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### **One Jesuit's View of Mercy**

How do we, as our conference theme states, "live our prayer" and live in mercy? This workshop will draw on Ignatian spirituality and the writings of the most famous Jesuit, Pope Francis, and others, to give us very practical ways to bring forgiveness, compassion, and healing into our prayer and into our busy lives. (updated 6-22-16)

I would like to begin with a story from my hometown New Orleans. About two years ago, a colleague of mine was attending a town hall meeting of one of our local congressmen held in a well-to-do New Orleans neighborhood. There a group of Hispanic workers had attended in order to promote the cause of comprehensive immigration reform. One of the arguments raised by the proponents of reform was an appeal to the debt of gratitude that many New Orleanians should owe to the workers, often undocumented, who did the awful, dirty, dangerous work of cleaning and "remediating" our homes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina flooding. The response of a woman resident in attendance was to shout out, "We paid them for that!" It seemed to my colleague and me an extremely callous response when we recalled how in the first weeks and months after the hurricane, no one wanted to do this kind of work and many Hispanic workers lived in tents, overcrowded apartments, and worse while working in the intense heat and humidity of a failed city.

It seemed to us to reflect the ingratitude about which St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote in a letter. In his words:

It seems to me in the light of the Divine Goodness, although others may think differently, that ingratitude is the most abominable of sins and that it should be detested in the sight of our Creator and Lord by all of His creatures who are capable of enjoying His divine and everlasting glory. For it is a forgetting of the gracious benefits, and blessings received. As such it is the cause, beginning, and origin of all sins and misfortunes. On the contrary, the grateful acknowledgment of blessings and gifts received is loved and esteemed not only on earth but in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

This afternoon I would like to suggest that the reaction of this woman in New Orleans falls far short of the mercy to which Pope Francis is calling all of us.

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<sup>1</sup> Ignatius Loyola in *Letters, No. 55. The Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by William J. Young, S.J., Chicago, 1959.

For this talk's context, I also would suggest a kind of "environmental scan" of the State of Louisiana in the context of a special social justice index which our Jesuit Social Research Institute released in March of 2016, using nine social indicators which look at issues of poverty, racial disparities, and immigrant exclusion. We applied these indicators to all fifty states and the District of Columbia. On the social justice index, Louisiana scored 51<sup>st</sup>, last. Our poverty index looked first at the average income of the poorest quartile or 25% of states' households; in Louisiana it was \$11,156 per year.[repeat] The national average was \$15,281. We also looked at the share of persons without health insurance among the same quartile; it was 32% in Louisiana, compared with 21% nationally. And we looked at the percent of renter households in this group who pay over 30% of their income in rent; it was 90.6% in Louisiana, compared with 85% nationally.

On our racial disparity index, using a conservative measure we found that 22.1% of public schools in Louisiana are segregated, compared with 15.6% nationally. The wage gap between white and minority workers of the same age, occupation, and education was 21.1%, compared to 8.8% nationally; and the unemployment gap was 5.8%, compared to 4.1% nationally.

On our immigrant exclusion index, Louisiana had 21.5% of immigrant youth between 18 and 25 reported as "disconnected," meaning not in school and not working, compared with 15.2% nationally. 34.8% of Louisiana immigrants who have been in the U.S. at least five years reporting difficulty speaking English, compared with 28% nationally; and the health insurance gap between native born and immigrants in Louisiana is 26.9%.

Overseas of course we are all well aware of the plague of civil wars and terrorism and, as Pope Francis repeatedly emphasizes, the tens of millions of refugees and immigrants searching for a "home" away from violence, natural disaster, and grinding poverty. Many of those who did not die on the journey now stagnate in refugee camps, hide from marauding troops, or sleep on the streets or in the woods, jungles, or deserts.

It is in these contexts that Pope Francis comes to us speaking about and embodying his theme of being "as merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful." In the Bull or Letter calling for this Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, which just ended, Francis writes this:

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. 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. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, April 11, 2015, no. 2.

As you can tell, in the mind of Pope Francis the word Mercy is itself extremely rich and involves a range of other words like love, justice, reconciliation, forgiveness, etc. I turned to the old American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition, 1976, sitting on my desk and found a similar list of synonyms: *mercy, leniency, clemency, forbearance, and charity*, with this explanation:

*Mercy* emphasizes compassion in a general way; it suggests reprieve from a fate of considerable severity, without further implication. *Leniency* applies to a specific act of indulgence. *Clemency* is usually applied to a specific act of a person or agency charged with administering justice; the recipient therefore is considered an offender. *Forbearance*, especially in its legal sense, is allied to *clemency* in denoting the act of foregoing the execution of a right. *Charity*, in this context, is a nonspecific term denoting benevolence.

So, in following Pope Francis or the dictionary, we could go down many paths in this discussion of mercy and its implications for faith and justice.

I would like to take three paths, beginning each with a scripture passage and seeking the help of certain commentators as guides for the journey to help all of us understand the breadth and directions of the call of Pope Francis to mercy and its implications for faith and justice. The three paths are *forgiveness, compassion, and healing*.

### I. Forgiveness

The first Scripture story from Luke’s Gospel<sup>3</sup> is popularly called “the prodigal son,” although Pope Francis calls it “the parable of the merciful Father.”<sup>4</sup> The story is very familiar to all of us: a farmer has two sons ... the younger asks for his share of the inheritance, takes his booty and moves to the city where he blows it all ... in the midst of a famine, he ends up in the worst possible place for a Jew—feeding swine and wishing he could eat their food ... he realizes he would be better off as a servant in his father’s house, figuring he has blown his position as a son ... he goes home ... his father sees him from far off, runs to him, hugs him, and throws a big party ... Then the older son comes home, hears the ruckus, and refuses to join the party for his brother ... The father pleads with him saying: “He was dead, and is now alive! Lost and is now found!” [Interestingly, we are not told whether the older brother went in to the party.]

My commentator on this parable and forgiveness is Pope, now Saint, John Paul II. Before Pope Francis began talking and acting out of mercy, John Paul wrote an encyclical in 1980 entitled, *Rich in Mercy*. When he discusses the prodigal son in that encyclical, John Paul tells us that, while the word “mercy” never appears in the parable, “it nevertheless expresses the essence of the divine mercy in a particularly clear way.”<sup>5</sup> When he drills down on the

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<sup>33</sup> Luke 15:11-32.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Homily at Papal Mass for the Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome, April 7, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Saint John Paul II, *Rich in Mercy (Dives in Misericordia)*, November 30, 1980, no. 5.

parable, John Paul emphasizes the importance of human dignity—the bedrock of Catholic social teaching—in the story and in the functioning of father’s love and mercy. When the son left his home and his father with his booty, he was leaving behind his dignity as son. Even he acknowledges this and believes he has lost this beloved status when his planned request to his father is just to be treated as a hired servant. As John Paul puts it:

He measures himself by the standard of the goods he has lost, that he no longer ‘possesses,’ while the hired servants in his father’s house ‘possess’ them. These words express above all his attitude to material goods; nevertheless, under their surface is concealed the tragedy of lost dignity, the awareness of squandered sonship.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that his behavior has hurt and seriously offended his father, the father in fact does not impose the just judgment that the son believes is his only fair request. He does not turn the son into a servant who might over the years somehow earn his father’s love again. Rather, the father’s behavior, John Paul writes, reflects the constant mercy of God in the Old Testament to a people who constantly go astray. Even more, he writes, “The father of the Prodigal Son is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love that he had always lavished on his son.”<sup>7</sup> When the father greets the son with great affection and brings him back into the family, the pope writes, “Although the son has squandered the inheritance, nevertheless his humanity is saved.”

For John Paul, the mercy presented by Jesus in this parable reflects the *agape* love of the New Testament. In his words:

This love is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin. When this happens, the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and “restored to value.”<sup>8</sup>

When the father later urges the older brother to rejoice in the return of the younger one, we then hear echoes of the teaching of Jesus and the theme of Pope Francis this year that we are to be as merciful as our heavenly father is merciful. So, when Peter asks how many times he has to forgive his brother, the response of Jesus, as we know, is seventy-time-seven, which is an awful lot.

As Pope Francis puts it for our world today:

Jesus affirms that mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. At times how hard it is to forgive! And yet pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully.<sup>9</sup>

This understanding of forgiveness at the heart of mercy then explains why recent popes and our bishops have called for the abolition of the death penalty. It also helps us understand why, in the midst of the debate over comprehensive immigration reform, Christians should be appalled at the outcry against any form of “amnesty”—as if it were a dirty word—for those who are in our midst without legal documents. It also helps us to understand our Church’s repeated insistence that, no matter what crime a person commits or what a person’s immigration status, he or she never loses their essential human dignity, whether in a prison, a detention center, a court, or in political discourse.

So what might all this mean for us in prayer and in our daily lives? Pope Francis talked about this in October with the Jesuits gathered in Rome for their 36<sup>th</sup> General Congregation. There he blended the deeds of mercy with a deep insight into experiencing mercy ourselves:

As Ignatius describes his experience of mercy in these comparative terms – the more he failed the Lord, the more He reached out in giving him His grace – he is releasing the life-giving power of mercy—which we often dilute with our abstract formulations and legalistic conditions. The Lord who looks on us with mercy and chooses us, sends us out to bring that same mercy, with all its power, to the poorest, to sinners, to the discarded and crucified people in the present world, who are suffering injustice and violence. Only if we experience this healing power first-hand in our own wounds, as individual persons and as a body, will we lose the fear of letting ourselves be moved by the immensity of our brothers’ and sisters’ suffering. Only thus will we set ourselves to walk patiently with our peoples, learning from them the best way of helping and serving them. (cf. GC 32, d.4 n.50)

So, in my prayer I need to go deeper into the very personal experience of being forgiven by Christ (a key grace of the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*) in order to know and to experience the “life-giving power of mercy” to reach out to the least among us.

## II. Compassion

The second path to understanding the theme of mercy in the teaching of Pope Francis is compassion. The parable on which I want to focus is the story of the Good Samaritan in the tenth chapter of *Luke*. Pope Benedict called this one of the three “great parables” of Jesus, along with the Rich Man and Lazarus and the judgment scene in *Matthew 25*.<sup>10</sup> All are about

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, *op. cit.*, no. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*.

social justice. We all are quite familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus tells in response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

The guides I have chosen for going down this path are two Jesuits: the moral theologian Jim Keenan, SJ, and the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles Greg Boyle, SJ. I will start with Keenan. Moralist James Keenan, SJ, defines mercy as “the willingness to enter into the chaos of another so as to respond to the other...”<sup>11</sup> In the work of Catholic Charities, for example, many of those served come from abusive home environments, life on the streets, a world of addictions, chronic unemployment, and the grinding world of persistent poverty—what Keenan would call “the chaos of the margins.”<sup>12</sup> In the parable of the Good Samaritan, although he has done nothing to injure the man, the Samaritan enters into the chaos of the man wounded by the roadside—robbed, beaten, and left to die. He has nothing. The Samaritan breaks his own journey, uses precious wine and oil to treat the man’s wounds, takes him to the next inn, and cares for him. Then, in the ways our Church has established so many caring ministries, the Samaritan gives the hotel-keeper the money to continue caring for the wounded man while he proceeds on his journey, promising to pay more if needed on his return journey.

The question which had prompted Jesus to tell this parable was, “Who is my neighbor?” As Pope Benedict explained, the earlier more narrow definition of neighbor within Israel was now “abolished” in the telling of this parable. Benedict continued:

Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor. The concept of “neighbor” is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now.<sup>13</sup>

The Latin roots of the word compassion are *cum (with) and passio (to suffer)—to suffer with*. In Father Greg Boyle’s words, it means “allowing our hearts to ‘be broken by the very thing that breaks the heart of God.’”<sup>14</sup> This would be consistent with the sub-title of his book *Tattoos on the Heart: “The power of boundless compassion.”* As a man whose ministries are with gang members and ex-gang members, Fr. Boyle is immersed in the world of poverty. From that experience, instead of the blaming and accusations which dominate so much political discourse about poverty, Boyle tells us this about what compassion is: “To be in the world as God is. Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James Keenan, SJ, “Virtues, Chastity, and Sexual Ethics,” Lecture Paper for the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, at [www.nplc.org/commonground/papers/kennanpaper.htm](http://www.nplc.org/commonground/papers/kennanpaper.htm). Keenan has written extensively on this topic for two decades or more.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Boyle, SJ, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, (New York: Free Press, 2010), p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

Boyle tells us that he learned this from Jesus. He explains it this way:

Jesus was not a man *for* others. He was one *with* others. There is a world of difference in that. Jesus didn't seek the rights of lepers. He *touched* the leper even before he got around to curing him. He didn't champion the cause of the outcast. He *was* the outcast. He didn't fight for improved conditions for the prisoner. He simply said, "I was in prison."<sup>16</sup>

Boyle tells a story to illustrate God's compassion for all of us. A young man in prison tells him this about his mother:

"I've been locked up for more than a year and a half. She comes to see me every Sunday. You know how many buses she takes every Sunday—to see my sorry ass?"

Then, quite unexpectedly he sobs with the same ferocity as before. Again, it takes him some time to reclaim breath and an ability to speak. Then he does, gasping through his tears. "Seven buses. She takes...seven...buses. Imagine."

Father Boyle continues:

How, then, to imagine, the expansive heart of this God—greater than God—who takes seven buses, just to arrive at us. ... Our image of who God is and what's on God's mind is more tiny than it is troubled. It trips more on our puny sense of God than over conflicting creedal statements or theological considerations.<sup>17</sup>

Now, in our prayer and contemplation we might ask about compassion in our world and in our nation. How compassionate is it for us to imprison so many prisoners and immigrant detainees far more than seven buses from family, friends, and legal resources? How compassionate for hungry families is it for Congress to propose once more this year to slash the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—once known as food stamps? How compassionate for millions of refugee families—including Muslims—are policies to close our borders and treat them all as criminals?

For us as we think about these questions about compassion in our world, Greg Boyle has one final reflection:

God is compassion, loving kindness. All we're asked to do is to be in the world who God is. Certainly compassion was the wallpaper of Jesus' soul, the contour of his heart, it was who he was. I heard someone say once, "Just assume the answer to every question is compassion."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

Besides our prayer and contemplation, this lesson about compassion asks of me: how then do I listen to the news, watch the suffering of the world, and how does it enter through prayer into my heart and soul? How does it expand the definition of who is my neighbor: prisoner, immigrant, welfare mother, drug addict, etc? And, finally, as Boyle put it, how does it break my heart with God's heart?

Canadian theologian Gregory Baum suggests that one proper Christian response to social evil is **mourning**. We don't close our eyes to the harshness of human evil or natural disaster, but we also do not blame ourselves or others if we are not involved. **We mourn**. We grieve the suffering of human persons like ourselves and join our grief and mourning to that of God and of all creation. We take a moment or an hour of personal time, of our meetings, and of our prayer to attune ourselves to the suffering around us, to be one with it, and to mourn.

### III. Healing

The third path to understanding mercy is healing. The Scripture text is from the first chapter of *Mark*, one of the earliest cures by Jesus. Here is the brief story:

A leper came begging to him and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people.

One of the most significant and continuing actions of Jesus is healing of the sick, possessed, and disabled. In this first chapter Mark's gospel, in a busy day at the beginning of the Galilean ministry, Jesus cures a Demoniac, Simon's mother-in-law, and, at sunset, a crowd of the ill and possessed who are brought to the door of the house of Simon and Andrew. The next day he cures the leper. When he later sends his disciples out on mission, he charges them to cast out demons and to heal the sick: "Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness" (*Matt 10:1*).

Healing is also an early sign in the *Acts of the Apostles* of the power of Christ's Spirit active in the person of the apostles after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus into heaven (*Acts 3:1-10*). In the centuries that followed, healing became an intrinsic part of the church's ministry and continues as such in this country in a vast network of hospitals, nursing homes, parish nurse programs, and home health services.

*Why is healing so central to the ministry of Jesus and to understanding mercy?* Our guide here is Immaculate Heart of Mercy Sister Juliana Casey, IHM.

In Jesus' society, those who were ill or disabled—often considered to be caused by possession by a demon—were isolated from the community. *Leviticus* required, for example, that those who were judged to have leprosy were to cry out, “Unclean, unclean” (13:45-46), when approached by others. Like sickness or disability today, people were marginalized by their condition and alienated from the community.

What does Jesus do, Sister Juliana asks, when he encounters those who have been cut off and marginalized by sickness and disability? First, he steps across the boundaries and social barriers around them. Then, in direct violation of the religious laws, he touches them just as he did the leper in Mark's Gospel. Jesus puts his hands on their eyes, ears, tongues, or other affected areas. By that action, Jesus risks being declared unclean himself and ostracized just as they have been.<sup>19</sup> After he touches and heals these people, Jesus often instructs them to return home (*Matt* 9:6-7; *Mark* 2:11, 5:19, 8:26; *Luke* 8:39) or, with lepers, as in our story, to go and show themselves to the priest (*Matt* 8:4; *Luke* 5:14,17:14). *Why?* So that they could be declared clean and then allowed to return home (*Lev* 14:8). He is restoring them, then, not just to good health, but back to their families and communities, setting relationships right among them. Healing brings the reconciliation that is central to the jubilee tradition and, as Jesus himself claims, a sign that the reign of God is among them (*Luke* 11:20).

In contemporary society, sickness and disability continue to isolate people from their families and communities. Some diseases legally require isolation or quarantine, even today. In addition, our struggle over recent decades to effect architectural, mechanical, or social changes on behalf of persons with disabilities is often called “handicapped access.” It reflects the fact that, without these changes, such persons were often unable to participate in—to “access”—the life of the community in public buildings, supermarkets, movie theatres, museums, and even places of worship. Healing, then, can be seen today as an expression, not only of God's compassion and mercy, but of the covenant with God that requires covenantal relationships among all people.<sup>20</sup>

For us then, this healing aspect of God's mercy calls us in our ministries to actions similar to those taken by Jesus. Just as he dared to cross the boundaries erected around the sick and disabled, how are we asked to cross boundaries of race, class, gender, or national origin to stand with the marginalized of our world? Just as Jesus dared to touch the untouchable, how are we called to touch those shunned by society for some illness, for their poverty, for their addictions, or even for having committed a crime? Just as Jesus healed the

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6. “In addition, both social and religious rules existed concerning what one could or could not touch. To touch something/someone considered unclean was to become unclean oneself. Lepers were, of course, unclean, as were the dead. A menstruating woman was unclean. In each case, contact with such persons demanded an elaborate ritual of purification. However, Jesus touched lepers, he touched the dead, and he was sensitive to a menstruating woman's touch. ... We accept that Jesus frequently touched the people he healed, but within his cultural milieu, this was truly astonishing.” Juliana Casey, I.H.M., Food for the Journey: Theological Foundations of the Catholic Healthcare Ministry (St. Louis: The Catholic Health Association of the United States, 1991), p. 23.

7. Ibid, pp. 50-53.

sick and disabled and returned them to family and community, how are we called to reconcile the excluded of our communities, our families, or our nation? What form of reconciliation is it, for example, when those released from prison are not allowed to vote, are excluded from jobs, or otherwise suffer punishment for the rest of their lives.

Beneath the call to heal all our relationships, there is implied yet one more form of healing to which Pope Francis invites us—that is, healing ourselves of the indifference and silence which Francis tells us “lead to complicity whenever we stand by as people are dying of suffocation, starvation, violence, and shipwreck...These are always tragedies, even when a single life is lost.”<sup>21</sup>

**In conclusion**, these three themes or paths—forgiveness, compassion, and healing—are ways to understand the call to Mercy of Pope Francis and ways for us to travel every year on our journey with Christ Jesus in service to the Father of Mercies and by the power of their Spirit of love and mercy.

Epilogue: I just received the documents of the 36<sup>th</sup> Jesuit General Congregation (2016) and there I found the following sections on mercy in a document called *Companions in Mission*:

19. At the heart of Ignatian spirituality is the transforming encounter with the mercy of God in Christ that moves us to a generous personal response. The experience of the merciful gaze of God on our weakness and sinfulness humbles us and fills us with gratitude, helping us to become compassionate ministers to all. Filled with the fire of Christ’s mercy, we can enflame those we meet. This foundational experience of God’s mercy has always been the source of the apostolic audacity that has marked the Society and which we must preserve.

20. “Mercy,” Pope Francis reminds us, “is not an abstraction but a lifestyle consisting in concrete gestures rather than mere words.” For us Jesuits, compassion is action, an action discerned together. Yet we know that there is no authentic familiarity with God if we do not allow ourselves to be moved to compassion and action by an encounter with the Christ who is revealed in the suffering, vulnerable faces of people, indeed in the suffering of creation.

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<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, Statement for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, released October 1, 2015.