



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - June 2016

Mercy and respect for life

Dear sisters and brothers in the UAC

After Pope Francis proclaimed the Holy Year of Mercy, I was asked by the General Secretariat whether I would contribute to Apostles for Today by writing a reflection on “Mercy and respect for life (in the broadest sense)”. I agreed, because the topic interests me. Meanwhile a few months have passed and, frankly, I do not quite know what to write. On the one hand the word mercy does not play a great role in our current everyday language; on the other hand, it has now reached a level almost of overuse in the Church. And now I am asked to add my own opinion about it! At the same time, I realise that it is more my nature to ask questions than to give binding answers. But maybe I was “chosen” for this topic because I have a special relationship to “life” through my job as a doctor, and thus my experience comes more from real life than from theological speculation. And so I want to share with you my thoughts, questions and efforts to explain.

When I approach a topic, I like to begin with a glance at the etymological dictionary. This explains the German word “*erbarmen*” – “to be merciful” as “to free from poverty, misfortune, misery, deprivation or, in the most general sense, from loneliness”. Therefore, in German, the term has a very charitable character. In Hebrew, on the other hand, the word for mercy, “*hesed*”, is related to that for “womb”, and therefore to

birth, creation, and so is directly linked to life. In our own existence and in looking at the history of the world, we experience the fact that life in itself is afflicted with misery, with suffering and death. Why this is so, why the all-powerful and benevolent God created such a frail world, is a question about which many theologians have racked their brains; ultimately I have found no solution that really satisfies me.

God created the world out of love, and out of mercy he redeemed it. We know and have internalised this article of faith. But I find it difficult to see myself as friends with a God who in the enthusiasm of his first love creates a world which he then realises has turned out pretty miserable, so that he needs to intervene again to bring the whole thing to a successful conclusion. (Maybe that sounds a bit too casual and not sufficiently reverent, but this happens to be one of the major objections of people who take a critical view towards our Christian faith - and I would like to take these brothers and sisters seriously.)

We believe that human beings are created by God, are creatures, and therefore so very different from God; not omnipotent, not infinite, not eternal. But we also believe that we are created in God's image, which is reflected in the fact that God grants us freedom, cognition, creativity and dominion over the world. We are not God, but at the same time each one of us is made uniquely in the image of God. This is our glory that can turn into our misery whenever we abandon that image and decide, through words and deeds and attitudes, that we are greater than God, that we want to live all or part of our lives without reference to the call of his infinite love which is inscribed in our very being. Here lies the root of our sinfulness, from human origins right up to the present. We human beings are conscious of this dilemma of our glory and our misery at the very heart of our existence, of our lived experience.

I escape from this dilemma only when I consider creation as not yet concluded, not completed. What for us creatures is happening in time, is for God, who is outside created time, a state of being “from eternity to eternity”. This is the only way I can explain to myself that the biblical creation account stands at the beginning of “our” time and God calls everything, good and indeed very good, and that then Paul writes to the Church in Rome that “the whole of creation to the present day sighs and groans in travail” and is still on the path to becoming good, even very good, in the fullest sense.. The love of the Father, the Creator, is eternal, and in this eternity he creates out of love the world, life, human beings in his image. In the Son, creation is already anticipated, as it says in John's prologue. He is, now speaking in a human scale, the beginning and the end of creation, its origin and destination. Through his incarnation he guides and accompanies human beings through the time of imperfection. The nature of this support is mercy, the incarnated love of God, flowing into the creation. The fruit of love is creation, the fruit of mercy is re-creation, the new creation or, more understandable for me, the completion of creation, as the prophet Isaiah describes it (Isaiah 11: 6-9). Certainly my thoughts are no “high theology”, but they help me overcome my questions and doubts.

If God is infinite love and mercy, then love and compassion are the most noble characteristics of we human beings as images of God, albeit to a limited and finite extent. If God accompanies us in compassion on our way to completion, it is our calling to accompany the *creation* over which we reign, the *life* that has been entrusted to us, the *people* who are on the way with us in mercy and compassion. If God “shows consideration” towards our temporal imperfection, has “respect” for us, then we also should show consideration to the wretched, the desolate. This means not only looking ahead, so we don't stray from the right path, but also to look around, to see whether those around us need our help.

And they definitely do need it. This calls for the well-known and often-quoted works of mercy: the so-called corporal works (based on Matthew 25,35 -40) relating to the basic human needs, focus on the *plight* of people. The spiritual works, formulated by Aurelius Augustinus, relate more to interpersonal relationships, with a focus on needs in relationship to *fellow human beings*.

One of the foundations of Pallottine spirituality is the likeness of all people to God. This is not a privilege that entitles us to all sorts of things, and certainly not to the destruction of life and the ruthless exploitation of the earth, but is our calling to follow God in his respect for creation, in His love and mercy. It is the calling of each one of us. Basically, charity is institutionalized in our modern welfare state, and therefore there are not a few who understand it as a *res publica* (a matter for the State) and not as a call for personal action. But precisely my profession of doctor shows me that relationship, based on compassion, mercy and on loving attention has to be a *res privata* (a matter for private individuals or groups), if it is to bear fruit and thus to succeed.

Respect for life. What does that mean for me? And what does that mean for us in the Pallottine family? I think it means looking lovingly at all creatures, of whom Vincent Pallotti said that he desired so much to be united with them in the Cenacle, even at all created things: to be prudent, cautious and considerate.

Such an attitude could certainly make the world a better place.

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