



# *Apostles for Today*

*Prayer and Reflection - July 2016*

---

## *Mercy and Justice, Critical Consciousness of Our Time*

The relationship between justice and mercy is an age-old issue which has marked the unfolding of Western civilization from the beginning. It has duly come to the fore every time that thought has tried to put order between what tend toward being polar opposites, such as between personal freedom and social order, between guilt and punishment, between recovery and redemption.

The conviction at which the Church has arrived during its two thousand years of history along with biblical revelation, is that broken order and harmony are restored only through linking together justice and mercy.

Justice and mercy are not words that can be substituted one for the other, and nor do they indicate perspectives opposed to each other. In his fundamental encyclical "*Dives in Misericordia*", John Paul II said: "... experience shows that other negative forces have gained the upper hand over justice, such as spite, hatred and even cruelty" (n. 12). In fact, human justice is always fragile and imperfect, subject as it is to limitations and personal or group conditioning, and therefore must include and, in a sense, be supported by, mercy, which is the inner form of love. Indeed, as John Paul II further clarifies, it becomes "becomes more evident that love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice - precise and often too narrow" (n. 5).

**“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth,”** admonishes St. Paul (1 Cor 13: 6). True mercy, in fact, demands first of all justice, the necessary basis of social life, where the order of the Good, of goodness, should reign. Those who wish to be merciful must first of all be just and must hear, echoing within themselves, that “hunger and thirst for justice” of which Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount. Mercy must produce first justice, if it wants to fulfil its true course. For this reason, mercy is not opposed to nor does it make excuses for justice, but includes it as its main expression and as its essential force. Therefore, mercy inspires and commands justice, it gives it heart and light because it surpasses for the better its rigid, formal distinctions.

This perspective finds its highest expression in the teachings and the very life of Christ. In many places in the Gospel, the Lord, while showing what we would today call “respect for the institutions” and for the laws of his day, at the same time points the way to a higher justice which goes beyond the merely narrow and psychological, and so transfigures it. And he does so to his final breath.

Tortured, insulted and crucified by the very representatives of the law, only the “thief”, a criminal entreats him. But it is precisely the “thief” - perhaps even a murderer - who for his gesture of humility and repentance, will be the first to gain Paradise. The carrying out of what Jesus himself had foretold to a caste which through pride considered itself honest and observant of the law - and formally it was:

And yet, “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matthew 21:31).

Benedict XVI takes a similar line in his first encyclical “*Deus Caritas Est*”, in which he significantly entitled a chapter precisely “Justice and charity”. “The just ordering of society and the State” - he

cautions - “is a central responsibility of politics. As Augustine once said, a State which is not governed according to justice would be just a bunch of thieves” - the Pope notes (at n. 28). For which, however, it must never be forgotten that “love - caritas - will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love”.

The common belief, according to which finally just structures would make any impulse of mercy superfluous, conceals, for the Pope, “a materialist conception of [the human person]: the mistaken notion that [human beings] can live ‘by bread alone’ (Mt 4:4; cf. Dt 8:3) - a conviction that demeans [us] and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human”.

Justice and mercy either walk hand in hand, one preparing the way for the other, or both limp, fumbling along in the dark. This is encapsulated very well in two Gospel parables.

The first is the **parable of the unforgiving servant** (Mt 18:23) in which the king discovers a servant who owes him ten thousand talents but, because of his pleas, does not carry out his original intention of selling him, his wife and their children, along with all his possessions, in order to pay off the debt. Just after this, the servant meets another just like him who owes him a hundred denarii. He grabs him and starts choking him, demanding that he pay his debt. The unforgiving servant does not want to hear the pleas of his fellow servant and throws him into prison until he can pay. His behaviour is, from the point of view of strict justice, irreproachable: the cancellation of his debt does not lead to an obligation on his part to do the same. What does condemn him, however, is the generous mercy shown towards him which he was unable to make his own: mercy accomplishes what justice never could, and leaves a mark that no

decision of justice could ever leave. The unforgiving servant chooses to slip into legalism and falls, however, in his turn into the net of justice: he who was merciful towards him was “beyond good and evil”, but the servant has chosen to cross back over this boundary.

The second **parable is that of the workers in the vineyard** (Mt 20:1-16). What law, what principle of justice, could ever stipulate that different jobs, of different duration, effort and intensity, be paid equally? And what judge could ever argue with those early morning workers who, believing themselves to have been treated unfairly, murmured against the master: “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat”!

Still, the owner of the vineyard knows how to call into question the very concept of human justice, based on an ordered scale of values and merit. Mercy, however, does not presuppose merit: it surpasses it; escapes its logic, like every true greatness of heart. The unpredictable gratuitousness of mercy completely turns the limited vision of human mentality on its head and becomes a stumbling block even to the principles of justice.

God's justice does not conflict, in reality, with human justice (each worker in the parable receives the agreed remuneration), but transcends it, completing and transforming it with love. For the jurist who pursues justice daily, an awareness of this excess becomes an intense and indispensable hope.

*Cristina Mastrorosati*  
*CCL Ostia - Italy*