Communicating

MERCY
Mercy, Communication, Encounter

Editor
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Doing is important for a meaningful and purposeful life. But being is more important than doing. “We are human beings, not human do-ings,” says Joseph Rain. Reading essentially shapes our being.

Communicating Mercy is aimed at providing insights about why we should be doing acts of mercy. It raises questions like who we are and where we stand in relation to mercy.

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Showering Mercy to the World

Evangelization as Communication of Mercy

Jacob Kavunkal SVD
An intense moment of the divine shining forth in our times is Pope Francis’ declaration of the Year of Mercy because the God of the Bible is a God of mercy and the entire Bible is a narration of the divine mercy – *bessed Yahweh* – God’s loving kindness. It is central to the Biblical revelation. In fact, Israel’s very first experience of Yahweh, their God, is when God came to liberate them from the Egyptian bondage, calling Moses to lead them out of their slavery, with the words: “I have seen their affliction, I have heard their cry” (Ex 3:6). This manifestation of God as loving Mercy resounds all through the Bible culminating in Jesus Christ who at the end of his ministry could say, “Those who have seen me have seen the Father” (Jn 14:6). In this chapter I will describe evangelization today as a manifestation of the divine mercy, beginning with Jesus’ own mission as a proclamation of the divine mercy. This will be followed by an examination of the recent church teachings and finally pointing out some practical expressions of this mission of mercy.

**Jesus’ Ministry**

Evangelization is the announcement of the good news, the sharing of the good news. The good news is that God’s loving mercy is fulfilled in God’s Son, Jesus Christ. In his very inaugural teaching, according to the Lukan gospel, Jesus presents his message as good news to the poor and the ushering in of “the acceptable year of the Lord” (4:19). This is preceded by his being anointed by the Spirit of God and affirmed to be God’s beloved Son in whom God is well-pleased (Lk 3:22), which in turn establish his authority. The
Every action of Jesus is a deed expressing the divine mercy, whether healing the people, especially on the Sabbath days, feeding the hungry, casting out demons from the possessed ones, forgiving sinners, including the woman caught in adultery, restoring the widow’s son to life, ... The list goes on. He is not upset by a woman considered to be polluting, rather, affirms her by telling her: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace” (Lk 8:48).

Divine mercy could not tolerate the unjust treatment of women. In a society that considered women as objects of their husbands’ property and thus a husband could not be accused of adultery against his wife, Jesus declared that a man could as well commit adultery against his wife (Mt 19:9).

Many of the parables, like that of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37), the prodigal son (Lk 16:1 ff), the lost sheep (Lk 15:3-7) and the lost coin (Lk 15: 8-10), are illustrations of the mercy of God. Jesus' acceptance of the hospitality of all, including those socially considered to be outcasts (Mt 9:10-13; Lk 19:1-10) solidifies the mercy of God.

Through all these Jesus was proclaiming how the reign of divine mercy is breaking already into the lives of the people of his time.

**Mercy in Recent Teachings of the Church**

Vatican II was a watershed experience of mercy. Not only did the Council affirm how the joys, the hopes, the agonies and aspirations especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys, the hopes, the grief and anxieties of the church (GS 1), but above all through its most significant insight, God is that "fountain of love" (AG 2). All that the Council said could be described as further spelling out of this basic insight. Every document of Vatican II resonates this understanding of God as loving-kindness. In contrast to the earlier understanding of revelation as the basis of truths and doctrines to be believed, the Constitutions on Divine Revelation, **
described revelation as divine self-manifestation through deeds and words (n 2) beginning with creation (n 3), thus, leaving nothing outside the purview of divine revelation. The Constitution on the Church (LG) presented the church as a sacrament of the intimate union with God and of the unity of all humankind (n 1), emphasizing the extroverted service to which it is called, as the initial budding forth of the reign of mercy (n 5). Liturgy is no more just the observance of laws, but enabling the participation of all “knowingly, actively and fruitfully” (SC 11). All these and other documents are the ramifications of the conciliar statement on mission: “Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than a manifestation or epiphany of God’s will, (the reign of mercy) and the fulfillment of that will in the world and in world history” (AG 9).

No wonder, just ten years later Pope Paul VI asserted: “Only the divine reign therefore is absolute, and it makes everything else relative” (EN 8). Continuing the same spirit Pope John Paul II in the encyclical Redemptoris Missio (1991), declared to the world how evangelization has but one purpose: “to serve human beings by revealing to them the love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ” (RM 2). This was echoed by his successor Benedict XVI when he wrote: “the service of charity is also a constituent element of the Church’s mission and an indispensable expression of her very being.”

With the papacy of Pope Francis we have a retrieval and resurgence of the divine mercy permeating every aspect of ecclesial life, but above all its mission of evangelization. His Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel) is a compassionate and merciful reflection of the Pope arguing how Christians have to experience Jesus’ own compassion to reach out to the world, especially the world of the poor with mercy and compassion. Enthused by the compassionate love of God (EG 8) we are called to “go forth” to sow the good seed (EG 19, 21) of fruit of its own experience of power of the Father’s mercy” (E 24). This in turn makes us to get involved by word and deed people’s daily lives, making us evangelizers to take on the “smell of the sheep” (EG 24).

Pope Francis speaks passionately about the poor. Evangelization must show compassion for and bring justice to the poor, eliminating inequality which is at the root of all social ills (EG 202). Franci love for the poor along with his mercy has endeared him to a except, perhaps, those who are unwilling to lose the show of power and prestige. His courageous and compassionate simplicity has left its mark not only on the church but even on the world at large.

Evangelization – Communication of Mercy

The incomparable new testament image to express church’s mission today is that of the good Samaritan tending the wounded traveler at the road side and bringing him to the safety and comfort of the inn (Lk 10: 30-37). Through his mercy towards the unfortunate man ignored by a priest and a Levite the Samaritan becomes God’s merciful presence to the man.

In the early 1970’s a Polish Divine Word Missionary, Fr Marianu Zelasek, saw how in the temple town of Puri, Orissa, hundreds of leprosy patients were wading through physical suffering caused by the incurable illness and the mental agony heaped upon them by the society that saw leprosy as a divine punishment for one’s evil karma. As a last resort they had flocked to the vicinity of the famous Pur Temple to beg from the kindness of the thousands of pilgrims that frequented the temple. Fr. Marianus, prompted by the mercy of Jesus who cured the leper (Mt 8:2-4), abandoned his customary mission station approach to evangelization, and went to Puri to care for the leprosy patients and their children. Though initially the local public shunned Fr. Marianus and his work due to their interpretation
his compassionate work, that they joined hands with him to assist the ‘missionary’ in his proclamation of mercy! Many doctors too pitched in, that Fr. Marianus exclaimed: though I failed to convert any to the church I have converted many to the divine mercy!

Probably this is one of the greatest contributions that Christianity has made to Indian culture. The example of Mother Theresa and her band of the Sisters of Charity as well as the hundreds of other sisters involved in various forms of bringing merciful service has served as leaven to Indian society at large. One did not hear of “Mission Hospitals” and similar centres of service other than the ones conducted by Christians until about the middle of the 20th century, though today they have become very common.

Very much in the same line, though not immediately recognized as such, is the service of late Fr. Joseph Idiyakunnel a Jesuit priest in Gujarat and the many who took inspiration from that venture and are trying to communicate mercy through their legal aid ministry. They are involved in restoring the dignity and human rights of the little ones of the society who are at the receiving end of the powers that are. Frequently at the root of the opposition to Christian presence, whether in Gujarat, in Khandamal, Orissa, or similar places, is the unwillingness to acknowledge the rights and claims to equality of the powerless sections of Indian society by the vested interests acting to safeguard their economic and social interests as well as political power. This makes involvement in communicating mercy through legal aid, empowerment programs, and others, risky as proved by many examples like that of Sr. Rany Maria, Fr. Thomas Pandipally and many more.

An associate avenue of communicating mercy is accepting those at the bottom of the Indian caste system, as equals without any discrimination, particularly, the denial of their rights. Again, the only allurements and material benefits where as often what attracted these people towards the church was the human respect they experienced from the church personnel. Thus, in the 1950s Fr. William Wullner, a Divine Word Missionary of German origin, went to Khandwa, M.P. and accepted the hospitality of the so-called outcastes of the town, staying in their houses, eating the rotty and dada they offered and listening to their stories and woes. That was the first time they experienced what it means to be equal to a white person. Naturally, he spoke to them of Jesus the friend of the outcastes. This attracted them to Christianity. True, there is the cancer of caste discrimination within the Christian community as well. However, evangelization as communication of divine mercy has to condemn it as an un-Christian practice and must take every step to root out the evil.

A closely interrelated issue in communicating mercy is the love for the poor. The church has to become a church for the poor, declared Pope Francis in March 2013 after his assuming of the papal ministry. In fact, more than all other characteristics and traits, what endeared Pope Francis to the world is his love for the poor that made him to adopt a simple life style as well, and advocating the same for fellow evangelizers manifesting “the power of the Father’s infinite mercy” (EG 24).

Communicating divine mercy through the love for the poor was integral to church’s evangelizing practice all through its history beginning with the apostolic times (Acts 6:1). In India this has been and is one of the most common expressions of mission in so far as practically all dioceses and religious congregations have one form or other of service to the poor. Some of the new initiatives in this direction are the ones like the mobile schools for children in the slums as the one conducted by the Canossa sisters in Andheri East, Mumbai, or caring for the street children, giving vocational training
What is required is a new attitude and a new ethos in the church making the poor and the powerless as the focus of the church’s evangelising mission.

Even as Jesus was God’s good eye (야인 토델 in Hebrew) (Mt 6:22-23), i.e., looking out for the needs of others, and generous in giving to the poor, as opposed to 야인 뱀 (to be self-centred), the Christian community has to become generous towards the needs of the people of our times and not just to be preoccupied with its own identity. The shine of the church is its concern for society’s vulnerable. As Lois Tverberg reminds us, “The more we read Jesus’ words in their Hebraic setting, the more we discover that if we want to follow Jesus as his first Jewish disciples did, we need to learn to have a very “good eye.”

In conclusion, the church, like Bartimeus the blind calling Jesus for help (Mk 10:46-52) and Jesus reaching out in mercy, has to reach out to the people of different contexts but in need of the divine mercy. This reaching out in mercy is the work of every baptized person as emphasized by Pope Francis in his address on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the synod of Bishops on 17 October 2015. Quoting Evangelii Gaudium (n 9) the Pope said: “All the baptized, whatever their position in the church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive.” This Church needs to be more merciful and less judgemental in its approach for it is “the vineyard of the Lord, the fertile Mother and the caring Teacher, who is not afraid to roll up her sleeves to pour oil and wine on people’s wound; who doesn’t see humanity as a house of glass to judge or categorize people. This is the Church, One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and composed of sinners. needful of God’s mercy.”