



The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland

Mercy Associates

Image of Catherine McAuley from Book Two – “Be as Shining
Lamps” by Caroline Thompson



Chapter 2: The Call to Mercy

2.1 The Mercy of God

2.2 The Church’s Call to Mercy

2.0 The Call to Mercy

Mercy is a quality of God and a gift of God. It entails having compassion for someone with all one's heart or from the very depth of one's being. Compassion is much more than sympathy or even empathy, as it includes a strong desire to alleviate suffering or misfortune. Thus, Mercy implies

- recognizing suffering (not just physical)
- feeling deeply with those who suffer
- taking action to help.

The ultimate root of the English word mercy is the Latin word *misericordia*. This, in turn, is derived from two other terms: *miserere* meaning 'to have pity on' or 'compassion for'; and *cor / cordis* meaning 'heart' or 'of the heart'.

The word mercy in the name of the Sisters of Mercy is not simply part of their title, rather mercy is intimately connected with their mission and ministry.

2.1 The Mercy of God

The Old Testament reveals the merciful heart of God:

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, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Ex 34:6-7).

In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) there are two words frequently translated as mercy. *Hesed* is the word used in connection with God's covenant agreement with Israel and it implies a profound faithfulness or fidelity. Kindness, grace and love are imbued in this covenant relationship with God; *Rahamim* is different and is derived from the word for womb. This suggests that the love of God is not merited but gracious, like the fundamental bond of mother and child (*Catherine, Carol Estelle Wheeler RSM*).

God's mercy is not to be confused with mere justice or fairness. Justice tries to balance the scales, whereas mercy often asks us to tip the scales! At its core these tensions arise from the challenge not to let the call for justice drown out cries for mercy and forgiveness.

In the New Testament, even a cursory read of the Gospels allows readers to appreciate that God's grace and mercy was Jesus' main purpose and message!



- Jesus’ teaching and preaching: do not judge (Mt 7:1), love for enemies (Mt 5:44);
- Jesus’ actions: forgiveness of sins (Mt 18:22); healing on the Sabbath (Mk 3:1-6); the forgiveness of the good thief (Lk 23:42-43); woman at the well (Jn 4:4-26);
- Jesus’ miracles and healings: numerous healings of those who were unclean, sinners, gentiles, blind (Jn 9:1-7), crippled (Jn 5:1-9);
- Jesus’ parables: the Prodigal Son (Lk 15: 11-32); the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37); the unjust judge and the persistent widow (Lk 18:1-8).

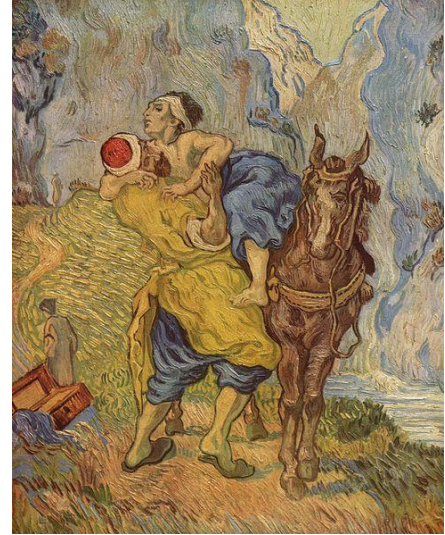


Image: Good Samaritan. Vincent Van Gogh

שְׁלוֹמַם

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Shalom – Hebrew word conveying wholeness, or everything that makes for people’s well-being, security, and, in particular, the restoration of relationships that have been broken.

It was Jesus’ mercy and forgiveness that resulted in his conflict with the Jewish religious leaders, and ultimately, his death. It was not that he did not value and respect the law, rather that his compassion for those whom he encountered often trumped the requirements of the law. When Jesus encountered people and their suffering, his heart was touched and he yearned to reach out with mercy and compassion. So too in our lives, real encounter with people in need can create fertile soil for mercy to grow.

The concept of justice presented in the scriptures is also important to understand. Hebrew words *tsedeq* and *mishpat* and the Greek *dikaiosyne* are used to describe justice. These words are interchangeable with the words for righteousness. Justice means what is right or what is normal — the way things are supposed to be. The fairness of laws coupled with fair and equal treatment under the law are common biblical concerns.

Throughout scripture, God is the defender and protector of the poor, the alien, the debtor, the widow, and the orphan. One of the clearest and most holistic words for justice is the Hebrew shalom, which means both justice and peace. Shalom includes wholeness, or everything that makes for people’s well-being, security, and in particular, the restoration of relationships that have been broken. The deeply biblical idea of shalom is the reason justice always has to be social – it concerns relationships between people or groups. Economic systems, structures, and

interactions can be judged by how they serve or destroy good and healthy relationships. ¹Justice, in this sense of the common good of all, underpins our commitment to redress the myriad injustices across societies around the world.

¹ Adapted from Jim Wallis, *How the Bible Understands Justice*, <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2014/06/06how-the-bible-understands-justice>

Jesus illustrated that the love and mercy of God are not earned and equally, that human legalistic concepts of justice differ from justice when the good of all is of equal importance. God



doesn't show mercy to someone because they have done good works, but in order that they may be liberated to do them. Indeed, the essence of the Good News lies in the fact that God does not love us because we are good, but rather because God is good; God is love! In turn, we too must show mercy!

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? (1 Jn 3:17)

Image: *Return of the Prodigal Son*, Rembrandt van Rijn, circa 1668, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Read the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32]. Why is it easy to sympathise with the older son in this story?

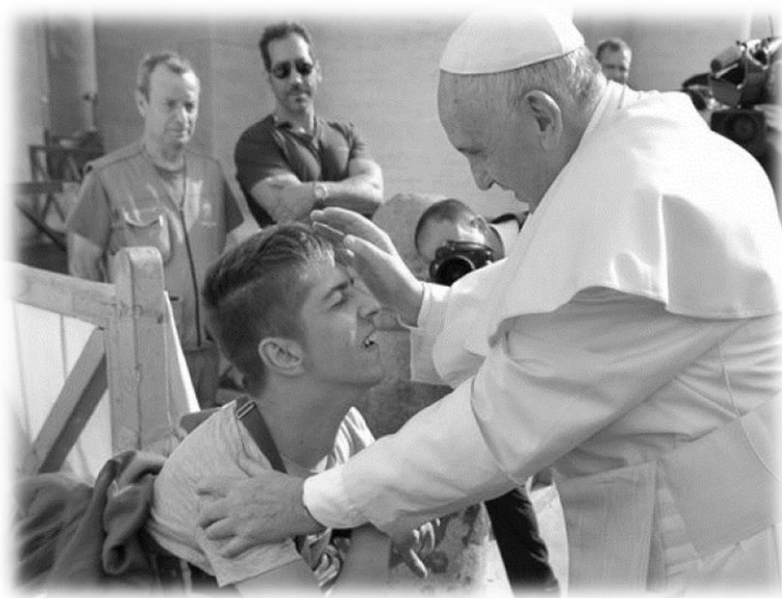
Sometimes we struggle to accept God's mercy, tending rather to almost prefer a God of justice. Discuss some contemporary examples of the tensions between justice and mercy.

2.2 The Church's Call to Mercy

Love for God, for Christians, is expressed in love for neighbour (Mk 12:28-34; 1 Jn 4:11), yet sadly, history and the daily news give plenty of examples of hatred and bitterness around us. The Church has always seen love of neighbour as part of the greatest commandment, and Pope Francis has reminded us that the Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love.

Jesus Christ taught that man not only receives and experiences the mercy of God, but that he is also called 'to practise mercy' towards others. (Dives in misericordia, Pope John Paul II, Nov 30, 1980)

Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. (Bull of The Jubilee of Mercy)



Pope Francis blesses people who have disabilities. *Photo: The National Catholic Register*

Describe some of the responses of the world to Pope Francis' focus on 'God's call to mercy'?

In the photos, words and reports of Pope Francis you see in the media, what message do you see about mercy?

The call to mercy was clearly identified by Catherine McAuley, the Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy. She lived a life of mercy and saw to it that mercy was integral to the ministry of the Sisters of Mercy.

*Mercy, the principal path marked out by
Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following
him...*

(Original Rule of the Sisters of Mercy)

*La misericordia, camino principal señalado por
Jesucristo a quienes desean seguirle...*
(Regla original de las Hermanas de la Misericordia)