MERCY AS EMBRACE: AN UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION THROUGH MIROSLAV VOLF'S *EXCLUSION* AND EMBRACE

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Introduction

Human history and experience—especially in the world's entry into the twentieth century—tell stories of violence such as terrorism, wars, genocide, and murder. People continue to experience injustice, murder, oppression, abuse, and exploitation in their everyday lives. Such a tragic reality makes the offense look unforgivable. This created a tension between the cry for justice of the oppressed and the call to forgive. Caught in this situation, will forgiveness and reconciliation still be possible?

A contemporary theologian, Miroslav Volf, has written extensively about forgiveness and reconciliation. He developed his works in a context fraught with disturbing wars and out of deep concern for today's social and political realities. This article presents Volf's theology of Mercy as seen in one of his works, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. The discussion outlines Volf's concepts of "identity and otherness" and "exclusion," against which he subsequently constructs his central argument on "embrace."

This paper systematically analyzes theological texts, carefully examining the articulation and development of Volf's

understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation vis-à-vis the Catholic Church's theology of Mercy. Integrating Volf's theology of embrace leads to an understanding of Mercy as an embracive identity, as exercising double vision, and as the will to embrace.

Miroslav Volf's Concept of Exclusion and Embrace

The concepts of Identity and Otherness, Exclusion, and Embrace guided the discussion of Volf's theology of forgiveness and reconciliation. He pins his theology of embrace on the premise of God's reception of humanity into divine communion. The personal experience of and faith in a merciful God can shape one's identity as an embracing identity patterned in the Trinitarian understanding of relationships – the mutual interiority of the Trinity, the decentering and recentering of the self in Christ, and the power and grace of the Holy Spirit that moves one from exclusion to embrace.

Identity and Otherness

Because he observes the imbalance between wealth and power among cultures, Volf argues that the formation of identity—the kind of selves people need to be rather than creating social arrangements—plays a crucial role in any attempt at reconciliation. A healthy understanding of 'distancing' and 'belonging' about the self and culture allows for creating space to receive the other. An identity, both bounded and not self-enclosed, can pursue reconciliation.

The journey to becoming this type of self begins with revisiting the life of Abraham and Paul. For Volf, Abraham and Paul exemplified the proper and healthy distance from and belonging to their culture in the continuous pursuit of embracing

all cultures and people. Abraham's response to God's call by departing from his country depicts the Volfian understanding of distance. In a sense, distance means becoming a stranger to one's given culture. It requires a departure from a "particular culture and give ultimate allegiance to the God of all cultures."[1] Distance allows room for others, reveals the truth about oneself and one's culture, and enriches each other's culture and identity.

But how does a culture keep its identity as it opens itself to others? How is the true *universal* God revealed to a *particular* people? How does the promise to one family become a blessing to all people? How can the tension between cultural particularity and God's universality be solved? In answering these questions, Volf turns to the framework provided by Paul: the cross of Christ. Volf explains Paul's "creative re-appropriation of the original Abrahamic revolution."[2] In his letter to the Galatians (Gal. 3:1-4:11.), Paul admonishes the Galatians to understand that it is neither by the law nor genealogy that they become descendants of Abraham and children of God, but by their faith in, and through God's grace. Further into the epistle, Paul emphasizes the unitive and all-embracing qualities of Christ's cross and resurrection. A new community is formed through them, "the one body of Christ." In this Body, the diversity in members is not wiped out. Still, it is gathered and united as a "complex interplay of differentiated bodies – Jewish and Gentile, female and male, slave and free."[3]

As seen in Abraham's life and Paul's writings, both cultural distance and cultural belonging are essential. "Belonging without distance destroys; but distance without belonging isolates."[4] While

1. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 39-40.

2. Cf. Ibid., 50.

3. Ibid., 48.

4. Ibid., 50.

the Abrahamic call to depart remains, Paul made it possible to depart without leaving. For Christians to practice this healthy dynamic between distance and belonging, they will have to "distance themselves from their own culture because, following the Crucified, they understand that there is an ultimate reality more important than their culture, and so they are ready to give an ultimate loyalty to God and his promised new world"[5] – their distance always involves belonging, and their belonging takes the form of distance. Departure is indeed "part and parcel of Christian identity."[6] As Lyotard and Gruber write, "Never simply distance; a genuinely Christian departure is always also presence; never simply work and struggles; it is always already rest and joy."[7]

Exclusion

Following the discussion on identity and otherness, Volf then develops his theology of embracing the counter-experience of exclusion, particularly from his personal experience of ethnic cleansing. In terms of identity of formation, exclusion entails drawing boundaries to distinguish the self from the other. While healthy, the process may lead to practices of exclusion manifested in acts of expulsion, assimilation, subjugation, and abandonment. Constructing identities opposing the other leads to a dynamic where difference becomes a basis for conflict, division, and violence.

Volf proposes that an adequate reflection on exclusion must satisfy two conditions: it must help to name (with confidence) exclusion as evil, and it must not dull our ability to detect

5. Corneliu Constantineanu, "Exclusion and Embrace: Reconciliation in the Works of Miroslav Volf," *Kairos, Evangelical Journal of Theology* Vol. 7, no. 1 (2013): 50.

6. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 40.

7. Jean-François Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 16.

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the exclusionary tendencies in our judgments and practices.[8] He argues that exclusion springs from a misconception and misconstruction that one's identity is "pure" without "the other." In contrast to this prevailing misconception, Volf offers a better model of understanding and constructing identities through his definitions of differentiation, exclusion, and judgment.

To differentiate often means to highlight specific characteristics or constitute a contrasting element that distinguishes one from the other or the rest. However, for Volf, differentiation is not mere separation; the latter would result in self-enclosed, isolated, and non-identical beings.[9] Instead, differentiation is the creative activity of "separating and binding." The self is separate, connected, and related to the other. Identity, thus, is a result of the distinction from the other and the internalization of the relationship to the other; it arises out of the complex history of "differentiation," in which both the self and the different take part by negotiating their identities in interaction with one another.[10]

If this is how identity is defined, then whatever diverges from the "separating-and-binding" is exclusion, which entails cutting off bonds that connect and erasing separation.[11] In any way it manifests, exclusion is the constant search for purity of the self with little or no regard for another, a radical independence sovereign over the neighbor. While Volf clarifies that

8. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 66.

9. Cf. Ibid., 68.

10. Ibid., 69.

The idea of *négritude*, introduced by the poet and first president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Sengho, also reflects Volf's understanding of differentiation. The concept of négritude says that "a self does not exist apart from a self with the other; it is always a self-created by an "encounter with the other. (Cf. A.N. Williams, "Assimilation and Otherness: The Theological Significance of *Négritude*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 3 [2009], 250.)

11. Cf. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 70.

exclusion differs from drawing boundaries, he maintains that exclusion happens "wherever impenetrable barriers are set up that prevent a creative encounter with the other."[12] While passing judgment in popular cultures is deemed exclusionary, Volf argues that the distinction between differentiation and exclusion aids in making a non-exclusionary judgment. This judgment names exclusion as evil and regards differentiation as a positive good.

In a world where the reality of evil is prevalent and presents itself as if "there is no choice," where captivity to the cycle of sin and exclusion is inescapable, Volf firmly asserts that "there is a choice." The possibility of reconciliation comes from acknowledging that no one is wholly and purely innocent, and thus, "no one should ever be excluded from the will to embrace."[13] Is this not also what the mandate "to love your enemies" shows—that at the "core of Christian faith lies the persuasion that 'others' need not be perceived as innocent to be loved, but ought to be embraced *even when they are perceived as wrongdoers* (Volf's italics.)"[14]

If the will to exclude comes from the desire for identity (Cf. Volf's understanding of *differentiation*,) the will to embrace, on the contrary, comes from the Spirit of the crucified Messiah. Consistently and convincingly, he wraps up,

> The Spirit enters the citadel of the self, decenters it by fashioning it in the image of the self-giving Christ, and frees its will so it can resist the power of exclusion in the power of the Spirit of embrace. [...] By this seemingly powerless power of the Spirit—the Spirit who blows even outside the walls of the Church—selves are freed from powerlessness to fight the system of exclusion everywhere—in the structures, culture, and self.[15]

12. Ibid.

13. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 90.

14. Ibid., 91.

15. Ibid., 98.

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Embrace

Opposite exclusion is the practice of embracing and reconciling. Modeled after God's embrace, the self can seek reconciliation through giving and readjusting identity and welcoming and creating space for the other. Having the will to embrace, the self can pursue the movement from exclusion to embrace. This movement has four essential moments: repentance, forgiveness, making space for the other, and memory healing.

Repentance

"For reconciliation to take place," Volf argues, "the inscriptions of hatred must be carefully erased and threads of violence gently removed."[16] Turning to Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God, Volf presents the first move from exclusion to embrace as a repentance of all. Jesus called everyone to repentance. His proclamation of the Kingdom of God speaks of God's unconditional love and Mercy and, at the same time, calls people to repentance. "To repent means to make a turnabout of a profound moral and religious import. Repentance implies not merely recognizing that one has made a bad mistake but has sinned."[17] By calling everyone to repentance, Jesus had removed the "victim-oppressor" distinction as seen in the modern models of oppression and liberation.

Volf affirms that social change cannot occur without a change of heart and repentance. This is reflective of what Volf considers the truly revolutionary character of Jesus' message and proclamation: "the connection between the hope he gives to the oppressed and the radical change he requires of them."[18] Thus, to repent means "to resist the seductiveness of the sinful

16. Ibid., 113.

17. Ibid., 114.

18. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 118.

values and practices and to let the new order of God's reign be established in one's heart."[19] Genuine repentance is challenging and is more of a divine gift or grace than a human capability. Caught in the cycle of violence and exclusion, the human instinct is not only to refuse to accept guilt but also to reject it by offering excuses or claiming relative innocence. Repentance can only be genuine if "we refuse to explain our behavior and accuse others, and [...] simply take our wrongdoing upon ourselves."[20]

Volf consistently argues for the necessity of repentance—yes, of both the victims and the oppressors—to restore human dignity and pursue social change. Victims must repent of wrongdoing that may emerge from hatred for perpetrators and strive to prevent such hatred from springing to life.[21] The repentance of perpetrators must lead to the willingness to offer restitution for wrongdoing, in an "injustice of superabundant restitution, which seeks to offset the injustice of the original violation,"[22] As a sign of true repentance and the fruit of forgiveness. By discussing the victims' need to repent, Volf continues to hope that this contributes to the "creation of the kind of social agents that are shaped by the values of God's kingdom and, therefore, capable of participating in the project of authentic social transformation."[23]

The Practice of Forgiveness

The second step towards reconciliation is forgiveness.

In his article *"Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflection in the Wake of Ethnic Cleansing,"* Volf describes the strong pull of revenge in the minds of the Serbians, Croatians, and Muslims

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 119.

21. Ibid., 117.

22. Ibid., 117-118.

23. Ibid., 120.

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during the Balkan tragedy. While everyone has reasons for wanting revenge, Volf notices that "the greater their success at revenging themselves, the more they feel justified in their aggression."[24] Continuous oppression and unrepentant perpetrators inspire constant mutual hate and exclusion and an indistinctive desire for revenge. Thus, the spiral of vengeance is set into motion endlessly: a 'just' revenge leads to a 'just' counter-revenge.

Volf argues that there is a way out of this spiral of vengeance through forgiveness. Jesus' words and deeds always speak about forgiveness. He asks his disciples to forgive, not only seven times, as Peter thought, but seventy-seven times (cf. Matthew 18:21-22). Hanging on the cross, Jesus became the ultimate example of his teaching: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:24). And for Volf, this stands as the supreme example embodying the truth and power of forgiveness.[25]

Why forgiveness? What about justice? Why not follow the *lex talionis* (cf. Exodus 21:22; Leviticus 24:19-21) and impose the exact extent as repayment, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth? Is forgiveness a substitute for justice? Volf immediately answers no to these questions, saying forgiveness is not a substitute for justice. Forgiveness implies an affirmation of justice. Forgiveness affirms justice since forgiveness requires the naming of wrong as wrong. Recognizing and declaring wrongs as wrong is an act of justice. Forgiveness does not violate justice; instead, it contextualizes and transcends it.

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24. Miroslav Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflection in the Wake of "Ethnic Cleansing," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 13, no. 6 (1993): 14.

25. Cf. Constantineanu, "Exclusion and Embrace," 42.

Christ expresses forgiveness most vividly in his passion and through the cross. By not returning violence for violence, he refused to be defined by his perpetrators. Christ forgives by not holding their transgressions against them. He does not suffer the wrongdoing passively; "rather, suppressing the rightful claims of strict retributive justice, Christ actively makes his suffering into a prayer for the forgiveness of those who have tortured and killed him."[26] In Christ, "God tells the truth about the sinful world, enthrones justice, and sets things right, for there is no redemption unless the truth is told and justice is done."[27] God names and condemns human sinfulness—not for revenge or retribution but to forgive and embrace. Pursuing and practicing forgiveness is a continuous call to imitate God's embrace and forgiveness in Christ.

Space for the Other

Forgiveness is necessary but not completion; it is the boundary between exclusion and embrace. Hanging on the cross, Christ extends his arms so that God and humanity may "fall into each other's arms and restore broken communion."[28] On one hand, forgiveness heals the wounds of exclusion and breaks down the wall of hostility. On the other hand, it leaves a certain distance between people, "a space of neutrality, that allows them either to go their separate ways in what is sometimes called 'peace' or to fall into each other's arms and restore broken communion."[29] But peace is more than just the absence of hostility; *it is communion between former enemies*.[30] Thus, to continually move from

26. Cf. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 126.

27. Ibid., 289.

28. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), 125.

29. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 128.

30. Ibid.

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forgiveness to reconciliation, Volf presents the third step towards embracing: making space for the other.

The passion of Christ on the cross and the "mutual indwelling of the others" in the life of the Trinity ground Volf's third step. The cross offers not only forgiveness but also aims at reconciliation.

> At the heart of the cross is Christ's stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in. [...] It is the consequence of God's desire to break the power of human enmity without violence and receive human beings into divine communion. [...] The arms of the crucified are open—a sign of a space in God's self and an invitation for the enemy to come in.[31]

Thus, the cross is neither an inability for enmity (leaving perpetrators victorious) nor enmity (brewing desire for revenge; the possibility of victims becoming perpetrators themselves.) Instead, it bespeaks of an "enmity toward enmity,"[32] i.e., the refusal to become entrapped in hatred and violence. The cross is the beginning of the embrace. It aims for something more: restoring communion between former enemies. Christ makes space in himself for the enemy to enter and dwell together in peace. The cross "is the giving up of God's self in order not to give up on humanity; it is the consequence of God's desire to break the power of human enmity without violence and receive human beings into divine communion."[33] As to what this embrace looks like, Volf turns to the life of the Trinity.

Self-giving love and the creation of space to receive the other are dimensions of the passion of Christ; the same two

31. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 128.

32. Cf. Ibid., 129.

33. Ibid., 127.

dimensions are characteristics of the Trinity. The life of the Trinity is a life of self-giving and other-receiving love. None of the three persons can be defined without the other two. Each person includes the other two in what Volf calls "mutual interiority," a re-expression of the divine perichoresis.[34] "When the Trinity turns toward the world, the Son and the Spirit become, in Irenaeus' beautiful image, the two arms of God by which humanity was made and taken into God's embrace"[35] — the very love that makes space "in God" for humanity, as most profoundly expressed at the cross.

As mentioned, forgiveness is not yet embraced. While forgiveness ends a cycle of violence and retribution, it does not automatically form an embrace. Thus, to move past this boundary, one must create space in themselves for the other. More importantly, one must be willing to accept the enemy into their life in such a way as to transform the self and the other—all reflective of the Trinity's acceptance of humanity into its own through Jesus Christ. In imitation of how God pursues reconciliation with humanity, should people pursue reconciliation with one another?

Healing of Memory

After repentance, forgiveness, and making space for the other, one final act must complete the reconciliation process. Volf states that this step requires a*n inevitable forgetting* of the

34. *Perichoresis* describes the "necessary being-in-one-another or circumincession of the three divine Persons of the Trinity because of the single divine essence, the eternal procession of the Son from the Father and of the Spirit from the Father and (through) the Son, and the fact that the three Persons are distinguished solely by the relations of opposition between them." (Cf. Randall E. Otto, "The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis in Recent Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 3 [January 2009]: 366.)

35. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 131.

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evil suffered. It is a forgetting that assumes that matters of truth and justice are dealt with, the oppressors have been named, judged, and transformed, and the victims are safe and healed of their wounds. While Volf strongly argues as well for the "obligation to know, to remember, and not to keep silent"[36] about the injustices suffered and hurts endured, he also suggests the need for non-remembering to remember rightly and be finally redeemed. The proper goal of such remembering is non-remembrance.

Can victims forget the atrocities? What are the significance and dangers of remembering the wrongs inflicted? In his book *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, Volf reminds us that memory is a Janus-faced organ: a shield and a sword. As a shield, the memory of inhumanities can help form a person's identity, bring about healing, strengthen the pursuit of justice by acknowledging the reality of wrongs, generate solidarity with victims, and protect them from further violence. [37] However, as a sword, it can also wound, breed indifference, reinforce false self-perceptions, and re-injure.[38] Given these images, Volf asserts that remembering injustice is crucial, but adds that it must be truthful and not embellished.

So, in what way is forgetting redemptive? Volf argues that remembering and forgetting are crucial to forming the identities of the victims and perpetrators. Remembering rightly, or a healthy non-remembering, frees the oppressor from the chains of unredemption and non-reconciliation. "The memory of wrongdoing," Volf writes, "superimposes on the image of the other a narrative of transgression; even a forgiven sinner

36. Cf. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 134-135.

37. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 19-35.

38. Cf. Ibid.

is still a past sinner if her sins are not forgotten."[39] At the same time, a non-remembrance of the wrong suffered paves the way for the victims' redemption through the redemption of a remembered past—since as long as the memory remains, the "past is not just the past; it remains an aspect of the present."[40]

How one remembers the wrongdoing suffered will be decisive for forgiveness or revenge. Thus, healing of memories entails remembering rightly. And for Volf, to remember rightly means to remember truthfully. It means remembering proportionately—so to speak—so that the injuries do not acquire disproportionate significance in one's lives. Volf further asserts that one can move toward reconciliation when one remembers rightly.

While Volf asserts that this particular kind of forgetting is ultimately in the eschaton, he still hopes that the "indispensable remembering should be guided, however, by the vision of the dawn of the new age whereby even now we may move the shield of memory cautiously to the side by opening our arms to embrace the other, even the former enemy."[41] This is all possible because even God Himself forgives, remembers rightly, and forgets iniquities and sins (cf. Jer. 31:34). Just as a woman cannot forget her nursing child, so God cannot forget Israel even when she has offended and forgotten God (cf. Is. 49:15-16).

The Drama of Embrace

Volf's phenomenology of embrace—the logic of grace—is also a four-part movement: opening of arms, waiting, closing of arms, and opening again of arms.

39. Cf. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 135.

40. Ibid.

41. Belle Miller McMaster, "I Have Been Reading: An Important Contribution to Political Theology, Addressing the Toughest Questions of Our Time," *Church & Society* 90, no. 2 (November/December 1999): 161.

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Act one: opening the arms. Open arms express a desire for an embrace, a gesture of invitation, an initiated movement of the self toward the other. The idea of the other as unavoidably a part of the self is the foundation of Volf's alternative conception of identity. It indicates that the self has created space for the other to come in. "Open arms," Volf writes, "suggest the pain of the other's absence and the joy of the other's anticipated presence."[42] Moreover, open arms suggest a fissure in the self. "They signify an aperture on the boundary of the self through which the other can come in. The desire for the other can be fulfilled, and the space for the other created by self-emptying is occupied only if the boundaries are passable."[43]

Act two: waiting. Waiting is a sign that, although the embrace comes initially from the self, it cannot achieve its goal until the other moves toward the self. This entails respecting the other's boundaries. "The other cannot be coerced or manipulated into an embrace; violence is so much the opposite of embrace that it undoes the embrace."[44] This waiting for a response is perhaps the point at which the actual practice of embracing will likely stall. There seems to be no possible alternative that does not force the other in some way, and the refusal to wait may suggest an ingenuine desire for an embrace. Still, waiting is necessary not to subsume the other into the self.

Act three: closing the arms. It takes two pairs of arms to make a single embrace. In a movement of reciprocity, arms are locked in a proper embrace. Volf writes, "Though one may receive or give more than the other, each must enter the space of the other, feel the presence of the other in the self, and make its presence felt."[45]

42. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 144.

43. Ibid., 145.

44. Ibid., 146.

45. Ibid.

The embrace requires a careful balance between differentiation and sameness. Volf is seeking the transformation of the self in light of an experience of the other, not the alteration of the self to be the other.[46] In addition, a *soft touch* is necessary in an embrace.

Act four: opening of the arms again. "The opening of the arms underlines that, though the other may be inscribed into the self, the alterity of the other may not be neutralized by merging both into an undifferentiated 'we' [...] the other must be let go so that her alterity—her genuine dynamic identity—may be preserved."[47] The end is not to make or fuse the two into one being. If the two selves merge into one, both lose their identity. Volf explains that "in an embrace, the identity of the self is both preserved and transformed, and the alterity of the other is affirmed as alterity and partly received into the ever-changing identity of the self."[48] Thus, the opening of the arms signals that the self lets go of the other so that the other's genuine dynamic identity may be preserved even as each has been changed by receiving some part of the other into the self; it also allows for an embrace to begin again.

Volf's phenomenology of embrace begs the question, "Why, then, should the self embrace the other?" Volf responds: "Because the others are part of my true identity."[49] Shaped by the cross of Christ and reflecting the life of the Trinity, the self seeks to open its arms toward the other, for an embrace includes the other, even if the other is an enemy. While nothing can guarantee an embrace or what will happen after an embrace, Volf asserts that "only one outcome is not possible: a genuine

46. Bethan Siân Willis, "Enlarging Justice: Miroslav Volf's Theology of Embrace and the Problem of Justice in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Croatia" (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2013), 130.

47. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 144.

48. Ibid., 147.

49. Volf, Exclusion, and Embrace: Theological Reflection in the Wake of "Ethnic Cleansing," 16.

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embrace cannot leave both or either completely unchanged."[50] An embrace is a risk, but more so a grace.

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Mercy in the Catholic Church

Understanding Mercy and justice in the Old Testament involved revisiting the *lex talionis* and the Israelites' experience of God. Considering the various Jewish codes and laws, the *lex talionis* is seen as an expression and reflection of the system of values that mold the identity of Israel as a nation. A non-literal application of the talion reveals the Jewish understanding of Mercy and justice. Furthermore, the Old Testament speaks of a gracious and merciful God, profoundly expressed through the words *hesed* and *rahamim*. Mercy not only describes who God is but also characterizes Israel's relationship with God. Through God's fidelity and continuous acts of saving, His Mercy and justice are at work.

In the New Testament, God's Mercy and justice are embodied in the person of Jesus, His revelation's fullness, the fulfillment of the law, and the prophets. Jesus calls the disciples to a better righteousness exemplified through their relationship with others. Instead of seeking retribution through the *lex talionis,* Jesus commands the disciples to love their enemies. The grace to live out this call springs not from how others treat him but from one's experience of Jesus. Having received love and Mercy from God, Christians ought to requite hostility with love. Among the parables and teachings of Jesus, the parables of the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son beautifully exemplify a merciful God. The call to discipleship is a life of imitation of the Father, just as how the Good Samaritan and the Father showed Mercy, so, too, Christians must do.

50. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 148.

Evident in all his homilies and writings, Pope Francis describes Mercy as God's identity card. Mercy is not only what God does and gives, but ultimately who He is. To respond to the call to be merciful like the Father, Francis reminds the faithful to return to one's personal experience of God's Mercy. Thus, discipleship is not primarily a following a set of commandments, but of a person, of Jesus, the face of the Father's Mercy. More concretely, the Church proclaims the message of Mercy through her corporal and spiritual works of Mercy by going to the margins and by being inclusive and all-embracing. The more the Church centers her life in Christ, the more she is decentered, moving towards the peripheries – always meeting people where they are, always accompanying people with patience and tenderness, love and Mercy.

Towards a Synthesis and Integration of Miroslav Volf's Theology of Embrace

The concepts of Identity and Otherness, Exclusion, and Embrace sum up Volf's theology of forgiveness and reconciliation. Springing from a very personal experience, his central thesis that "God's reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other" offers a general structure for drawing out the practical significance of the call to love one's enemies. Adopting and integrating Volf's theology of embrace with the Church's teachings and understanding of Mercy assists in drawing out a more holistic response to the call to be "merciful like the Father." In both Volf's and Pope Francis' theology, the underlying principle is similar: just as the will to embrace underlies both divine and human efforts at reconciliation, so does one's personal experience of Jesus' Mercy direct and move the response to the call of discipleship. Walking the path

of reconciliation and living out the commandment of loving the enemy is derived from an indicative of faith in the God of unconditional love and forgiveness.

Among the many possible contributions and valuable insights of Volf's theology of forgiveness and reconciliation, the succeeding paragraphs shall focus on three significant elements in an enriched and deepened understanding of Mercy. Integrating Volf with the Catholic Church's theology of Mercy—especially with Pope Francis—gives the following perspectives: Mercy as an embracive identity, Mercy as exercising double vision, and Mercy as the will to embrace.

Identity as Embrace

Volf consistently states—and positions himself as one of the recipients of this critical point—that the individual, who is morally compelled by his experience of God's forgiveness and his merciful relationship towards humanity, bears the responsibility for himself, others, and the rest of the world. Thus, to respond appropriately and practically to the call to "embrace the enemy," one must start with the kinds of selves each must become instead of concentrating on forming social arrangements that accommodate diverse identities. Just as Jesus emphasizes the character of "the one who showed mercy" in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Volf also advocates for forming an embracive identity.

The question and formation of identity are crucial to the question and application of forgiveness and reconciliation. Volf observes that conflicts often rage around discrete identities – of cultural groups or individuals. Culture and gender are always embodied within particular selves and given shape by being situated in specific persons. He argues that the problem of identity and otherness are connected to 'situated selves'

"who, through the cross of Christ, are the foundation of a new community; out of this particular context, they embrace the other by creating space through 'distancing' and 'belonging.'"[51]

Identity is not simply what the other is not; it encompasses what is distinct from the person and what binds him to another person. A more dynamic way to make the same point is to say that boundaries should be porous, allowing traffic to go back and forth between the self and multiple others, including the institutions in which one finds oneself. The result is a discrete but fluid sense of identity. Only such a fluid sense of identity could account for who human beings are in their interchanges. Such identity is capable of and open to an embrace.

Seen through the lens of Volf's theology, conflicts exist partly because of the resistance to changing boundaries or oneself. Accordingly, people aren't reconciled partly because they don't want to transform their identity to accommodate the person with whom they are in conflict. Such dynamics are at work in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When left by the younger son, the Father is no longer the same but, in a sense, is now the prodigal's Father. Disavowing the son is one approach to dealing with that identity and maintaining one's identity intact or at least less harmed. However, as seen in the story, being the Father of the Prodigal means "traveling into the far country with the son, changing one's own identity, and then altering it again when the son returns."[52] Thus, the will to embrace the prodigal is, at the same time, the Father's will to shift his own identity and his own journey along with his son. The other belongs to the self, and the self to that other.

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51. Cf. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 35-55.

52. "Conversations with Miroslav Volf," transcribed from a pastor's seminar led by A. James Reimer at Conrad Grebel College. Waterloo, Ontario, on March 17, 2000.

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An embracive identity shows the ideal of embrace, not as the coming together of two fundamentally separate individuals "hugging it out" when it comes to their differences, but rather as a complex dance in which they realize that they cannot be what they ought to be until they learn to genuinely love and forgive those that they have despised, and even more that they find it in themselves to mercifully love those who have despised them.

Furthermore, an embracive identity deepens Pope Francis' call to reflect the great Mercy received from Jesus. The Church's mission of forgiveness and reconciliation is integral to and reflects God's Mercy. Looking at the resurrection stories—in particular, the stories of Thomas, Peter, and the disciples walking toward Emmaus—one sees a transformation of identities springing from each of their encounters with God's Mercy. Such an identity can understand, hope, inspire confidence, not give up, not burn bridges, and can forgive.[53] The grace of Jesus Christ changes the heart, from sinners to saints, from an exclusionary to an embracive identity. God's Mercy is the immense grace that changes the heart.

The love of one's enemy is perhaps the most humanly difficult demand of Jesus, and yet it is, at the same time, one of the most central Christian commandments. It is rooted in the innermost essence of the Christian mystery and represents the specific character of Christian behavior and identity. Jesus calls the disciples to a better righteousness, a life imitating the Father. Bonhoeffer calls this "*person*" the characteristic which distinguishes Christians' identity. In his messages, Pope Francis constantly reminds us that to be followers of Christ is to be instruments of the great Mercy received. Thus, integrating

53. Cf. Pope Francis, "The Embrace of God's Mercy," in *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Loyola Press: Chicago, 2014).

Volf's notion of identity—built upon embrace, begins with a movement from the self to the other—now provides an even more practical way of living out and proclaiming the gospel of Mercy. "God's reconciling self-giving for the ungodly" bears consequences for the Christian life, i.e. the practical and deliberate decision to show God's unconditional love and Mercy towards the wrongdoers. As God loves, Christians ought to forgive and love their enemies.

Exercising Double Vision

For Jesus, the command to love one's enemies is the apex and highest expression of Mercy and love that is demanded in the Sermon. He establishes this demand—extreme from a purely human perspective—based on God's extreme behavior toward sinners. In his writings and homilies, Pope Francis consistently reminds the Church of God's constant renewal of His merciful love and initiative towards every person. Thus, adopting God's vision toward humanity is vital in responding to the call to forgive. Forgiveness is only possible in the power and at the prompting of God's saving activity in Christ. It is possible only in the light of the statement that God has reconciled everyone to himself, even when still enemies. According to God's vision and model behavior, Christians should also forgive.

Delving into Volf's theology of embrace—evidently influenced by liberation theology—one observes his inclination towards polarities and dualities such as oppression and freedom, perpetrator and victim, exclusion and embrace, and vertical and horizontal reconciliation. These highlight Volf's importance to a healthy and balanced understanding of different and opposing sides. Thus, integrating this perspective in a theology of Mercy and patterning in God's vision towards humanity, one draws another vision that practically assists the

response to love and forgiveness. Mercy as embrace involves the necessity of exercising "double vision."

The philosopher Hannah Arendt speaks of "enlarged thinking." This "enlarged thinking" speaks of accommodating the perspective of others—especially those in conflict with them—allowing their voices to resonate with oneself, and if needed, readjusting one's perspective on account of their perspectives. However, more than an "enlarged mentality," "double vision" calls for opening oneself to the other, allowing the enemy to speak, acknowledging opposing justice, and learning from other traditions.

The most important theological reason for exercising "double vision" lies not only in Jesus' example but most especially in the cross. It is because "on the cross, God made space in God's very self for others, godless others, and opened arms to invite them in."[54] What is essential in "double vision" is not simply taking the position of the other, or indifferently and shamelessly denying the victim's or the perpetrator's status, but rather acknowledging in faith that God, on the cross, "receives the godless," and "exposes their godlessness in the very act of providing for its forgiveness." According to Volf, this movement is drawn from the fundamental premise of faith, which is "that we are the perpetrators who crucified Christ, we are the godless whose godlessness God exposed."[55] The logical conclusion is that Christians need to make space within themselves for the experiences and perspectives of others in order to be consistent with Christ.

Furthermore, this "double vision" enriches the connection between justice and Mercy. According to Volf, to achieve justice, it is necessary to suspend the righteousness of one's own

54. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 214.

55. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 214-215.

perspective and be willing to see justice through the eyes of the other. It is imperative to transcend one's self-centeredness to move closer to the embrace. This entails stepping away from oneself and moving towards the embrace of the other person. The "will to embrace the unjust precedes agreement on justice,"[56] Volf concisely claims. However, creating new injustices does not lead to the attainment of justice. As there is no justice without a will to embrace, there is, likewise, no embrace without justice. Neutrality[57] is not an option, and one cannot consider differing points of view as equivalents. Volf emphasizes God's "bias" in favor of those in need. He does so by recognizing that in "double vision," one must maintain both the "initial suspicion against the perspective of the powerful" and the "epistemological privilege of the oppressed."[58]

Volf's unique contribution is consistent emphasis and conviction that God's "bias" extends beyond the poor and oppressed. God is perceived as "unjust" and "biased" because of His inexplicable Mercy toward every person, including the sinful and ungodly. God's relationship with each individual is characterized by forgiveness. He approaches each person with unconditional love and compassion, "and by the movement of justice which is concerned with the wellbeing of each person, and his or her own 'measure' of Mercy, following the definition

56. Ibid.

57. "Even more than just encouraging inaction, neutrality is positively harmful. For one, it gives tacit support to the stronger party, independently of whether that party is right or wrong. Second, neutrality shields the perpetrators and frees their hands precisely by the failure to name them as perpetrators. Third, neutrality encourages the worst behavior of perpetrator and victim alike." (Volf, *End of Memory*, 219).

58. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 219.

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of justice to give each his own: to each his accompanying grace."[59]

"Double vision" does not deny justice and truth. By embracing one another in pursuit of the truth, one can establish a community composed of righteous and truthful individuals. Just as justice needs to be told and done, so is truth. Christians need to ensure that the truth does not become, as was the case with Pilate, a despised truth, the truth of power, social status, and position, which is ultimately nothing more than the power of violence.[60] The person and identity of others should not be sacrificed to a personal and relative understanding of truth, as was the case with the chief priests and elders of people about Jesus.

The truth, more importantly, is freeing because it is nonviolent. "The cross of Christ breaks the cycle of violence constituted by the truths of the powerful."[61] It is difficult to practice nonviolence in a violent society, but refusing to take revenge and striving to act like Jesus is the only type of discipleship worthy of the Christian name and identity. For what is redeemed in the cross of Christ is not just the truth of the victim, but also the truth of the enemies.

Thus, Mercy is concerned with more than justice; it involves being aware of and sensitive to the tangible needs of others. To exercise "double vision" is to overcome the self-centeredness that causes one to become deaf and blind to the material and spiritual needs of others. It is a matter of dissolving the hardening of hearts to God's call that one hears in the encounter

59. Ivan Šarčević, "Reconciled in the Embrace of the Crucified: The Notion of Enemy in the Theology of Miroslav Volf," in *Envisioning the Good Life*, eds. Matthew Croasmun, Zoran Grozdanov, and Ryan Mcannally-Linz (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 218.

60. Cf. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 264-271.

61. Šarčević, "Reconciled in the Embrace of the Crucified," 219.

with others' adversity.[62] Mercy as exercising "double vision"—all within the process of forgiveness and reconciliation—is offered as a possible way of true reconciliation, a possible way of new relationships between the opposing persons, and as a way of coming together in big and small worlds, ridden with conflicts and hostilities. Volf makes this personal expression of faith: God has already accomplished it, and continues to do so with people throughout history, but most entirely in the person of Jesus Christ. Without equating the victim and the offender, without denying justice and truth, every individual finds their reconciliation in the cross of Christ, for all are sinners and need to be justified.

When the Church preaches God's Mercy, it communicates the deepest truth about God and the deepest truth about human beings. Because the ultimate truth about God is that God is love, which bestows itself and is always willing to forgive. Taking inspiration from one of the prayers during Christmas, Kasper writes, "The deepest truth about human beings is that God in his love has wonderfully created them, that he has not forsaken them even when they have distanced themselves from Him, and that He has mercifully reestablished them and their dignity in a still-more wonderful way."[63]

Adopting God's vision towards every person and exercising "double vision" bring about important realities of Mercy, justice, and truth. Mercy without truth would be an inauthentic consolation, empty promise, and meaningless talk. On the other hand, truth without Mercy would be callous and hurtful, cold, and insensitive. Therefore, the Church can only authentically communicate the gospel of God's Mercy if Mercy likewise

62. Cf. Christoph Schönborn, *We Have Found Mercy: The Mystery of Divine Mercy*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco, Ignatius, 2012), 102-105.

63. Kasper, *Mercy*, 161.

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shapes her words and vision. Above all, it is essential that the Church not only proclaims the truth about God's Mercy but also demonstrates her teachings in practice. The Church's proclamation of God's Mercy—through an exercise of "double vision"—must affect its concrete praxis and result in a culture of Mercy in her entire life. As a result, "double vision" paves the way for an authentic and merciful dialogue that presupposes a listening heart and reciprocal listening to each other.

The importance of the Will to Embrace

In light of Volf's theology, the love of enemies is interpreted as forgiveness in the movement from exclusion to embrace proceeding from one's experience of God's Mercy, i.e., the will to embrace. Such an interpretation more clearly articulates how Christians are invited and empowered to imitate Christ in pursuing the difficult work of reconciliation according to the law of embrace, a power no less than divine grace. The strength of Volf's argument calls the Church to visualize the beauty and drama embedded in the concept of embrace and realize how important it is to offer it as a work of love. An embrace rooted in God and imprinted on every person becomes translated as a work of love that promotes life and reconciliation.

The call to embrace mirrors back to one's neighbor, who has profoundly shaped one's relationship with relationship with God. Forgiveness and the will to embrace must come from the depths of a person's own heart and willingness; in that sense, even the will to embrace the other results from an act of prior grace.[64] Volf's quick move from *being embraced* by God to the *will to embrace* others—since to receive grace means to become an agent of grace—reflects his strong practical emphasis. As a result, he employs the interpersonal categories of self and

64. Cf. "Conversations with Miroslav Volf," Part II, 91.

other, identity and difference. The grace of embrace gives the person a new identity by decentering the self and patterning it upon Jesus, making him capable of the will to embrace. The will to embrace the other through self-giving love is truly a mark of a Christian.

Mercy as the will to embrace assists in retrieving a robust theology of grace. It empowers the person to forgive and love his enemies despite their transgressions. This springs from the experience of God's unconditional and indiscriminate love—that is why, precisely, the will to embrace, as Volf consistently claims, is indiscriminate. The claim is radical, and its radicality is socially significant. The will to embrace is before any judgment about others, except identifying them in their humanity; everyone, regardless of their background, actions, or identity, should be viewed with a predisposition of acceptance and openness. This is the initial posture or stance one takes toward the other—a willingness to embrace and an openness to make space for the other. Volf reminds us that "at the heart of the cross is Christ's stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating a space in Himself for the other to come in. The arms of Christ are open—a sign of space in God's self and an invitation for the other to come in."[65]

No one is outside Volf's indiscriminate will embrace; however, the embrace itself is discriminate, for the truth must be told and justice attended to. Hence, the will to embrace intrinsically entails the determination of justice and the recognition of wrongdoing. "The will to embrace includes the will to rectify the wrongs that have been done, and it includes the will to reshape the relationships to correspond to justice."[66] The will

65. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 126.

66. Volf, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, & Justice: A Christian Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Environment," *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, eds. Raymond G. Helmick, S.J. and Rodney L. Petersen (Philadelphia & London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001, 43.

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to embrace Mercy becomes a dynamic and relational process. It is not simply about pardoning sins but actively attempting to build bridges of understanding and compassion—in fact, this is a recurring theme throughout Pope Francis' teachings. This approach challenges individuals and communities to rethink their attitudes toward justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It suggests that genuine Mercy involves a willingness to go beyond the self and to create a space where healing and new relationships can flourish.

Furthermore, placing emphasis and importance on the will to embrace brings to the fore a critical dimension of Mercy as an active and dynamic choice. The "will" signifies intentionality and volition, suggesting that Mercy is not merely a divine attribute to be admired but a divine action to be emulated. It involves a continuous and conscious decision to extend oneself toward the other, reflecting God's unceasing desire to reach out to humanity. Kasper describes this reaching out as God's "yes" to humankind. He writes, "Mercy is the good, comforting, uplifting, hope-granting message, on which we can rely in every situation and trust and build upon, both in life and death. Under the mantle of Mercy, there is a place for every one of goodwill. It is our refuge, our hope, and our consolation."[67] Thus, embodying this merciful embrace calls for a responsive and proactive spirituality. It requires that the Church, as the Body of Christ, perpetually manifest God's Mercy through her actions—be it through liturgical expressions, pastoral care, social justice initiatives, or ecological stewardship.

In light of Pope Francis' theology, mercy as the will to embrace involves decentering the self and reaching out to others. Mercy as the will to embrace excludes and deprives

67. Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life, trans. William Madges* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 2013), 111.

no one of God's Mercy. In *Misericordiae Vultus*, Francis writes, "Mercy is the foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in Mercy."[68] Without denouncing the rich and the powerful, the Church must have a heart for the poor, the sick and the disabled, the marginalized and discriminated by society, the drug addicts, alcoholics, criminals, the homeless, and those experiencing great deprivation. Of course, the Church cannot justify the sin, but Mercy as the will to embrace moves the Church to attend to sinners with great Mercy.

All attempts to respond to and live out Jesus' commandment to love one's enemies is impossible by sheer human power alone—with it is the power that comes from the love of God. This call—Mercy as the will to embrace—demands a human and Christian largesse and restraint that breaks up the cycle of evil and the vicious cycle of violence and counterviolence, establishing peace in their lives. Just as God's self-giving love has embraced the person and is capable of the will to embrace the enemies through self-giving love, so Christ's love provokes love in him for the forgiveness of sins and the love of neighbor, including the enemies. The offer of forgiveness—Mercy as the will to embrace—in the movement from exclusion to embrace is divine. The will to embrace stresses the connection—within the grace of one's experience of God's Mercy—between the possibility of repentance, forgiveness of sins, and the love of enemies.

68. Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus,* paragraph 10.

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Conclusion

A Theology of Embrace

Looking at human experience and history, the command to love one's enemy is undeniably challenging, and yet is one of the most important Chrisztian commandments. While it seems more difficult to practice in contexts of wars—because simply suppressing personal feelings of hatred towards the enemy is not enough since Jesus calls for concrete action—the struggle to embrace the call to love one's enemy is also evidently tricky in the life and mission of the Church. Whether it was the persecution of Jews and heretics, the crusades, or the wars of religion, the Church's behavior and actions reflect her constant efforts to be faithful to Christ's commandment.

The call to love the enemy includes wars, church history, and societal conflicts. It also extends to everyday situations – whether towards the unfriendly neighbor or among strained family relationships between professional rivals, political competitors, and other aspects of life. Is it even realistic to love one's enemies? Is this commandment merely utopian, placing an excessive burden on individuals? Can a mother forgive and love the person who took the life of her child? Can forgiveness be extended to the murderers? How can a daughter forgive her Father for sexually abusing her? Can a nation forgive a government responsible for the tortures and killings of thousands of its citizens? Moreover, what happens if there is no offer of resistance to evil and people choose to pardon instead of demanding justice? Does this reward the unjust?

Mindful of and as a response to these situations, a theology of embrace challenges the idea that renouncing violence and practicing forgiveness leads to a loss or disadvantage. Instead, it raises the question of what happens when there is

no forgiveness and when people respond to wrongs with more wrongs – a retributive mindset of seeking an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This attitude perpetuates a cycle of violence and revenge. As stated more positively, a theology of embrace empowers each person by highlighting and emphasizing his will to embrace and his capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation.

In light of the horrific atrocities of the twentieth century, a theology of embrace offers a fresh perspective and practical framework for heeding the call to love and forgive. It has become evident that Mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation —while often deemed extraordinary acts—are also practical, possible, and sensible. Just as God continuously desires, welcomes, and embraces humanity, a theology of embrace offers a vision of forgiveness and reconciliation as the constant desire for a relationship with the other—all grounded in love, Mercy, justice, and truth.

Mercy and the Human Experience of Embrace

The act of embracing is very close to the human experience. It presents itself in various relationships and situations—be it between friends, couples, parents to children, or during moments of welcoming and farewell, as well as celebrations and losses. Whatever the case may be, embrace demonstrates close encounters. It is always relational and thus includes a desire for and step toward the other person. Through such characteristics, the image of embrace makes Mercy a very human, personal, and concrete act.

Just as embrace entails movement from the self toward the other, Mercy is the movement from the victim toward the oppressor. It pictures a dynamic relationship where the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation, respect, and justice are at

work. The offer of forgiveness and pursuit of reconciliation are movements of decentering of the self. As embrace, Mercy calls for an active desire and will of the other. Mercy is always the grace-driven movement from exclusion to embrace.

Furthermore, human experience reveals the reality of embrace as a risk and place of vulnerability. As seen in Volf's phenomenology of embrace, the second step entails waiting – a phase that opens up the possibility of rejection. As with any embrace, the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation should not be forced or coerced. It is non-threatening, non-aggressive—as any offer and show of Mercy should be—but does not also lessen the gravity of offenses. A transformative embrace entails a willingness to listen, openness to dialogue, and the courage to forgive. At the same time, it constantly seeks for and does not discard truth and justice. Mercy as embrace is a risk—sometimes hesitant, yet always the hopeful will to embrace—but always a grace.

The image of embrace places Mercy at the heart of the Church's theology and pastoral praxis, all because Mercy is at the heart of God's self-revelation. Thus, Mercy is not only what Christians do but should be at the heart of their identity. As an embrace, the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation is not only a response to the call to love one's enemies; more importantly, it is a bold affirmation and declaration of the experience of being embraced by God.

Embrace is one of the first human experiences. After the long, tiring, and risky labor, the mother tenderly embraces and brings her baby close to her heart. *Nang may pag-aaruga at pag-ibig, niyayakap ng ina ang kanyang anak.* Same goes with Mercy. It is one of the first experiences we have of God. Even before we can embrace others, God has already embraced us in his love and Mercy – even made more concretely and tangibly

in the person of Jesus Christ. God, the prodigal Father, always desires for us, runs towards us, and welcomes and transforms us with his merciful embrace. *Bago pa man tayo magpatawad, pinatawad na tayo ng Diyos. Bago pa man tayo makapagmahal, minahal na tayo ng Diyos.*