

BECOMING A PERSON OF MERCY

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BECOMING A PERSON
OF

Mercy

Personal reflections
and practices on the
WORKS OF MERCY

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Introduction

I am a product of sixteen years of Catholic schooling. My education took place before the Second Vatican Council, when the emphasis was more on God's justice than on God's mercy. Thanks to the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of the Council members, a welcome shift started to happen: toward compassion and "tender mercy" in relation to humanity's moral frailty. Saint John XXIII, at the beginning of the Council, said: "Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity."

God is the source of mercy. This gives us hope that, with God's help, we too can act mercifully toward others.

In this book, we look at our God of mercy in chapter one. To facilitate our response to God's invitation to be people of mercy, the seven spiritual works of mercy—actions that help our neighbor in their spiritual needs—are presented in chapters two and three. Continuing our response, chapters four and five help us to reflect on the seven corporal works of mercy—those that serve the bodily needs of others. Chapter six addresses Jesus' command that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves by reflecting on how we can be merciful to ourselves. Because of the times we live in, it would seem appropriate to have an ad-

ditional work of mercy—our care for the planet on which we live. Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* clearly points us in that direction, and we’ll briefly look at that in the conclusion.

I am indebted to Joe Sinasac of Novalis Publications, and Therese Ratliff of Twenty-Third Publications, for asking me to write a book on mercy. This project was inspired by Pope Francis’ declaration of 2016 as a Jubilee Year of Mercy. I am also grateful to Dan Connors for his excellent editing of my manuscript.

THE WORKS OF MERCY

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

FORGIVING INJURIES

BEARING WRONGS PATIENTLY

INSTRUCTING THE IGNORANT

ADVISING THE DOUBTFUL

ADMONISHING SINNERS

COMFORTING THE AFFLICTED

PRAYING FOR THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

The Corporal Works of Mercy

FEEDING THE HUNGRY

SHELTERING THE HOMELESS

CLOTHING THE NAKED

GIVING ALMS TO THE POOR

VISITING THE SICK

VISITING THOSE IN PRISON

BURYING THE DEAD

Chapter One

GOD, THE SOURCE OF MERCY

I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

HOSEA 6:6

For the Christian or Jewish believer, the primary source of mercy is God. We find this reality in the Bible, and the place in the Bible where God's mercy is most pronounced is in the covenants.

The four most significant covenants in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) are the ones between God and Noah, between God and Abraham, between God and Moses, and between God and David. For the purpose of this book, I have chosen the Mosaic covenant as the most meaningful in relation to the mercy of God.

The Book of Exodus is where we see this. In the beginning of the Book of Exodus, we discover that the Israelite people were living as slaves in Egypt. There, the Egyptians oppressed them cruelly (the opposite of mercy) with forced labor. In great distress, the Israelite people cried out to God for help and to free them from this oppression. Into this situation came Moses, who was tending the sheep of his father-in-law when he had an unusual experience. He saw a bush on fire, but the flames were not consuming it. He decided to draw closer to the bush in order to have a better look at this incredible sight.

God then called out to Moses from the bush: “I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exodus 3:6). Then God revealed two particular aspects of the divine personality—compassion and mercy:

“I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt; I have heard them cry out to be rescued from their slave drivers. I know all about their sufferings, and so I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians....” (EXODUS 3:7–8)

Later, when the Israelites grumbled about the harsh conditions on part of their journey toward the Promised Land, God—after Moses pleaded for the people—ceased in his threat to punish them and once again showed them mercy. The author of Psalm 106 sums up this ongoing dynamic:

Many times the LORD rescued his people...For their sake he remembered his covenant, and because of his great love he relented. (PSALM 106:43-45)

I am reminded here of Jesus' teaching about how often we should forgive. When Peter asked him, "Lord, if my brother [or sister] keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive [them]? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22).

I have to admit that this is a difficult thing for me to do. I have inherited from my Italian father, and likely his father and beyond, a tendency to "write off" people I perceive as seeking to do me harm in some way or another. I remember sharing this with a psychologist friend of mine, who responded: "Very Italian!" Perhaps your culture also struggles with this kind of unlimited mercy. The only solution, in my experience, is to ask God for the grace to let go of whatever ill feeling you have toward the "offending" (in your eyes) person. We will consider this topic again later in the book.

What lies behind the mercy of God is love; for love is the essence of God, as St. John reminds us in his First Letter: "God is love, and those who live in love live in union with God" (4:16). The authors of the *Modern Catholic Encyclopedia* write: "Mercy springs from the passion of love. Love for the other urges both God and God's people to act in kindness and tenderness, to heal and to save."¹

God's deep concern for humanity is an everlasting mercy,

as Psalm 136 so clearly states. Beginning with the opening sentence, “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his mercy endures forever,” all twenty-six verses of the song end with the same refrain: “for his mercy endures forever.” God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, reassures the people of the divine constancy: “Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, my love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says the Lord, who has mercy on you” (54:10, NAB).

William Shakespeare captured the true meaning of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath...
[Mercy] is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself...
We do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.”²

One of the key characteristics of the mercy of God is “persistence.” We see this dynamic especially in the messages of the prophets. Note the following:

Isaiah:

Turn to the LORD and pray to him,
now that he is near.

Let the wicked leave their way of life
and change their way of thinking.
Let them turn to the LORD, our God;
he is merciful and quick to forgive. (55:6-7)

Jeremiah:

[The Lord] told me to go and say to Israel: “Unfaithful Israel, come back to me. I am merciful and will not be angry...only admit that you are guilty and that you have rebelled against the LORD your God.” (3:12-13)

Hosea:

Return to the LORD your God, people of Israel. Your sin has made you stumble and fall.” (14:1)

O LORD, you show mercy to those who have no one else to turn to. (14:3)

The LORD says,

“I will bring my people back to me.
I will love them with all my heart.” (14:4)

Micah:

There is no other God like you, O LORD; you forgive the sins of your people who have survived. You do not stay angry forever, but you take pleasure in showing us your constant love. You will be merciful to us once again. (7:18-19)

These messages of God's love and mercy were a challenge and a consolation to the people of the time—and to us as well, for we all depend on the mercy of God.

Many of the psalms, especially those attributed to King David, are a treasure trove of God's constant love and mercy. Some praise God for protecting the psalmist from his enemies, such as Psalm 18, which refers to the time David was rescued from the pursuit of Saul:

I love you, Lord, my strength,
Lord, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.
My God, my rock of refuge,
my shield, the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold! Praised be the Lord, I exclaim,
and I am safe from my enemies.

(PSALM 18:1-4, NAB)

This has been an important psalm in my life. God keeps inviting me to do ministries I never imagined I could do, ministries that have taken me to places like Northern Ireland (before the end of the "Troubles") to give retreats and to South Africa (twice: both times before the end of Apartheid)—ministries that had me dealing with a fair amount of fear. I found extra courage in the recitation of this psalm.

In Psalm 25, the psalmist, again in the voice of David, acknowledges his need for God's moral guidance and for mercy:

Turn to me, LORD, and be merciful to me, because I am lonely and weak.

Consider my distress and suffering and forgive all my sins. (PSALM 25:16, 18)

Through the prophet Nathan, David sincerely acknowledged his sin in taking another man's wife, Bathsheba, to be his own while at the same time having her husband killed (2 Samuel 11—12). Psalm 51 expresses his sorrow:

Be merciful to me, O God,
because of your constant love.
Because of your great mercy
wipe away my sins!
Wash away all my evil
and make me clean from my sin.
(PSALM 51:1–2)

This part of the story of David's life gives us hope. If God could forgive him for his heinous crimes, how much more should we trust in God's forgiveness for whatever sins we have committed!³

Psalm 103 praises God for his faithful love and constant mercy:

Praise the LORD, my soul!
All my being, praise his holy name!

Praise the LORD, my soul,
and do not forget how kind he is.
He forgives all my sins
and heals all my diseases...
and blesses me with love and mercy. (PSALM 103:1-4)

And Psalm 145 extols some of the attributes of God:

The LORD is loving and merciful,
slow to become angry and full of constant love.
He is good to everyone
and has compassion on all he has made.
(PSALM 145:8-9)

Commenting on the proper disposition of those who seek God's help, the psalmist writes:

The Lord is righteous in all he does,
merciful in all his acts.
He is near to those who call to him...
with sincerity. (PSALM 145:17-18)⁴

In the psalms about the mercy of God that are attributed to David, he teaches his readers about the frames of mind and heart they should have toward the Creator: humility, trust, and gratitude. English educator Elizabeth Fry composed the following prayer that summarizes beautifully the sentiments in David's psalm:

Lord, undertake yourself for me;
Your arm of power can alone heal, help and deliver;
and in You do I trust, and hope, though at times deeply
tried and cast down before You;
yet, O Lord! You are my hope,
and be therefore entreated of Your poor sorrowful and
often afflicted servant,
and arise for my help.
Leave not my poor soul destitute, but through the
fullness of Your own power, mercy and love, keep me
alive unto Yourself, unto the end!⁵

In the New Testament, we find many instances of God's mercy.

First of all, Jesus is mercy incarnate, the clearest revelation of God's mercy in the world. We see this in many ways: by his forgiving people of their sins, through his healing ministry, by the manner in which he treats the poor of his day, and by his giving his life for our salvation.

In his encyclical *Rich in Mercy*, Saint John Paul II shares his insights on this reality.

Christ and through Christ, God becomes especially visible in his mercy; that is to say, there is emphasized that attribute of the divinity which the Old Testament, using various concepts and terms, already defined as "mercy." Christ confers on the whole of the Old Testament tradition about God's mercy a definitive

meaning. Not only does he speak of it and explain it by means of comparisons and parables, but above all he himself makes it incarnate and personifies it. He himself, in a certain sense, is mercy. To the person who sees it in him—and finds it in him—God becomes “visible” in a particular way as the Father “who is rich in mercy.”⁶

Vincent Cardinal Nichols writes, “We look to Christ, who reveals to us the face of God, the Father of mercies.”⁷ And noting the essential role of the Third Person of the Trinity, he adds, “It is the Holy Spirit who fixes our gaze on Jesus, who assures us that Jesus’ gaze is always upon us, and who each day makes wonderfully new our relationship with Jesus.”⁸

When we “fix our gaze on Jesus,” what do we see? In Pope Francis’ words, we see a man of “tender mercies.” My favorite story from Jesus’ life that illustrates this description of Jesus is found in the Gospel of John:

Early the next morning [Jesus] went back to the Temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and began to teach them. The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees brought in a woman who had been caught committing adultery, and they made her stand before them all. “Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. In our Law Moses commanded that such a

woman must be stoned to death. Now, what do you say?” They said this to trap Jesus, so that they could accuse him. But he bent over and wrote on the ground with his finger. As they stood there asking him questions, he straightened up and said to them, “Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her.” Then he bent over again and wrote on the ground. When they heard this, they all left, one by one, the older ones first. Jesus was left alone with the woman still standing there. He straightened up and said to her, “Where are they? Is there no one left to condemn you?” “No one, sir,” she answered. “Well then,” Jesus said, “I do not condemn you either. Go, but do not [do this] sin again.”

(JOHN 8:2–11)

In this scene, Jesus takes the humiliation of the woman and turns it into grace for her future. Instead of condemning her, as her accusers wanted, he turns the tables on them while showing her a better way to live. He is a man of “tender mercies.”

Commenting on this kind of mercy, Saint John Paul II reminded us of the value of the human person when he wrote that, with Jesus, the person who is the recipient of mercy does not feel humiliated but rather is found again and restored to value.⁹

Second, Jesus is approachable. When the blind beggar Bartimaeus called out to Jesus for help—“Jesus! Son of

David! Have mercy on me!”—the crowd tried to get him to shut up. Even the disciples were complicit in this scolding. Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they brought him to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked Bartimaeus. “Teacher,” he replied, “I want to see again.” “Go,” Jesus told him, “your faith has made you well.” At once he received his sight and joined the crowd in following Jesus (Mark 10:46–52).

When we gaze on Jesus, we see a man who is genuinely interested in our well-being. Living our faith values on a daily basis can be a challenge at times, both personally and professionally. The Lord, in his mercy and compassion, understands this, and so he says to each of us:

“Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest.”

(MATTHEW 11:28–29)

Take a break to play and to pray. “Be merciful to yourself,” we hear him say in the silence of our hearts.

If we gaze at Jesus with the same intensity as St. Peter, we will discover another important aspect of the Lord’s mercy: second chances. Three times Peter denied Jesus, and at a time when Jesus was in a terrible situation. Here is how Pope Francis describes the scene: “When [Peter]) hits rock bottom, he meets the gaze of Jesus who patiently, wordless-

ly, says to him, ‘Peter, don’t be afraid of your weakness, trust in me.’”¹⁰

The Apostle Thomas had his own “second-chance” moment as well. Recall the story as it is told by John in chapter 20:24–29. Thomas was not with the other apostles when the risen Christ appeared to them in the room where the Last Supper had taken place. Later, as soon as the others saw Thomas, they excitedly related to him that they had seen the Lord. To which Thomas replied, “Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later, the apostles were once more in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus appeared again. He looked at Thomas and said to him: “Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting and believe!” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

Pope Francis shares these thoughts on this story of Thomas:

How does Jesus react [to Thomas’ doubting]? With patience: Jesus does not abandon Thomas in his stubborn unbelief; he gives him a week’s time. He does not close the door; he waits. And Thomas acknowledges his own poverty, his little faith: “My Lord and my God!” With this simple yet faith-filled invocation, he responds to Jesus’ patience. He lets himself be enveloped by divine mercy.¹¹

When we gaze at Jesus, we see his tender mercy, we witness his approachability, we experience his genuine interest in our faith journey, and we are consoled by his merciful patience with our sometimes erring ways.

The Works of Mercy

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his or her spiritual and bodily necessities.¹² Moral theologian James F. Keenan adds, “Mercy is the willingness to enter into the chaos of others so as to answer them in their need.”¹³ There are two categories of the works of mercy: spiritual and corporal. They are listed at the beginning of this book. In the following four chapters we will consider each of these works of mercy in terms of becoming a person of mercy.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Do you have a favorite passage from the Bible, in the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament, that speaks to you of God's mercy? Why is this passage important for you?

The Lord invites us to live our faith values in both our personal and professional lives. What helps you to do this? What hinders you?
