

## **GOD OF MERCY, PEOPLE OF MERCY: THE YEAR OF MERCY AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

**STEPHEN B. BEVANS\***

**ABSTRACT.** The paper offers a missionary interpretation of Mercy. Mercy is presented as a visible and effectively active aspect of the essence of God, who is love (1John 4:8, 16). It is an attribute of God Who created the world, the creation being God's first act of mission. Then Mercy is a reality in the history of Israel, where it takes a human face in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In Pope Francis's reflection, Jesus Christ is incarnate Mercy, or "the face of mercy". The great mercy of God does not stop with simply having mercy on us, but He takes us in the heart of Mercy and makes us a community of mercy. Christians, as mercy-bearing disciples, need to constantly discern where God's mercy is at work and beckons them to work in today's Australian context: showing mercy to migrants and refugees, showing mercy to victims and perpetrators, and showing mercy to God's creation.

**Keywords:** Mercy, mission, incarnate Mercy, community of mercy, disciples, migrants, refugees, victims, God's creation

*The quality of mercy is not strained;  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown:  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's*

---

\* SVD Professor of Mission and Culture, Catholic Theological Union. E-mail: sbevans@ctu.edu.

*When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, ...  
...consider this,  
That, in the course of justice, none of us  
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
The deeds of mercy.*<sup>1</sup>

Portia's well-known speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*—probably quoted a lot in this Year of Mercy—startled me when I read it once again as I searched for words in literature to speak to you about mercy in a Year of Mercy. I was startled, because I found in these beautiful, powerful words the entire outline of what I want to share in this presentation about Mercy and Mission. God's mercy, Shakespeare says, is an attribute of God as such. God is a God of Mercy, and human beings are most like God when they are merciful themselves, especially "seasoning" justice with mercy. Without God's mercy, if God dealt "with us according to our sins" (Ps 103:10), none of us would see salvation.

But God *is* a God of mercy, and opening up to God's mercy calls us to be People of Mercy. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams defines Mission as "finding out where the Spirit is at work and joining in."<sup>2</sup> Since God's Spirit is "the Finger of God's right hand divine,"<sup>3</sup> and so a Spirit of Mercy, we might paraphrase Rowan Williams's definition to say that "Mission is finding out where God's Mercy is at work, and joining in."

These opening reflections on Mercy and Mission suggest a way to organize these reflections that I would like to share with you today. A first part will meditate on our Triune God, a communion-in-mission, as a God of Mercy. Part II will reflect on how, as God's People, the church, we are called to be a People of Mercy, called to be a "Community of Missionary, Mercy-Bearing Disciples."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, "Fresh Expressions" website, <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/principles/transform>. Cited also in Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: Epworth Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Hymn "Veni Creator Spiritus." See the original Latin: "digitus paternae dexterae," at <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/VeniCreator.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), 24. Francis's phrase is "community of missionary disciples."

## **A God of Mercy: Community-in-Mission**

Mercy, wrote Shakespeare, “is an attribute to God himself.” Cardinal Walter Kasper, however, notes that God’s mercy needs to be understood even more fundamentally. It is, he says, “God’s Defining Attribute.”<sup>5</sup> Mercy, insists Kasper, cannot be regarded as a marginal, derivative quality of God. “Instead, mercy is the externally visible and effectively active aspect of the essence of God, who is love (1John 4:8, 16).

Equating God’s mercy with God’s love points to the fact that it is not a quality that generates a “Plan B” for a fallen humanity and a fallen world. No, according to its etymology—clearer in the Romance languages’ *misericordia* and the German *Baumherzigkeit*---mercy is at the very heart of God. Why “God never tires of forgiving us”<sup>6</sup> is because the overflowing heart of God in love and delight in what God is still in the process of creating, and God’s pain of creatures’ suffering. Mercy is at the very core of what it means to be God, the deepest motive for God’s mission of sending the Spirit at the first nanosecond of creation and sending the Son “in the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4). Shakespeare was right on target: “the quality of mercy is not strained.” It is simply who God is.

### ***Mercy from the First Moment of Creation***

During an Angelus message soon after he became pope, Pope Francis told of an old woman he had met in Buenos Aires who told him that without mercy the world would not exist. Francis, struck by the truth of this conviction, asked the woman if she had taught theology at the Gregorian in Rome!<sup>7</sup> Creation, God’s first act of mission, is the result of God’s overflowing, “unstrained” heart of mercy, which as St. Bonaventure expresses it, “is diffusive of itself.”<sup>8</sup>

Australian theologian Denis Edwards describes the act of creation as the gentle, caring, loving action of the Holy Spirit, coaxing and persuading the formation of gases and molecules, stars and planets, emerging life on earth, microbes, corals, barramundi, kangaroos, and human beings.<sup>9</sup> U.S. theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes of how the Spirit’s presence was active, and yet not

---

<sup>5</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), Kindle Edition, location 1617.

<sup>6</sup> EG 3.

<sup>7</sup> Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), Epilogue, location 7173.

<sup>8</sup> See Bonaventure, *The Mind’s Journey to God*, V, 1, quoted in Kasper, location 1704, note 18.

<sup>9</sup> Denis Edwards, *Breath of God: A Theology of Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 43-49.

the presence of a manipulating and all-determining monarch. It was the freeing, life-giving presence of a lover: "... the Spirit, more mobile than any motion, blows throughout the world with compassionate love that grants nature its own creativity and humans their own freedom, all the while companioning them through the terror of history toward a new future."<sup>10</sup> Creation is conceived in and executed in mercy. As Australian Anglican Bishop Stephen Pickard has expressed it, it is a "continual and infinitely patient act of love."<sup>11</sup> It is a mercy "mightiest in the mighty," as Shakespeare wrote. God's mercy, argued Thomas Aquinas, manifests God's omnipotence to the greatest degree.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Mercy in the History of Israel***

It is in the history of a relatively insignificant people, however (Dt 7:7), that God revealed Godself fully as a God of mercy. In Abraham, "all nations" would find a blessing" (Gen 12:2). In and through Israel God would show God's mercy—this was the oath that God swore "to Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants forever" (Lk 1:56; see Lk 1:78-79). When that people was oppressed by the Egyptians, God in God's mercy heard their cry and sent Moses to free them from slavery (see Ex 3:7). Even in the midst of betrayal by that people, God's purposes for them would not be deterred. As God gives the Law to Moses on Sinai—the great proof for Israel of God's *hesed* and *emeth*, God's mercy and love—God passes by Moses and cries out: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation" (Ex 33:6-7).

God's mercy and purpose for Israel is beautifully expressed, as British Anglican theologian Sam Wells highlights, in the eleventh chapter of the prophet Hosea.<sup>13</sup> Wells sees it in four parts, but let's just concentrate here on the first three. In a first part, God is reminiscing about God's love for Israel. "When Israel was a child, I loved him" (11:1); "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk" (11:3); "I took them up in my arms" (11:3); "I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks" (11:4). Wells writes: "You can feel God stroking Israel's soft skin and getting out the little spoon and trying to put some liquidized food in Israel's mouth as it sits in its high chair. What a tender scene."

---

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 159.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Pickard, "Wicked Problems: The Ecology of the Praise of God," Second Keynote Address at the Life of Abundance Conference, Australian Anglican Church, Melbourne, Australia, February 11, 2016, <http://www.abmission.org/resources.php?action=list-items&catId=23>.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, quoted in EG.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Wells, *Learning to Dream Again: Rediscovering the Heart of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013). The quotations in the following treatment are from pages 16-18.

But then the scene shifts to the present, and God laments Israel's unfaithfulness. "The more I called them, the more they went from me. ... My people are bent on turning away from me" (11:2, 7). And that unfaithfulness has and has had consequences: exile and slavery. "They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to turn to me" (11:5).

The third scene of Chapter 11, as Wells describes it, "is the most poignant one of all," because "we're given the awesome privilege of a window into the heart of God." Here we see "an all-night struggle between sober, realistic pragmatism; passionate, wild fury; and overwhelming, tender compassion"—mercy. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion (mercy!) grows warm and tender" (11:8). In Pope Francis's reflection on this passage, he ends by quoting St. Augustine: "It is easier for God to hold back anger than mercy."<sup>14</sup>

God cannot save Israel from the consequences of its sin and unfaithfulness, but God will be faithful. And so in the end, love and mercy win. God will continue to work in Israel's history. In the end, God promises a new covenant, one in which Israel's hearts of stone will be replaced by hearts of flesh, and God will place God's very Spirit within them (Ez 36:27).

One small verse in Psalm 49 might explain how, in Sam Wells's words again, "God's love is crazy, illogical, and a matter of pure grace"<sup>15</sup> The line is "God delights in God's people" (Ps 149:4). For some crazy reason, God loves Israel. As God said to Moses in Deuteronomy, it was not because they were more numerous than other peoples. It was simply because God loved them. There was simply something about this people that moved God's heart. In her amazing novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson describes her main character, the Reverend John Ames, reflecting on a passage in John Calvin "somewhere" that each person is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. Ames muses: "I do like Calvin's image ... it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think of that far too little."<sup>16</sup> God enjoys us, Ames muses, "not in any simple sense, of course, but as you enjoy the *being* of a child, even though he is in every way a thorn in your heart."<sup>17</sup> "Could a mother forget her child?... Behold, I have carved you on the palm of my hand" (Is 49:15, 16).

---

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Psalms*, 76, 11. Quoted in Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Wells, *Learning to Dream Again*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador—Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), 124.

<sup>17</sup> Robinson, *Gilead*, 125.

### *Incarnate Mercy*

“In the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4) the mercy lavished upon all creation in general but on Israel specifically takes on a human face in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is incarnate Mercy, or “the face of mercy,” as Pope Francis reflects in his message at the beginning of this year of mercy.<sup>18</sup> Jesus is “God’s body language,” in the beautiful expression of British Anglican theologian Mark Oakley.<sup>19</sup>

We see God’s mercy as Jesus performs so many healings and exorcisms in his brief ministry in Israel. We see it in Jesus’ healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46-52), who cries out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” And Jesus did. And Bartimaeus received his sight. We see mercy in Jesus’ healing of a leper. Mark’s version of the story (Mk 1:40-45) notes that when Jesus heard the leper’s plea for healing he was “moved with pity”—mercy—and reached out and touched him. It struck me one time while I was meditating on this passage what that touch might have been like. Most likely it wasn’t a tentative, fearful touch—eeew!—but a loving, generous, merciful touch. And the leper was healed.

Every once in a while we see mercy incarnate in Jesus’ attitudes and actions. In Mark’s sixth chapter, beginning with verse 30, we read how the apostles came back to Jesus after they had been on mission, proclaiming the Reign of God, casting out many demons, and curing many sick people. They were obviously excited, and were sharing with Jesus “all that they had done and taught” (30). Jesus responds by inviting them to come with him to a deserted place and rest a while. Jesus and the Twelve must have been tired—the text says that so many were “coming and going” that “they had no leisure even to eat” (31). As they left, however, many people in the crowd saw where they were going, and got to the place before them. No rest for the weary! As they came ashore Jesus “saw a great crowd,” and what does the text say? You would think he might say something like: “oh NO!” But we read: “he had compassion (mercy) for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (34). Jesus went on to teach them, and then, because it was getting late and they had nowhere to go to eat, he fed the whole crowd with the little that his disciples had with them. Incarnate mercy. The face of mercy. God’s body language.

Many of Jesus’s parables express God’s mercy, incarnations in word of the mercy of his Father. Perhaps Jesus’ most powerful and beautiful parables are the three that make up chapter 15 of Luke’s gospel: the story of the shepherd searching for and finding his lost sheep, the story of the woman searching for

---

<sup>18</sup>MV, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Oakley, *The Collage of God*, Second Edition (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012), 25, 27.

and finding her lost coin, and the story of the father waiting for—the text says that he saw him coming back in the distance (Lk 15:20)—and accepting his long lost, really unworthy son. In these parables we see the determination of God—incarnate in the good shepherd and the persistent woman—and God’s joy when that determination succeeds; we see as well the truth of Pope Francis’s often-repeated line that God never tires of forgiving us.<sup>20</sup> I find a marvelous parallel to Jesus’ parable of the loving father and wayward son in a lovely poem by the American poet Wendell Berry. It’s called “To My Mother,” and goes like this:

I was your rebellious son,  
do you remember? Sometimes  
I wonder if you do remember,  
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been  
I wonder sometimes if it did not  
precede my wrong, and I erred,  
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,  
or my bed at night, so that almost  
I should forgive you, who perhaps  
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,  
causing me to smile now, looking back,  
to see how paltry was my worst,  
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,  
is the vision of that Heaven of which  
we have heard, where those who love  
each other have forgiven each other,  
where, for that, the leaves are green,  
the light a music in the air,  
and all is unentangled,  
and all is undismayed.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> See EN 3.

<sup>21</sup> Wendell Berry, “To My Mother,” in ed. Garrison Keillor, *Good Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), Kindle Edition, location 2641.

God's mercy is perhaps most fully and graphically revealed, however, in Jesus' death on the cross. As Paul puts it powerfully, to die for a friend or a good person is rare enough. Jesus reveals the extent of the merciful heart of God, however, in that "while we were yet sinners" he died for us (Rom 5:8). U. S. poet Denise Levertov writes of God's mercy as a gushing waterfall:

To live in the mercy of God.  
  
To feel vibrate the enraptured  
  
waterfall flinging itself  
unabating down and down  
to clenched fists of rock.  
Swiftness of plunge,  
hour after year after century,

\*\*\*

Thus, not mild, not temperate,  
God's love for the world. Vast  
Flood of mercy  
flung on resistance.<sup>22</sup>

As we well know, and as we celebrate in these days after Easter, Jesus' death is not the end of the story. If it were, as British scripture scholar N. T. Wright argues persuasively, we would not be able to explain how Jesus and his story continue to live on today, and continue to transform those who acknowledge his Lordship and take on his lifestyle. Without the resurrection, Jesus would join the ranks of those great women and men who have made a difference in the world, and whose names live on, but who are not experienced as alive, as present, as transforming today.<sup>23</sup> As it is, the mercy of God, incarnate in Jesus, raised from the dead, has been shared with Jesus' disciples, the women and men who have been called to be his church. In a real way, perhaps the greatest mercy of God is that Jesus, through the Spirit, has called us to be witnesses to, servants of, and proclaimers of that mercy in the world today. God's mercy calls us as People, Missionaries of mercy. God's mercy calls us to mission.

---

<sup>22</sup> Denise Levertov, "To Live in the Mercy of God".

<sup>23</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 658-61.



## **A People of Mercy: A Community of Missionary, Mercy-Bearing Disciples**

The great mercy of God does not stop with simply having mercy on us—giving us and all creation the gift of existence, and, for some of it, the gift of life; recognizing our need of and working for our healing and liberation, restoring us to relationship despite our betrayal and sin. God’s mercy takes us into God’s very life, God’s very mission.

St. Paul implies this when he writes of how Christians, in virtue of their Baptism, have put on Christ (Gal 3:27), have the mind of Christ (1Cor 2:16; Phil 2:5), are conformed to Christ (Rom 8:29; 2Cor 3:18), are Christ’s body in the world (Rom 12:3-8; 1Cor 12:12-30). St. John connects the life of Christians to Christ’s with his image of Christ as the vine and Christians as the branches (Jn 15:1-11). The Second Letter of Peter (2Pet 1:4) tells how baptized Christians share the divine nature.

This idea of sharing in the divine nature is echoed repeatedly in the writings of Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, and many others as they talk of deification or *theosis*.<sup>24</sup> While such language often seems static, Norman Russell, a major patristic scholar who has written extensively on *theosis*, insists that it really has a missionary cast to it. As he writes, “It is not simply the remedying of our defective human state. It is nothing less than our entering into partnership with God, our becoming fellow workers with him (1Cor 3:9) for the sake of bringing the divine economy to its ultimate fulfillment.”<sup>25</sup>

What I would like to suggest, therefore, is this: because God is a God of mercy we are People of mercy. God is—in Denise Levertov’s words—an intemperate waterfall of mercy, mercy “not strained” as Shakespeare puts it. God created the world out of this overflowing, unstrained mercy. God looks with eyes of mercy on those who suffer and who are oppressed, and so calls for justice. God forgives us, almost preceding our wrong (as Wendell Berry put it) when we betray God, one another, and God’s creation in sin. We who are baptized into the divine life and share the divine nature are therefore People of mercy, called to be witnesses to and sacraments of God’s mercy. At the end of MV, Pope Francis speaks of God’s mercy as a “great river,” flowing “from the heart of the Trinity, from the depths of the mystery of God.” He goes on to speak of the church as echoing “the word of God that resounds strong and clear as a message and sign of pardon, strength, aid, and love. May she never tire of

---

<sup>24</sup> See a “sampler” of patristic statements about *theosis* in Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 38-39.

<sup>25</sup> Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 36.

extending mercy, and be ever patient in offering compassion and love.”<sup>26</sup> As a “community of missionary disciples,” therefore, the church is a community where mercy is “freely given.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Embodying Mercy*

What might it mean concretely to act as a People of Mercy in our world today? Pope Francis has certainly pointed to the fact that a first and basic way is that the church community needs to embody God’s mercy in its own institutional and community life. In MV, Francis images the church as an “oasis of mercy.”<sup>28</sup> In EG, Francis writes movingly that local church communities should be like “a mother with an open heart,” “the house of the Father, with doors always wide open,” like “the father of the prodigal son, who always keeps his door open so that when the son returns, he can readily pass through it.”<sup>29</sup>

Part of this “open door policy” is that “the doors of the sacraments” should not “be closed for simply any reason.”<sup>30</sup> Francis urges that the door of Baptism be wide open—that it be available for any parent, for example, who requests it. As a kind of example of this, Francis himself baptized the child of a civilly married couple on January 12, 2014.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Francis implies that the church should have a more open attitude toward the reception of the Eucharist. “The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness.”<sup>32</sup> Might such “prudence and boldness” entail allowing divorced and remarried Catholics to receive the Eucharist? Might it include more instances of intercommunion with other Christian churches and communities? These questions are subjects of hot debate in the church today. Might they be solved by remembering that we are a People of Mercy? As Francis says, “the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> MV 25.

<sup>27</sup> EG 24, 115.

<sup>28</sup> MV 12.

<sup>29</sup> EG 47, 46.

<sup>30</sup> EG 47.

<sup>31</sup> See <http://www.christianpost.com/news/pope-francis-causes-stir-for-baptizing-unmarried-couples-baby-in-sistine-chapel-tells-mothers-its-ok-to-breastfeed-in-church-112519/>.

<sup>32</sup> EG 47.

<sup>33</sup> EG 47.

Similarly, Francis reminds priests that “the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best.”<sup>34</sup> Speaking in February to priests from around the world who he was officially commissioning as “missionaries of mercy,” Francis told them that holiness of life, not the “club of judgment” would bring people back to God and the church.<sup>35</sup> As he said in his interview with Antonio Spadaro in the fall of 2013, “the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all.”<sup>36</sup>

In the same interview with Fr. Spadaro, Francis offered a striking image of what a church of “mercy freely given” might look like. “I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars. You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.”<sup>37</sup> In MV Francis is explicit: “It is absolutely essential for the church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy.”<sup>38</sup>

### ***“Mercying”***

Pope Francis’s episcopal motto is a phrase from a homily by Venerable Bede that reflects on the call of St. Matthew in Matthew’s gospel (9:9-19): “having mercy, he chose him,” or, as the pope prefers to translate it, “mercying, he chose him.”<sup>39</sup> Kerry Weber comments that “in turning the noun into a verb, a sentiment into an action, Francis calls us not only to have mercy or to show mercy, but to *embody* mercy.”<sup>40</sup> One way that such embodiment can take place is what we reflected on above—the church community becoming a community of openness, vulnerability, and hospitality. Another way it can take place is what we will reflect on in this section—Christians “mercying” by doing works of mercy, the traditional Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. Once more this connects mercy directly with God’s mission, and the mission of the church.

---

<sup>34</sup> EG 44.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.cathnewsusa.com/2016/02/francis-confessors-should-never-judge-club-of-judgment-wont-bring-sheep-back/?newsletter=1>.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ, *A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis* ((New York: HarperOne/America, 2013), Kindle edition, Location 357.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, location 350.

<sup>38</sup> MV 11.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, location 146-153. The pope coins a word in Spanish—*misericordiando*—making “mercy” into a verb: “mercying.”

<sup>40</sup> Kerry Weber, “Mercy-ing,” in Interview, location 1051.

The Corporal Works of Mercy certainly have their roots in the Old Testament, particularly in passages like Is 58:7-9 and Micah 6:8, but more immediately in their Christian form they are drawn almost wholly from the great judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46: “I was hungry and you gave me to eat; thirsty, and you gave me to drink; a stranger, and you welcomed me; naked, and you clothed me; sick, and you visited me; in prison, and you came to me” (35-36). To these six practices the Christian tradition added a seventh—to bury the dead. Pope Francis’s recent encyclical *Laudato Si’* suggests an eighth corporal work of mercy—to care for creation.<sup>41</sup> As they arose in the tradition, the Spiritual Works of Mercy are also seven. They are: instruct the ignorant; counsel the doubtful; comfort the sorrowful; admonish the sinner; gladly forgive injuries; bear wrongs patiently; and pray for the living and the dead.<sup>42</sup>

Walter Kasper quotes a beautiful prayer by St. Faustina Kowalska (to whom St. John Paul II was so devoted) that eloquently expresses the extent of the “mercying” that Christians as People of Mercy, missionary disciples of mercy, should be about:

Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful...  
Help me, O Lord, that my ears may be merciful...  
Help me, O Lord, that my tongue may be merciful...  
Help me, O Lord, that my hands may be merciful...  
Help me, O Lord, that my feet may be merciful...  
Help me, O Lord, that my heart may be merciful...<sup>43</sup>

Hand in hand with these acts of mercy goes the commitment to justice. Genuine “mercying” does not just relieve suffering or misery. It goes to the root of the problems and works for personal, societal, and structural change. Not only does the commitment to working for justice show mercy to the victims of injustice, however. It also shows mercy to perpetrators of injustice, for ultimately those who are exposed or convicted as perpetrators of injustice, can and will receive mercy. The prophets railed against Israel not out of hatred for the people, but because they loved them. Their call to “return” to God was as much an act of mercy as it was a call for justice. As Shakespeare recognized, justice must be “seasoned” with mercy. At the same time, however, mercy needs to be seasoned with justice.

---

<sup>41</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* (LS), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>42</sup> For a listing of the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy and further reflection, see Kasper, *Mercy*, location 2662-2693.

<sup>43</sup> *Tagebuch der Schwester Maria Faustyna Kowalska* (Hauteville: Parvis Verlag, 1990), 80-81, in Kasper, *Mercy*, location 2696-2716.

### ***“Mercying” in Today’s World, Today’s Australia***

What might “mercying” look like concretely, especially today’s Australia? How might we live out the spiritual and corporal works of mercy today, as partners in God’s mission? Obviously the concrete ways are many, and Christians, as missionary, mercy-bearing disciples, need constantly to discern where God’s mercy is at work and beckons them to work in their particular contexts. In this final section of my reflections on mission and mercy I’d like to offer three rough sketches of where God is working and beckons us to work in today’s Australian context: showing mercy to migrants and refugees, showing mercy to victims and perpetrators, and showing mercy to God’s creation.

#### ***Mercy for Migrants and Refugees***

On his first trip outside the Vatican after being elected pope, Pope Francis traveled to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, the first landfall of many migrants making the perilous journey from Africa to Italy. Many of these migrants, victims of corrupt smugglers, were “dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death.” In his homily on Lampedusa, Pope Francis asked disturbing questions: “Has any one of us wept because of this situation and others like it? Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters? Has any of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep—to experience compassion—‘suffering with’ others. The globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep”<sup>44</sup>—in other words, from the ability to have mercy.

We see the same kind of indifference in many Europeans who harden their hearts against Syrian and Afghani migrants and refugees who crowd their borders, in demagogues like Donald Trump who would build a wall along the US-Mexican border or forbid Muslims to enter the United States. In his introduction to the Australian Bishops’ Social Justice Statement for 2015-2016, Bishop Long Nguyen, Auxiliary of Melbourne, writes that “We Australians have rightly felt appalled at the dangers that refugees experience on their journeys, but we seem to have come to believe that harshness and rejection will be enough to deter desperate people from their flight to safety.”<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Pope Francis, Homily at Lampedusa, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130708\\_omelia-lampedusa.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html).

<sup>45</sup> Chairman’s Message, Australian Bishops, Social Justice Statement, 2015-2016, “For Those Who Come across the Seas: Justice for Refugees and Asylum Seekers,” 2.

As individual Christians, however, and as church, we need to do all we can to show mercy to these poorest of today's poor. The corporal work of mercy of welcoming the stranger, and the spiritual work of mercy of praying for the living and the dead, need to take concrete shape in our personal actions, our voting, our charitable contributions, and our liturgical and private prayers. How can the picture of that small Syrian child lying on a Turkish beach be ignored? How can hundreds of Latin Americans dying of thirst in the Arizona desert leave us unmoved? How can we remain indifferent to people in virtual concentration camps in Baxter, Curtin, or Christmas Island?

### *Mercy for Victims and Perpetrators*

The spiritual work of mercy of consoling the sorrowful might take on concreteness in today's world and today's Australia as we open our hearts and lives to the world's victims—women who have been sexually harassed or raped, women and children who have been physically or sexually abused, victims who have been displaced by war, victims of human trafficking, children who have been recruited to fight civil wars, children who are the victims of clergy sexual abuse. The corporal work of mercy of healing the sick takes on powerful significance as we show mercy to victims of AIDS, or Ebola or the Zika virus. The corporal works of mercy of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and clothing the naked take concrete shape as we come to the aid in any way we can to victims of natural disasters. As Christians and as church, we need to weep for these victims, pray for them, take political action on their behalf, do anything we can to alleviate their suffering, and work for the justice of their causes.

Much harder, however, is to extend mercy to those who perpetrate violence and injustice, and thus put into practice the corporal work of visiting the imprisoned and the spiritual works of forgiving injuries and bearing wrongs. While justice must always be seasoned with mercy, mercy needs always to be seasoned with justice. As Pope Francis writes, "these are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love."<sup>46</sup>

Having mercy on perpetrators does not mean ignoring or forgetting the evil they have done, nor does it mean absolving them of the consequences of their actions. Certainly, society needs to be protected from criminals, rapists, child abusers, drug dealers and the like. Such protection, however, does not necessarily entail cruel punishment that would treat them in an

---

<sup>46</sup> VM 20.

inhuman way and deny the human dignity that they have denied by their actions. Christians and the church need to work for prison reform, and the abolition of the death penalty where it still exists.

There have been wonderful examples of “healing circles” in which reconciliation is cultivated and restorative justice is practiced—I think of Fr. Dave Kelly and his ministry with victims and perpetrators in the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago. Powerful scenes of mercy to perpetrators have been enacted in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after Apartheid; or after a fatal mass shooting in Pennsylvania, USA, by the Amish community; or Pope John Paul II forgiving his would-be assassin. Can there be forgiveness in the Christian community for the pilot of the Germanwings jet that crashed into the French Alps last year? Smugglers who provide refugees with leaky boats? People who profit from human trafficking? For the terrorists who attacked Paris in November, 2015? For Cardinal Law or Cardinal Pell? As Robert Schreiter writes, reconciliation—or mercy for perpetrators—is not primary a human task. It is the result of God’s grace. Without denying the need for justice, might Christians not offer them mercy? As People of Mercy who share God’s life, can they act any less mercifully than God?

### ***Mercy for Creation***

In EG, coming to the defense of vulnerable human beings, Pope Francis writes of “other weak and defenseless beings who are frequently at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation. ... creation as a whole.”<sup>47</sup> Like John Paul II and the Australian bishops, Francis calls for an “ecological conversion,” one that recognizes creation’s beauty and dignity, and calls for our mercy on its wounded and broken state.<sup>48</sup>

As far back as 1988, the bishops of the Philippines wrote that “God intended this land for us, God’s special creatures, but not so that we might destroy it and turn it into a wasteland.... After a single night’s rain, look at the chocolate brown rivers in your locality and remember that they are carrying the life blood of the land into the sea.... How can fish swim in sewers like the Pasig (the river that flows through Manila) and so many more rivers which we have polluted? Who has turned the wonderworld of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life?”<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> EG 215.

<sup>48</sup> LS 218; John Paul II, General Audience, January 17, 2001; Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *A New Earth—The Environmental Challenge* (2002), [http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/files/SJSandresources/2002\\_SJSS\\_statement.pdf](http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/files/SJSandresources/2002_SJSS_statement.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> Catholic Bishops of the Philippines, Pastoral Letter, *What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?*, quoted in EG 215.

In 2004 the bishops of Queensland published a magnificent pastoral letter on the protection of the Great Barrier Reef, which entitled *Let the Many Coastlands Be Glad!*. They described the Reef as having “a special glory.” “Wonder, gratitude and praise of God lead easily to a deeper sense of responsibility for what God has made. Our Reef is home to thousands of creatures, ‘many of which appear to be dressed for an underwater mardi-gras so absurd and brilliant are their colours and patterns.’”<sup>50</sup> And yet they noted that this magnificent but fragile wonder is under serious threat from soil erosion, waste disposal, over fishing, tourism, development, and global warming. The Queensland bishops’ call for the use of more renewable energy, a change in people’s habits of consumption, recycling and conservation of electricity are calls for acts of mercy, the practice of the “new” corporal work of mercy that is the care and protection of creation.<sup>51</sup> Ecological commitment is an integral part of the mission of the church, for it joins in with God’s merciful protection of creation.

### ***Conclusion***

Mercy is not only what God does. It is who God is, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, the face of God’s mercy. The quality of mercy is not strained. It flows like an intemperate waterfall, a flowing river, from God’s heart. In Pope Francis’s Prayer for the Year of Mercy, he asks us to pray to the Lord Jesus to send the Spirit to

Consecrate every one of us with its anointing,  
So that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace from the Lord,  
And your Church, with renewed enthusiasm,  
May bring good news to the poor,  
Proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed,  
And restore sight to the blind.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Catholic Bishops of Queensland, *Let the Many Coastlands Be Glad! A Pastoral Letter on the Great Barrier Reef*, <http://catholicearthcare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Let-The-Many-Coastlines-Be-Glad-A-Pastoral-Letter-on-the-Great-Barrior-Reef.pdf>, 6. Quoting Penelope Figgs and Geoff Mosely, “Australia’s Wilderness Heritage, Volume 1,” World Heritage Areas (Sydney: Landsowne Press, Published in Association with the Australian Conservation Association, 1993), 47-51.

<sup>51</sup> Bishops of Queensland, *Let the Many Coastlands Be Glad!*, 21-22.

<sup>52</sup> Prayer of Pope Francis for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/prayers/documents/papa-francesco\\_preghiere\\_20151208\\_giubileo-straordinario-misericordia.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/prayers/documents/papa-francesco_preghiere_20151208_giubileo-straordinario-misericordia.html).



Pope Francis asks us to pray, in other words, that the God of mercy make us a People of Mercy, a community of missionary, mercy-bearing disciples.

## REFERENCES

- “Veni Creator Spiritus.” <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/VeniCreator.html>.
- Berry, Wendell. “To My Mother.” In *Good Poems*, edited by Garrison Keillor. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Kindle Edition.
- Catholic Bishops of Queensland, *Let the Many Coastlands Be Glad! A Pastoral Letter on the Great Barrier Reef*. Sydney: Landsowne Press, 1993.
- Edwards, Denis. *Breath of God: A Theology of Creator Spirit*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.
- Ivereigh, Austen. *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014.
- Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Kasper, Walter. *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013. Kindle Edition.
- Kim, Kirsteen. *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission*. London: Epworth Press, 2010.
- Oakley, Mark. *The Collage of God*, Second Edition. Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012.
- Pickard, Stephen. “Wicked Problems: The Ecology of the Praise of God,” Second Keynote Address at the Life of Abundance Conference, Australian Anglican Church, Melbourne, Australia, February 11, 2016, <http://www.abmission.org/resources.php?action=list-items&catId=23>.
- Pope Francis, Homily at Lampedusa, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130708\\_omelia-lampedusa.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html).
- Pope Francis. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG). [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).
- Pope Francis. Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (LS). [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).
- Robinson, Marilynne, *Gilead*. New York: Picador—Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.
- Russell, Norman. *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009.

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*.

Spadaro, Antonio, SJ. *A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis*. New York: HarperOne/America, 2013. Kindle edition.

Wells, Samuel. *Learning to Dream Again: Rediscovering the Heart of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013.

Williams, Rowan. "Fresh Expressions".

<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/principles/transform>.

Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.