

# Mercy & Catholic Social Teaching

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For this year, I was tasked with locating Pope Francis's emphasis on mercy within the broader context of Catholic social doctrine. Pope Francis's emphasis on MERCY is, I think, particularly important and helps us reconnect with the vision of Catholic social thought as really central to the life of discipleship. Mercy as an animating attitude for catholic social teaching & Christian witness – that I would like to explore with you today.

When he announced the jubilee year of mercy, Pope Francis called it “the beating heart of the Gospel and insisted that mercy is the “the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sins.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout his announcement of the jubilee year, Francis used images of tearing down walls that block people from God and from the Church, reminding his critics that mercy and justice are “two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love.”<sup>2</sup> As moral theologian Marcus Mescher notes, mercy is not often centered in Catholic social teaching but Pope Francis reminds us it is in the background of all of it.<sup>3</sup> I propose for our conversation this is because for the believer, Catholic social doctrine is a concrete reflection, in our daily lives in community, and as a global community, of what it means to live out Micah 6:8 – what is it that the Lord asks of us – to live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

The year of mercy was remarkable for many reasons – starting with its inauguration in the Central African Republic. It focused on moving outward to the margins and embracing the vulnerable and translating mercy, or *misericordis*, as “opening one's heart to wretchedness.” No one is exempt from both the need of mercy or the vocation to practice mercy. Mercy, notes Mescher, “inspires a Christian morality that replaces ‘never falling down’ with ‘always getting up.’”<sup>4</sup>

## The Parable of the Good Samaritan

If we pause and consider perhaps Jesus's most well-known parable – that of the Good Samaritan - the deeper theology of mercy emerges. All too often we tune out listening to the parable because it is familiar and its lesson seems obvious – we should help people.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cnstopstories.com/2015/04/11/pope-says-year-of-mercy-will-be-time-to-heal-to-help-to-forgive/>

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Mescher, “Mercy: the Crux of Pope Francis's Moral Imagination,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 16:2, 2019, pp 253-77.

<sup>4</sup> Mescher, 263.

Yet I want to suggest there is more going on here. First, in this parable we perceive the “see, judge, act” method at work: Mercy is not abstract or generic but specific to the needs of this particular wounded man – wine to cleanse and oil to coat the wounds. And second, the parable centers mercy and offers 4 theological lessons important for Catholic social teaching:

- a. Jesus is teaching the importance of humility
  - b. Discipleship involves risk
  - c. We are called to become neighbor
  - d. Mercy directs us towards justice
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a. Humility

Speaking to the FAO on world hunger, the pope used the Good Samaritan to emphasize the importance of humility. He reflected:

My thoughts turn to the well-known parable in the Gospel where a Samaritan helps someone in need. He is not prompted by philanthropy or the fact that he has money at his disposal, but by a desire to identify with the person he helps: he wants to share his lot. Indeed, after providing for the man’s care, he announces that he will return to inquire after his health. What is involved here is more than mere compassion or perhaps a desire to share or to promote a reconciliation, which can overcome differences and disagreements. It is a willingness to share everything and to decide to be Good Samaritans, instead of people who are indifferent to the needs of others.<sup>5</sup>

Repeatedly, Francis makes clear he doesn’t trust any vision of love or charity that is easy or superfluous; that does not prompt self-reflection.

b. Risk:

Samaritans were outcasts for Jesus’ listening audience. The priest and the Levite were the religious elites who just keep walking. Yet, it is the Samaritan, despised and excluded from the community, who practices love of neighbor. People often speculate about why the priest and Levite did not stop. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, a Protestant minister and American civil rights leader, offered a provocative interpretation of the parable, which resists the easy judgment of the priest & Levite as simply hypocrites or the villains of the story.<sup>6</sup> Dr. King asked – perhaps they were afraid – maybe worried

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<sup>5</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130620\\_38-sessione-fao.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130620_38-sessione-fao.html)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geX-a5PqxaY&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geX-a5PqxaY&feature=emb_title)

that the man was faking it, maybe the robbers are still here.... the central question being: What will happen to me if I stop to help this man? The Samaritan, on the other hand, takes a risk and reverses the question. What will happen to this man if I do not stop?

The parable of the good Samaritan, then, is a call to practice what King calls “Dangerous Unselfishness.” It is not in opposition to the pursuit of justice – mercy helps us cultivate the humility and unselfishness needed in order to take the risks of discipleship. Mercy helps motivate and root the call of love of neighbor. And so – Jesus asks us not only who was neighbor to the wounded man but also who is our neighbor?

### c. Becoming Neighbor

My personal favorite definition comes from my former professor Jesuit priest James Keenan who defines mercy as “entering into the chaos of another.” In a forward to a collection of Pope Francis’s writings on mercy, Keenan explains “mercy is not one virtue and a set of practices among others. Mercy is the ‘epitomizing word of the gospel’... one could argue that the entire theological tradition is expressed in terms of mercy. . . the incarnation is God’s entry into the chaos of human existence.”<sup>7</sup> For me, this beautifully captures both the human and divine aspects of the theology of mercy. God enters into the brokenness and fragility and chaos of our world in the incarnation, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We see the grace of mercy throughout the gospels, in the healing and building of solidarity. To see this mercy we must go out, we must listen, we must enter into the chaos. Deeply, here is the recognition that mercy is always relational. To practice mercy I must enter into a relationship with another and that only happens by listening and being open. That involves risk, as mentioned above, as well as possibility. Yet the question remains – who is my neighbor? Can I really be asked to enter into the chaos of everyone?

In his philosophical writings before becoming pope, St. John Paul II explained “as human beings we are capable of participation in the very humanity of other people, and because of this every human being can become our neighbor” and that “a human being finds fulfillment of himself by adding to the fulfillment of others.”<sup>8</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* recognized a “special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of absolutely every person and of actively helping him when he comes across our path” (27). This understanding of *becoming neighbor* has relevance not only for our understanding of mercy but also for Catholic social teaching. This is the ecclesiology of encounter of which Pope Francis so frequently speaks. It is the Church envisioned by *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church in the modern world – “a church attentive to human needs.” “It depends on me,” Pope Francis said, “it depends on me to be or not be a

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<sup>7</sup> James Keenan, “Forward” *The Works of Mercy*, Pope Francis, Orbis, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Philosophy of praxis* 49

neighbor to the person I meet who has need of my help, even if he is a stranger, or even hostile.”<sup>9</sup>

The question “And who is my neighbor?” we can see is both simple and quite complex. Again, I come back to this sense that the parable of the good Samaritan is one that we all know so well yet, like the injunction from Micah, is so challenging that we often resist surrendering to its depths. A lawyer asks Jesus, who is my neighbor? Dr. Cecelia Gonzales-Andrieu, a theologian at Loyola Marymount University in California, wonders why is it that we always seem surprised by the answer. Using the diversity of words for neighbor in Spanish, Dr. Gonzales-Andrieu identifies three types of neighbors: our neighbors are those who live with us – neighborhood – but in our world this is the weakest concept as we think about the parable, which challenges us to see our neighbors as both:

“*Prójimo*: focus [ing] on our shared human condition and which refers to solidarity. For Spanish speakers (even in the most common vernacular usage) it always carries with it the biblical injunction to love. So the neighbor here is understood as that other human being whose dignity I am called to protect, and whose well-being I am called to guard vigilantly. *Prójimo* answers “Who is my neighbor?” very simply: the one who needs you, *this* is your neighbor.”<sup>10</sup>

But our neighbor is also Gonzales-Andrieu notes *semejante*:

“*Semejante* answers the question with poetry—see the beauty in you, see the beauty in everything that resembles you. Your neighbor is close and also far, needy and also comfortable, known and also unknown. Because your neighbor is precisely every single human person.”<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, globalization and interdependence as both fact and claim call us to become neighbor to all of our brothers and sisters.

#### d. Mercy directs us towards Justice

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<sup>9</sup> [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20160710.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20160710.html)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2016/10/17/we-often-ask-who-my-neighbor-why-does-answer-always-surprise-us>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2016/10/17/we-often-ask-who-my-neighbor-why-does-answer-always-surprise-us>

Mercy is not a lessening but a deepening of the commitment to justice and the need for building just communities. Reflecting on Jesus's injunction in Mark 6:37 to "give them something to eat" – in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis argues "it means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs that we encounter. The word solidarity is a little worn and at times poorly understood but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset that thinks in terms of community and the priority of life over all the appropriation of goods by a few" (EG 188).

As Mescher notes, "Mercy does not replace judgment; mercy informs judgment. It requires great resolve to be merciful rather than to condemn, surrender, or abandon." He argues that refocusing on mercy "inspires a renewal of biblical witness" that renews the centrality of justice in Catholic social teaching.

Mercy as an animating spirit for Catholic social teaching challenges any privilege of place wherein we separate ourselves from those in need of mercy (as if we ourselves are not also desperately in need of mercy). A key question then becomes – are we standing in the right place? Are we standing with those on the margins to LISTEN, to LEARN and to ACCOMPANY or are we standing off on the other side of the road – passing judgment as we walk by? It then becomes not only a matter of the option for the poor but infuses the way in which we live out all of the principles of Catholic social teaching from subsidiarity to the global common good.