails over evil, and His grace infiltrates us even when we go astray.

The Catholic Church can give young people fuel for their spiritual fires. She provides tangible methods by which individuals can emulate the actions of Jesus so that each person may be a living reflection of God’s word. The Church is a vehicle for individuals to become the best versions of themselves, and young people ask the Church to guide them along that path. The Catholic Church must continue to call youth to action through its teachings. It must invite them to challenge themselves to change for the better so that they may pursue their best selves. As children of God, we are all made in His image, and the Church can help us to unveil that image. Once we do so, we become ambassadors for the Good News of the Lord.

Matthew Kelly’s words have given great clarity to my vocational discernment. They have guided me as a Catholic and have inspired me to become more attuned to my role as a disciple of Jesus. In my pursuit of the best version of myself, I have discovered Catholicism on a deep level. I have learned that even as a young person, I play a vital role in my Church community. All young people serve as
exemplary disciples of Christ—we are flawed individuals who are constantly discovering facets of the plans that God has for us. We serve to remind all members of the Church that so long as we are human, we will never stop learning about our faith. Only through God and the Catholic Church may we improve ourselves, and only through improving ourselves may we improve the world.

Student group outside Santuario di Santa Rosalia, Palermo region, Sicily
The Catholic Church in Schools

By: Andrew Bower – Immaculata High School

Young people today seem to be obsessed with living their own life and being independent. The stereotype is that the youth of today’s world have become increasingly self-centered, likely as a result of the ease with which they live—of course this is not a universal truth, but it is also not unfounded. This focus on self-service rather than the service of others distracts many young people from hearing God and finding their path.

How do you help young people hear your message? It’s a simple question. The obvious answer is to speak their language, the language of social media. There is no more effective way to get a young person’s attention than to post on Twitter or Snapchat or even Instagram @them. You can get your message out and it will reach their eyes and ears. There is still the issue, however, of those eyes and ears closed to something new and different that they might not like at first.

The degree of readiness of young people to communicate with the Church may be a larger problem; there are no easy answers. It’s very difficult to reach young people with a message so different from everything else they hear. It helps when their ears have been tuned to the right message from very early on in their lives. Catholic schools deliver the message early and often. Even in the age of constant remote and virtual connectivity, there is no better way to reach young people than immersing them in their faith and values every day.

It is that immersion in the core values of the Catholic Church that trains a child’s ear to hear the whispers of
God’s message. The call may come first in the First Friday Masses that students attend, and then perhaps later in their development as they learn to participate more in the Liturgy. The language of the bible becomes more familiar, despite it being so different from the language of our modern world. It would be easy to lose the message if one’s whole mind were not attuned to it.

Once young people have that focus on God and faith, it becomes easier, little by little, to hear the message and stay on the path as they make their way in the unforgiving world of today. The Church needs to hear those calling for guidance and support. Catholic schools are obligated to provide the foundation that youth cannot forget to build upon, and support young people with opportunities to follow their faith once they leave school. Too often, church ministries are dominated by older parishioners. Outside the high school youth group, there is little for a young person to do. There must be places for young people to gather with those of common values and beliefs. Young people are enthusiastic and dynamic, and they deserve the opportunity to begin their own ministries. The more they feel welcome to stay, the stronger the message becomes. It is said that if one can “build it and they will come.” If the Church builds a foundation for young people, they will listen, and they will come.
The Church:
Generous Supporter of Vocational Discernment

By: Leo Melancon – Immaculata High School

Throughout history, Catholics have been called to be disciples of Christ, and have faced different challenges in every age. I am fortunate to live in 21st-century America, where I enjoy religious freedom, and yet, there are many barriers to living my faith and following my vocation. As our society drifts further away from religion and towards more sinful practices, it is important for every young Catholic to rely on the support of the Church to resist the temptations of a secular society. Like many young Catholics, I know that my general vocation is to be a disciple of Christ, but I am still looking for my own specific vocation. As I discern my vocation, I am fortunate to have the support of many people who make up the Church, and I count on the Church’s commitment to listen to and shepherd her young people.

I never really understood the meaning of “vocation” until I started attending a Catholic high school. If I had been asked about it in CCD, I would have said it meant becoming a priest. Now I understand that it means living as an image of God in whatever I choose to devote my life to, whether that is as a priest, a husband, or a single person. Recently, as I have been trying to select a college and a major, I have been thinking about what talents I have, and how I can use them—not just to earn a living, but also to help others and live as God wants me to. I owe this deeper understanding of vocation to teachers at my school, priests and sisters in my parish, and my parents. All of them have helped me see that my life should have a purpose and be devoted to God.
As a young Catholic, I see every day that the Church listens to its young people and understands the situations they have to deal with. The people who make up our Church show us it is possible to live in modern society and still have integrity. For example, health teachers in Catholic schools provide the same facts about adolescence as do public school teachers, but they provide strategies for resisting temptation and peer pressure that are unique to my Catholic identity. Campus ministry offers students chances to help carry out the mission of the Church through projects, such as soup kitchens, that help those who are less fortunate. When you are taught by religious sisters in classrooms and at the parish, as I have been, you learn how joyous it can be to devote one’s life to God. In my parish, Father Tim Christie’s homilies always make me think deeply about Church doctrine, and I appreciate the way he urges everyone to do the right thing even if it is the hard thing or the unpopular thing. Finally, my parents support my religious education and formation through their own faith and weekly Mass attendance with me. All these people make me feel understood and supported as I consider how to live out my vocation.

Perhaps one of the things that made me feel most proud to be a young Catholic was being able to see and hear Pope Francis when he visited Philadelphia. He is a simple man of the people, who makes everyone feel loved and important in the Church. He tries to cut through all the old traditions of the papacy to focus on the needs of his flock. He doesn’t focus on doctrine as much as he does simply loving others. As a young person, that is where I want the Church’s focus to be: on service to others. I would also ask that the Church continue to support religious education in order to form the next generation of Christian leaders. I benefited greatly from at-
tending a Catholic high school, and I have chosen to attend a Catholic university because I cannot determine the path of my life without my faith being part of it. No doubt, in the future many young Catholics will keep asking the Church to relax its positions on abortion, premarital sex, and birth control, but I hope instead the Church will provide service opportunities and living examples to help us learn about the dignity of life and the sanctity of marriage.

I can’t imagine what it would be like to face the pressures of adolescence and the responsibilities of impending adulthood without support from the Catholic Church. My faith helps me live with purpose and integrity, knowing I have the support of so many people in my Church and school communities. Young people like me will help shape the future of the world. By nurturing its young Catholics, the Church can make sure that we are following in Christ’s footsteps.
Prayer in Verse

The following two poems were written by a Seton Hall alumnus. We invite you to read these poems reflectively, allowing their artistry to lift your mind and heart in prayer.
Lines Like Incense

*May my prayer be set before you like incense…*

- Psalm 141:2

*Smoke of incense with prayers of the holy ones Went up before God from the hand of the angel.*

- Revelation 8:4

Those walls of stone are a tomb to slow flow and motion, (Home to atoms of Adam’s sons, womb to a human hum) Will mute notes and tones but not smallest mote or atom Of prayer once afloat, for no moat or barrier can interfere With the praise we raise, blessings sing - sin only lessening Ascent - that charity-charioted carry with clarity to Heaven And who pays Him praise prays a hymn more-than-human.

* 

Clearer than water is the clarity of the washed-clean vessel, Purer than air are the prayers of the Heaven-hearted vassal, Though sounds thrown out through throat and mouth alone Are drawn down to drown with all sinners who in droning on Hope, through heathen hearts, to reach the heavenly throne, For only with inner groan can an organ pour forth a holy song. 

* 

Lord, spare me the Pharisee’s error of fair-seeming prayer For I see with terror I’m their heir...given to that disorder That’s the mere restoring of air to air, resorting to words In lieu of Truth...in no sense incense of saintly innocence. And fouler now than slime since I’m that sinner or fowler Who sets the nets, the lime, the snare to my own prayer, So asleep in Soul that each word is no more than a snore Borne by winged horse to old Horus or Thor of the Norse; Senseless incense to incensed or incestuous gods of stone Set on thrones, notes of no-love to whore Hera or her Jove Rather than Hours Spirit-spirited to our Father and His Son: No worthy chorus or hymn to Him who bore us and our sin.
All that pagan chorus sung the courses of the Sun - wondering
At that ever-going gong's far-flung wanderings, songs of lungs
To some idol sunken rather than to the One, our Father's Son,
Who hung in Human form and who men long and hunger for:
Cursed worm turned Word-who-cures; lamp, Lamb and balm;
One, crowd-crossed, who wore his own crown: so, I mine now;
One, a Son set on a throne for us, who won wondrous renown.

* 

Amid a midnight’s domain of calm in some solemn monastery
Whose own lower dome floats on columns of Gregorian song
Under night’s starry dome, home to God’s host (if only ghosts
To those who wholly oppose angels and the whole holy story),
Monks from under an hour’s slumber to worship and ministry
Stir, rising to a desiring of Heaven even as asylum from a slum,
Each psalm lifted in angelic palm to enter an eternal Jerusalem.

*Dome of Pantheon, Rome*
Our Lady of May

_May it be done to me according to your word_
_-Luke 1:38_

On this day, the first of May, may we honor Mother Mary
Especially, adoring more than _eros_ or a rose the Rosary
And those series of mysteries of Joy or Sorrow or Glory:
Our Lord's deeds and stories that we tell in words and beads
While Our Lady shows us how we're to be glad and be sad
As we pray in shapes and phases and in phrases Bible-based:
She we believe to be beloved above all, more than mere mortal,
Not born for anything ordinary, for God's own portal was Mary.

* 

Mary, our Eve's heir, we ever revere (even while we never err
And Worship or Adore her _merely a door_ with Son or Father),
Wary of growing weary of her prayer that so honors Our Savior
And makes worthier of His Mother all who savor her favor;
She whose showered womb is our ever-overflowing reservoir
For in her heart on Earth, Heaven's Sovereign was no foreigner:
She whose shed tears or stare turns tares into flowers even:
Eve whose heel levels hell into heaven-on-a-hill, a New Eden;
Whose suffering Son is an offering for every sin: the ransom
Of a Lamb purer than any random ram or son of Abraham,
Lamb whose shed blood became sacred balm for he is I AM.

* 

May we this day also praise Saint Joseph the Carpenter,
Partner of her who, by preservation, had nothing to repent,
Worker of wood who'd marry her who'd use Woman's womb
To mother, through Spirit, the Son who'd save us from the tomb.
Martyr Mary, sword-struck by words sworn by worn-out Simeon,
Is the sun same as at Fatima that day in May - who still comes
And from cold seasons of sin and loss summons men to blossom:
May all made in His image praise His maker and handmaiden,
Daughter of the Father, far-the-fairer for her love as Mother
Of One whose slaughter was from before our common father.
Mary, summit and summary of all souls who will submit
To the Will of One who had come, as Son, solely to remit
The sins the sum of men commit (all but the one woman
Preserved, by Grace, to serve our race), will still summon
As her own those who bear witness to the One she bore;
Those whose witness is the robe of whiteness they wear;
All those who love her, as Mother, with warmth so tender
As to render Nature’s sunniest summer another December,
For Grace’s Mother is a Saint while Nature’s is a whore.

May’s maiden, Woman mantled with the sun, *Mater Dolorosa*:
Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lord’s own Lady, Heaven’s haven
via *Ave*
And *Fiat*, whose fate by faith was to lead to the Avenue *Dolorosa*:
Reverse Eve, ever Virgin, thee of Fatima, the *Fiat*, and Rosaries:
Revelation’s Lady, God’s blood-relation: ever-receive our praise.
Your womb was once a dome covering over Love’s New Covenant,
(Love’s home that was host to the Ghost Who moves as doves do)
Now every blood-red bloom and sacred-blue bud is but a flower
For your own crown, our Queen of May, whose word was *Will*
That hour messenger Gabriel hailed you,

*Heaven’s blessed vessel,*

Saying the saving *Ave* Heaven sent to enflesh a New Testament.
Blessed Mother, pray for us!

Catedral de Monreale, Palermo region, Sicily