**OUR FRANCISCAN THEOLOGY OF THE MERCY OF GOD**

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As a brief introduction into our Franciscan theology of the mercy of God, I would like first to present a typical Franciscan approach to our understanding of mercy, and to our practice of it.

I would like to quote a Franciscan writer, possibly a theologian, Benedict Groeschel, a Capuchin who initiated the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal.

In his book, *Heaven in Our Hands*, Fr Benedict helps to clarify our Franciscan practice of mercy insofar as we are moved to identify with others. He writes that:

“Mercy and compassion encourage us to see behind the external failings of a person to the infinite value of that person. Mercy opens our minds and hearts to sympathy or the ability to suffer with others; to empathy, the ability to understand objectively and assist others. Mercy breaks down the defences we have, the need to pretend that we are something that we are not. Mercy helps us to identify with others in their great need or failure” (p.109).

“A brief pause allows us to exchange a kindly word and ask how the person is doing, to make a small contribution, or to buy a little food to ease the physical hunger... These are acts of mercy, and they cost us something, either in time or in money or both” (p.106).

What else could be the cost? Fr Benedict continues: “What if you suspect that someone might be abusing your charity?” And he advises us, “Decide once and for all not to let it bother you in the least and then live by that conclusion. Better to take a chance of being cheated than to neglect mercy. Merciless people never have to worry about being cheated; they just don’t help anybody. Foolish people, (like Franciscans) on the other hand, help everybody” (p.106).

So we can deduce from the writing of this Franciscan friar, and indeed from any number of others, that their understanding of mercy is far from theoretical, that it moves us out to the other person, and that it is thoroughly down to earth in practice.

#### With this talk, I will draw extensively on the research of a theologian, Paul Rout OFM, who gave our friars’ retreat three years ago and included a conference on Joy in the Discovery of God Who Is Merciful.

The biographer of St Francis, Friar Thomas of Celano, tells us that the night before Francis composed the Canticle of the Creatures, he was suffering badly, physically, emotionally, and spiritually (2 Cel 213; also Legend of Perugia 43). He was even tempted to despair. But in this pit of suffering, he continued to look into the heart of God and found there an assurance of God’s continuing faithfulness and mercy. When morning dawned, Francis was able to praise the Creator in all of his works, even in the midst of pain. Joy was not linked to an unreal world, where pain and suffering didn’t exist. Francis had come to realize this, many years earlier, in the event that he narrates as the initiation of his conversion, his encounter with the lepers.

In his Testament, Francis doesn’t mention any embrace of a leper, it’s rather that he went among lepers (Test.1-3). In the Middle Ages, lepers were shut away by the authorities in types of hospices where a few dedicated people would care for them. It could very well be that after his return from Spoleto, increasingly dissatisfied with his former way of life and seeking happiness elsewhere, Francis began to engage in works of ‘mercy’.

Mercy was an essential element of the lay spirituality of that period. Towards the end of the twelfth century, the term ‘mercy’ began to apply not only to sinners who needed God’s mercy, but also to the unfortunate ones within society. To bring assistance to such people was a special way of entering into God’s kingdom. So we find at this time, before Francis’ period of conversion, the creation of hospices, where a considerable number of men and women engaged in caring for the needs of the unfortunate. To work in a leprosarium, caring for lepers, was to engage in a work of mercy and to advance along the path of spiritual perfection.

Francis said, ‘I showed a heart full of mercy towards them.’ It is not as if Francis was the first to engage in works of mercy. Rather, he was attracted to this work when he became more aware of this religious movement of the laity that showed such sensitivity to the suffering and misfortunes of people such as the lepers.

The compassion, the drawing out of himself that he had experienced while working among the lepers, was concretized in the compassion he experienced as he contemplated Jesus Christ hanging on the Cross of San Damiano.

What is important here is the experience of mercy, the experience of being drawn out of oneself through love for the other. Because Francis had practised mercy, had gone out of himself to reach out in love to the lepers, he was also able to experience the mercy of God poured out for him in Jesus Christ. And so it is for us: the more I reach out of myself in love for the other, whoever that other may be, the more I may begin to experience God’s mercy for me.

Francis, the one who reached out in mercy to the lepers, certainly experienced God as merciful. In Chapter 23 of the Earlier Rule, he wrote:

Let nothing else please us and cause us delight except our Creator, Redeemer and Saviour, the one true God, who is the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good, who alone is good, merciful and gentle (ER 9).

Experience is the surest foundation for faith. When St Bonaventure, a trained philosopher and theologian, speaks about God, he takes as his starting point the experience of St Francis. Bonaventure differs from many other theologians in beginning his theology not with the abstract speculation of the philosophers but with the concrete experience of Francis. We looked at that last month.

So, Bonaventure begins with Francis’s experience and builds his theology on it. God is the highest good. From there, Bonaventure presents an understanding of the Trinitarian God of Christian faith in terms of the eternal expression of goodness, the never ending outpouring and flow of love and goodness between the persons of the Trinity. The Father is the fountain ceaselessly pouring out love and goodness, which is the life of God. The Son, the Word, is the expression of that goodness. The Spirit is the bond of love that exists between Father and Son. To affirm in faith that God is Trinity is to affirm that the originating source of all that exists is a life of relational love.

Following Francis’s experience, Bonaventure’s theology is about the Word of God who took on human flesh in Jesus. God’s love is most fully expressed in time and history in the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ our Saviour, born of a woman, we find the greatest manifestation of God going out of himself (which is mercy) to reach out in love for the other, for all of us who, as Francis recognized, are wounded and in need of mercy. That was Francis’ experience, praying before the Crucifix in San Damiano.

Since the life of the Godhead itself is one of continuous outpouring of selfless love, so it is with Christ. Saint Bonaventure saw humility as the greatest of all the virtues of St Francis, and he continually stresses the notion of the divine humility. So, the humility of God is a major theme of Franciscan theology and is inseparable from God’s mercy.

True humility is not a matter of walking around with bowed heads but it is a matter of acknowledging who we are: creatures, dependent on God. The words of Francis, “What I am before God, that is what I am and nothing more”, express humility. Humility is the virtue that results from the exercise of mercy, where concern is not for the self but for the other. Humility is the source of outpouring love.

For Francis, God is also humble because God expresses fully what God truly is, merciful love. This conviction lies at the basis of Francis’s meditation on the Eucharist, which is to be found in his Letter to the Entire Order (LtOrd 27). Here he speaks of the Eucharistic presence in terms of a manifestation of the humility of God: The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation He hides himself under an ordinary piece of bread.

In response to such divine humility, he called the brothers to

... look at the humility of God and pour out your hearts before Him! Humble yourselves, that you may be exalted by Him (LtOrd 28).

It is important to note that one of the issues being addressed in this Letter to the Entire Order was the role of the friar-priest within the brotherhood. It was an issue that Francis became aware of, following his return from Egypt. Apparently, some friar-priests were bringing into the brotherhood attitudes of superiority which were connected to the position of priests in the Church of that time. This was creating tension. In his Letter, Francis reminded his brother priests that their ministry was to be exercised as one of humility and service.

Pope Francis, so much in harmony with his namesake St Francis, stresses that priestly ministry must be one of humility. He writes:

We have to be humble, but with real humility, from head to toe ... Humility is what gives assurance that the Lord is there. Where someone is self-sufficient, when he has all the answers to every question, it is proof that God is not with him. Self-sufficiency is evident in every false prophet, in the misguided ‘religious’ people who use religion for their own ego.

Pope Francis urged priests “to exercise their ministry in humility and mercy”.

The humility of God, and the mercy of God: these convictions concerning the nature of God, are central to our Franciscan theological tradition. We encounter this humility and mercy of God when we encounter Christ. This was the truth that St Francis recognized and lived, and it became the source of his joy, even in the midst of trials and adversity.

Pope Francis has continually urged us to look to Christ, the one who reveals who God is. Whatever about his being a Jesuit, our Pope’s theology is thoroughly Franciscan.

To quote his words:

When we put Christ at the centre of our life, we ourselves don’t become the centre. The more that Christ becomes the centre of your life, the more he leads you out of yourself. He leads you from making yourself the centre and opens you to others. This is the true dynamism of love, this is the movement of God himself. God is the centre, but he is always self-gift, relationship, love that gives itself away.

Perhaps this is the essence of our faith, to surrender to the summons of love. As with St Francis of Assisi, this surrender to love did not take away pain or suffering. Surrendering to love never does. But it transforms pain and gives us reason to hope. St Bonaventure commented: “Love is always preceded by suffering. A sculptor [working on a block of marble] never adds anything but cuts away to reveal the most beautiful form within.”

I’ll finish with a prayer attributed to St Bonaventure, in which he asks among other gifts for a compassionate or merciful heart. Let us join him in his prayer:

Lord Jesus, as God's Spirit came down and rested on you, may the same Spirit rest on us and bestow his sevenfold gifts. First, grant us the gift of understanding, by which your precepts may enlighten our minds. Second, grant us counsel, by which we may follow in your footsteps on the path of righteousness. Third, grant us courage, by which we may ward off the Enemy's attacks. Fourth, grant us knowledge, by which we can distinguish good from evil. Fifth, grant us piety, by which we may acquire *compassionate hearts*. Sixth, grant us fear, by which we may draw back from evil and submit to what is good. Seventh, grant us wisdom, that we may taste fully the life-giving sweetness of your love. Amen.