Landas 30:2 (2016) 119–131

MERCY AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

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Christianity is a missionary religion. Jesus Christ was the first missionary whom the Father sent to save the world, and all followers of Jesus, too, are missionaries.[1] In the pre-Vatican II era, however, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church understood mission as converting people to Christianity. The hierarchy considered priests and consecrated religious as missionaries who spread the Gospel of Christ, and relegated the role of the laity to supporting the missionaries through prayers and finances.[2]

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[1]Pope John Paul II noted in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio:* "[T]here is a new awareness that *missionary activity is a matter for all Christians*, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations" (no. 2).

Pope Francis echoed similar views as well in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium:*

> In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (Mt. 28:19). 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 recipients. (no. 120)

[2]See Sharon Henderson Callahan, "The Roman Catholic Lay Leader," in Sharon Henderson Callahan, ed., *Religious Leadership: A Reference* Vol. 1 (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 136–144.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, however, reversed this understanding, noting that all Christians are missionaries, irrespective of their juridical status in the Church. They also redefined the scope of mission,[3] seeing it no longer as a means of doing something for the people but being with the people. Mission is not like one-way traffic where missionaries alone keep on giving the love and mercy of Jesus to the people; rather, it is more like two-way traffic, a giving and receiving of mercy to and from others.

In this article, we shall reflect upon the virtue of mercy and trace its role in Jesus' public ministry to show that mercy is the key to Christian mission. The primary resources for our study will be Pope Francis' Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus* (hereafter referred to as MV) and other Church documents.

1. Mercy in Jesus' Ministry

Jesus is the model *par excellence* for all missionaries. The Gospels note various episodes and parables where Jesus announces the mercy of God to common people,[4] clearly revealing through His life and ministry that He was a person full of mercy and love. In the following sections, we shall examine some of these episodes and parables to understand the importance of mercy in Jesus' public ministry.

Jesus taught His disciples, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk. 6:36), and that blessed "are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Mt. 5:7). For Jesus, both to be merciful and to receive mercy were very important actions for the spiritual growth of a person.[5] Thus, as a true person, Jesus kept Himself open to receive

[3]See Roger P. Schroeder, *What is the Mission of the Church?: A Guide for Catholics* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 89–111.

[4]See Jürgen Roloff, ed., *Theology of the New Testament* Vol. 1, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 125–126.

[5]See John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1–7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 187–197.

mercy in the form of affection from others and had mercy on all those whom He met.

Jesus healed the sick and the possessed. He had compassion for the infirm (see Mt. 14:14). He had compassion on the crowd which came to hear Him. He knew they were hungry and would faint if they had no food, and so worked a miracle to feed them (see Mt. 15:32).

Jesus had compassion for the widow of Nain, who lost her young son. He raised her son back to life (see Lk. 7:11–15). Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus (see Jn. 11:35). He raised Lazarus back to life (see Jn 11:38–44).

Jesus called ordinary persons to be His apostles, and trusted them even though they were not perfect.[6] He called Matthew, whose profession as a tax collector was considered sinful. When the Pharisees complained to the disciples of Jesus that He, being a spiritual *guru*, was associating Himself with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus boldly replied, "'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (see Mt. 9:11–13).

Pope Francis notes that this Gospel episode about the call of Matthew has a direct connection with his Episcopal motto: *miserando atque eligendo*. He says, quoting St. Bede's commentary on this passage, that "Jesus looked upon Matthew with merciful love and chose him: *miserando atque eligendo*. This expression impressed me so much that I chose it for my Episcopal motto."[7]

Jesus taught His disciples that God, His *Abba*, is full of mercy and love; His parables in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke clearly show this, a God who has mercy on all. In the parable of the lost

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[6]See Leo Zanchettin, *Acts of the Apostles: A Devotional Commentary* (Frederick, MD: Word Among Us Press, 2001), 27–28.

[7]Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* 8. Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html (accessed February 2, 2017). Hereafter referred to as MV.

sheep, the shepherd risks leaving ninety-nine sheep behind to search for the one lost sheep, and does not rejoice until it is found. Similarly, in the parable of the lost coin, the woman who loses the coin does not rest until she finds it. Finally, in the parable of the loving Father and the prodigal son, Jesus teaches that God is in love with the whole of humanity, here represented by the prodigal son who, like all peoples, is in need of mercy and pardon.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus commends the Samaritan, who passes over cultural differences to help the wounded person (see Lk. 10:25–37). The priest and the Levite symbolize the lethargic system, which enjoys basking in the limelight but refuses to reach out to the weak and the oppressed. Through this parable, Jesus taught that love and mercy overcome all differences.

In the parable of the two debtors, the Master forgives his debtor but this debtor in turn refuses to show mercy to his debtor (see Mt. 18:21–35). Here Jesus stresses the importance of receiving and showing mercy—the one who refuses to show mercy to others closes the door of mercy on himself or herself.[8] He concludes the parable by saying that this "is what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart" (Mt. 18:35).

Jesus once again teaches the importance of reaching out to others with love in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (see Lk. 16:19–31). In the parable, we read that the rich man had done no wrong to Lazarus, yet God still condemns him to hell. The reason behind his condemnation is not because of what he did but rather what he did not do.[9] God had blessed him with wealth so that he could share his resources with others. However, he did not show mercy to the poor beggar, Lazarus, who was sitting at his gate. The rich man represents the powerful in society who do not hesitate to indulge in

[8]See David Dockery & David Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom: The Sermon on the Mount Made Practical for Today* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 27–29.

[9]See Randolph King, Jr., *Forgiven But Not Perfect* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2005), 43–52.

the extravagances and luxuries of life but fail to share their resources for the good of the weak.

Jesus did not merely preach about love and mercy, however; He showed the depth of His own care for us through His passion and death. In spite of the excruciating physical, mental, and spiritual agony as He hung on the Cross, he had the heart to forgive not just the thief at His side (see Lk. 23:42–43) but the whole of humanity as well (see Lk 23:24). He knew that His disciples would feel the pain of His absence and so He gave His mother to them (see Jn. 19:26–27). The figure of the mother is the symbol of mercy—by gifting His loving Mother Mary to His disciple John (who represented the whole of humanity), Jesus proved His profound love and mercy for all.

Finally, after His death and resurrection, Jesus sent His Spirit upon His disciples to be with them and to continue His ministry of love and mercy through them until the end of time. The Gospels are thus filled with episodes which clearly prove that the life and ministry of Jesus were heavily permeated with acts of love and mercy.

2. Mission of Mercy

The mission of Jesus—to reveal the love and mercy of God—is the mission of the Church.[10] Jesus emphasized the importance of love and mercy through His life, death, and resurrection. All His teachings centered on the same theme. The mission of the Church, therefore, is also primarily the mission of mercy.

Pope Francis echoed similar sentiments in MV. He noted,

> The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. The Spouse of Christ must pattern her behaviour after the Son of God who went out to everyone without exception. In the present day, as the Church is charged with the task

[10]See John Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church: A Study of Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 193–206.

> of the new evangelization, the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father.[11]

In the contemporary world, cutthroat competition and the pursuit for more bring enormous stress and pressure on people. Some are tempted to take the wrong path in order to achieve success, and in the process lose their direction in life. The Church needs to reach out to them with love and mercy; she needs to avoid labeling them as sinners. Jesus hated sin, not the sinners. He did not condemn the woman caught in adultery but condemned her sin. His love and mercy transformed that woman's life. Similarly, He praised the woman who anointed His feet and dried them with her hair. Even though the Pharisees looked on this woman as a sinner, Jesus did not; rather, he looked upon her as a forgiven sinner. He made His thoughts clear through the parable of the creditor and two debtors (see Lk. 7:36–50), telling Simon,

> Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. Then he said to her, Your sins are forgiven. (Lk. 7:44–48)

The Church needs to live the message of love and mercy that she preaches. Instead of condemning people's weaknesses and looking upon them as sinners, the Church needs to welcome them just as Jesus welcomed sinners. Jesus' openness towards sinners transformed them[12] and gave them a tremendous experience of God in their lives, an experience that helped them to give up sin. Thus, if the Church

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[11]MV 12.

[12]See Marty Haugen, *To Serve As Jesus Did: A Ministerial Model for Worship Teams & Leaders* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005), 81–88.

pushes away those who do not follow the teachings of the Gospel in the contemporary world, she risks losing them forever. But, if she approaches them as Jesus approached sinners, then there is a great chance that they may turn into saints.

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well thus serves as a model for the Church when entering into a sincere dialogue with those who are leading a wayward life (see Jn. 4:1–42).[13] When Jesus asks the Samaritan woman to give Him a drink, she immediately begins to confront Him by calling Him a Jew. She points to cultural barriers which do not allow Jews and Samaritans to dine together. However, Jesus continues to dialogue with her and begins to talk about living water. Unfortunately, the woman does not comprehend the spiritual nature of the living water. She once again objects to His offer, reasoning out that since Jesus has no bucket with Him, He could not possibly draw water from a deep well. Again, Jesus does not give up His dialogue with her. He continues to talk about spiritual things, and boldly offers her living water which can quench her thirst eternally. The woman does not yet sense the spiritual meaning of Jesus' talk, but she finds His offer very delightful. She probably thinks that if she could get the living water which could quench her thirst eternally, she would have no need to come back and draw water from the well. This living water could save her effort and time. Therefore, she readily asks Jesus to give her this living water.

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman to bring her husband along with her to fetch the living water. The woman replies that she has no husband. Jesus does not negate her; instead, He reveals to her that He knows everything about her past life and about her five husbands, and He tells her that she is presently living with a man and committing adultery. Jesus through His divine wisdom knows about the Samaritan woman's past, but He does not put her to shame or condemn her like the Pharisees do. Jesus only makes her realize that He has mysterious powers working in Him.

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[13]See Thomas Ascheman, "Witness-Dialogue-Dimensions: An SVD View of Mission Today," *Studia Missionalia* 55 (2006): 215–238.

When the woman realizes that Jesus knows everything about her past and present life, she considers Him a prophet and so begins to rise above her previous earthly concerns in order to speak of spiritual things with him. Thus, when Jesus sees that the woman has risen up to the spiritual level, He reveals to her the definition of true worship.[14] He tells her, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:24).

The encounter with Jesus transformed the woman's life, giving her the courage to go back to her town and speak to the people who probably looked down on her because of her sinful ways. She boldly tells them, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can He?" (Jn. 4:29). Her testimony in turn has a great influence on the townspeople. They too experience a transformation of life—"Many Samaritans from that city believed in Him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done'" (Jn. 4:39). Moreover, once they encounter Jesus, they become convinced that He is the Messiah, and they no longer have to depend on the Samaritan woman's testimony. "They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world'" (Jn. 4:42). Jesus' ongoing dialogue of love and mercy with the Samaritan woman therefore transforms not only her life but also many others in that town. It is an episode that truly teaches the art of dialogue.

Indeed, no amount of rational debate can convince people today to follow the teachings of Christ. In fact, they may probably have more reasons to consider the Church's teachings as rubbish. The Church, therefore, needs to realize that mere doctrines and condemnation will not help,[15] and that she needs to embrace people just as the Father

[14]See Robert Tremmel, *The Four Gospels* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2011), 120–121.

[15]See Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, & William Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982–1998* (Grand Rapids: WCC Publications, 2000), 485–565.

unconditionally embraced his prodigal son (see Lk. 15:20). The Church needs to practice her teachings of love and mercy. Like Jesus, she needs to enter into dialogue with all those "Samaritans" who may be leading a "sinful" life, and pursue them even when they confront and mock her. The perseverance, love, and mercy of the Church will definitely have a salutary influence on them over the due course of time. They will begin to see the mysterious work of God in the Church and her teachings. As Pope Francis notes,

> The Church feels the urgent need to proclaim God's mercy. Her life is authentic and credible only when she becomes a convincing herald of mercy. She knows that her primary task, especially at a moment full of great hopes and signs of contradiction, is to introduce everyone to the great mystery of God's mercy by contemplating the face of Christ. The Church is called above all to be a credible witness to mercy, professing it and living it as the core of the revelation of Jesus Christ.[16]

Jesus healed people who suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Gospel of Matthew notes, "When [Jesus] went ashore, He saw a great crowd; and He had compassion for them and cured their sick" (Mt. 14:14). Jesus' ministry of healing revealed His unfathomable mercy for the whole of humanity, served as a sign of the reign of God among people, and demonstrated His divine power. Thus, reaching out to people and healing them in the name of Jesus needs to be the ministry of the Church. She needs to apply healing balm rather than rubbing salt on people's inner wounds. Pope Francis urges the Church to have mercy when she deals with people who are in need of inner healing. He notes,

> We will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity, and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ, asking him to pour out his mercy upon us like the morning dew, so that everyone may work together to build a brighter future. How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God. May the balm of mercy

[16]MV 25.

> reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst.[17]

Christians need to understand the real meaning of mercy in order to be genuinely merciful: "Mercy is the compassionate care for others whereby one takes on the burden of another's as one's own. It is an active quality of the virtue of charity, motivated by love."[18] God has consistently revealed His mercy through all the generations; both the Old and New Testament demonstrate His gracious and merciful nature. Therefore, as recipients of God's love and mercy, Christians need to be generous to others. Pope Francis noted,

> To be instruments of mercy because it was we who first received mercy from God. To be generous with others, knowing that God showers his goodness upon us with immense generosity.[19]

Christians need to prepare themselves to be instruments of spreading love and mercy in this world. Personal prayer, regular receptions of sacraments, and meditation on the Bible are some of the useful resources they need to employ to be loving and merciful in imitation of Jesus Christ. Pope Francis also notes the importance of having internal silence to hear the message of God. He says,

> In order to be capable of mercy, therefore, we must first of all dispose ourselves to listen to the Word of God. This means rediscovering the value of silence in order to meditate on the Word that comes to us. In this way, it will be possible to contemplate God's mercy and adopt it as our lifestyle.[20]

The early Christians proved their loyalty to Jesus not by outward religious observances but by their way of life. Their sincere love, mercy, and joy attracted people towards them. Just like the early

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[17]MV 5.

[18]Julia Upton, "Mercy," in Michael Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 653–654.

[19]MV 14.

[20]MV 13.

Christians, therefore, the Christians of the present age need to attract people through their acts of genuine love and mercy. They need to be instruments of mercy.

> 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 of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. At times how hard it seems 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.[21]

Sometimes, however, people question the relation between mercy and justice.[22] They argue that if someone in the name of mercy pardons a gross offender then that person does not do justice, and that offenders would take advantage of people who are compassionate. But, while it is true that sometimes people misunderstand the relation between mercy and justice, God Himself is full of mercy *and* justice. God's compassion for humanity does not make Him unjust. We can thus learn from God's attributes of mercy and justice, attributes which Pope Francis clarifies are not opposites but complementary. He notes,

> It would not be out of place at this point to recall the relationship between justice and mercy. These are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love. Justice is a fundamental concept for civil society, which is meant to be governed by the rule of law. Justice is also understood as that which is rightly due to each individual. In the Bible, there are many references to divine justice and to God as judge. In these passages, justice is understood as the full observance of the Law and the behaviour of every good Israelite in conformity with God's commandments. Such a vision, however, has not infrequently led to legalism by distorting the original meaning of justice and obscuring its profound value. To overcome this legalistic perspective, we need

[21]MV 9.

[22]See Terry Veing, *The Beatitude of Mercy: Love Watches Over Justice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2015), 11–33.

> to recall that in Sacred Scripture, justice is conceived essentially as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God's will.[23]

God's mercy and justice are complementary.[24] Society does not expect Christians to allow others to take advantage of their mercy, yet Christians need to be prudent when they deal with people who come to them with ulterior motives. Furthermore, having mercy on an offender does not mean that he or she need not atone for their crimes. Every offender needs to repent and atone for his or her misdeeds, but Pope Francis notes that if Christians treat even offenders as human persons with dignity, then that could bring about an internal transformation in them. God did not abandon sinful humanity. Rather, He showed the depth of His mercy and justice through Jesus whom he sent to save the world. Pope Francis notes,

> Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God's way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert, and believe. If God limited himself to only justice, he would cease to be God, and would instead be like human beings who ask merely that the law be respected. But mere justice is not enough. Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in its destruction. This is why God goes beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness. Yet this does not mean that justice should be devalued or rendered superfluous. On the contrary: anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price. However, this is just the beginning of conversion, not its end, because one begins to feel the tenderness and mercy of God. God does not deny justice. He rather envelops it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice. We must pay close attention to what Saint Paul says if we want to avoid making the same mistake for which he reproaches the Jews of his time: "For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified" (Rom. 10:3–4). God's justice is his mercy given to everyone as a grace that flows from the death

[23]MV 20.

[24]See Christopher Dowdy, "Mercy," in Joel Green, Jacqueline Lapsley, Rebekah Miles, & Allen Verhey, eds., *Dictionary of Scripture & Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 521–522.

> and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus the Cross of Christ is God's judgement on all of us and on the whole world, because through it he offers us the certitude of love and new life.[25]

Christian mission, therefore, means to spread God's love and mercy. As such, even though Christians are not perfect instruments for demonstrating God's marvelous acts of mercy and love, they need to make the effort to be humble agents of change in this world.

3. Conclusion

God's mercy is unfathomable. Jesus showed the depth of His love and mercy for the whole of humanity by His Cross, Death, and Resurrection. The Gospels note that He was a person full of love and mercy who demonstrated mercy through all His works and actions. Thus, Christians who profess to continue His ministry also need to be instruments of love and mercy. They need to be merciful to others and also be open to receive mercy from others. In this light, Pope Francis in *Misericordiae Vultus* strongly recommends all people of good will to be "*misericordes sicut Pater*" (merciful, just as your Father is merciful [Lk. 6:36]). His message gives hope to those who seek mercy as well as strength to all who are struggling to have mercy on others. He is guiding the whole Church to follow the path of Jesus, which was the path of mercy.

[25]MV 21.