

Perfectae Caritatis: Sent to Preach the Gospel of Mercy

Thank you so much for the invitation to join you. I am so happy to have been able to hear about Dominican life in your various contexts in these past few days and I hope these few reflections will be a help to us as we embark on the next 800 years.

I have been asked to help break open our theme: *Perfectae Caritatis: Sent to Preach the Gospel of Mercy* from my perspective as a biblical scholar with a passion for our mission of preaching.

In the time we have together today, I will reflect on select passages from the Scriptures that speak to us about God's mercy and that point to what is asked of us as we are called to preach the gospel of mercy in this particular time and in our various contexts.

How will our preaching mission continue into the next 800 years?

I am very Grateful to Pope Francis for turning our attention to mercy in this jubilee year. And to Pope Paul VI, who opened the way to renewal for us when he issued *Perfectae Caritatis* in 1965. I was only 12 years old then, so I was not immediately affected by it, but nine years later, in 1974, when I entered the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, we were still very much learning how to live into the renewal it called for.

While the times were much different in 1965, and the language and style and nature of the decree are different from that of Pope Francis, it seems to me that the focal point is the same: the "perfect charity" that we were asked to pursue in 1965 might today be understood as perfect, or complete mercy in the way Pope Francis speaks of and enacts it, and the same kind of love that Pope Benedict spoke of in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* in 2005.

I. Starting point: not us trying to live "perfect charity" but "Let yourself be mercy'd"

In each case, the starting point is not that we try to live "perfect charity," but that we "let ourselves be mercy'd."

Pope Francis tells how he was greatly taken with the story of the call of Matthew in Matt 9:9-13. And he took as his bishop's motto: *miserando atque eligendo* – "By having mercy and by choosing him." Good biblical scholar that I am, I looked at the account in Matt 9:9-13 and these precise words aren't there!

The expression "He saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him" comes from the Venerable Bede's account of Jesus' call of Matthew

(Bede was an English monk who lived in the 7th-8th c. and was known as “the Father of English history”; he also wrote biblical commentaries)

Though these words are not in the gospel, Bede’s interpretation is quite in line with the spirit of what the evangelist wrote!

According to one of Pope Francis’ biographers, “Bergoglio liked the way Latin had “mercy” as a verb, *miserando*, [“having mercy”] and so created the Spanish *miseriordiando*¹ – an activity of the divine, something God does to you. “Dejáte misericordiar,” he would tell the guilt-ridden and the scrupulous --- “let yourself be mercy’d.”

[Spanish speakers may think I just mispronounced *déjate*, but those of you from Argentina know that in the rioplatense region it’s *dejáte*]

Letting ourselves “be mercied” may sound easy, but it is actually quite difficult; Often I prefer to earn my right to God’s favor: I think that if I pray, if I do good works, God will be pleased and I will earn God’s mercy. I suspect it is not only Americans who have this tendency.

In the Scriptures, we see that some of our ancestors in the faith struggled with letting God do the mercying.

St. Paul struggled with those who were set on thinking they could make things right with God by keeping the law – “justification through works of the law” --- keeping the law perfectly assured one of being in right relation with God.

Something of this could be seen in the way we approached religious life before Vatican II. Might there still be a part of us that is oriented toward this way of thinking? “Keep the law and the law will keep you.” But keeping the law, striving to live perfect charity, puts the emphasis on ***me and my efforts***, whereas letting myself/ourselves first be looked upon with mercy, relinquishes control, and acknowledges that God is the one who takes the initiative.

Jesus “saw him [Matthew] through the eyes of mercy and chose him.” God looks at us with mercy and chooses us.

That is the starting point.

¹Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2014), 13.

The Divine Gaze: all is good

a.) Creation

When we let God look at us, what does God see? The very first chapter of Genesis tells us something about how God sees everything that God creates. There is a refrain that recurs as God gazes at what she has made:

Day: 1 after God made the light: "and God saw that the light was good" (1:4)

Day 3: "The earth brought forth vegetation....And God saw that it was good (1:12)

Day 4 God separates light from the darkness. "And God saw that it was good" (1:18)

Day 6: God makes living creatures, wild animals, creeping things .. "And God saw that it was good (1:25)

Day 7: God creates humankind in the divine image and likeness. "God saw everything that she had made, and indeed, it was [not only good, but] very good." (v. 31).

Now you remember when Genesis 1 was written ---after the exile – a time that was truly not so good! And many Israelites blamed themselves; they interpreted the exile as punishment for their sins.

Part of what the author of Genesis 1 is saying to a discouraged and depleted Israel is a reassurance that all is created good, including human beings who disobey God. It is a reminder that God still gazes with delight on them, and that they still now and always have the capacity to choose the good.

God's / Jesus' gaze is never reproachful, even when we are at our worst. The divine gaze is that of a lover. They say love is blind to the faults of the beloved. I would say that the Bible tells us that God sees our faults very clearly, but loves us all the more fiercely, transforming us into being able to return that loving gaze and to look on others with the same love and delight that God does. We see this as well in the call of Peter.

b.) Call of Peter (Lk 5:1-11)

There is a unique detail in Luke's version of the account. When Jesus calls Peter, he responds: "depart from me, for I am a sinner!" (v. 8). Jesus does not see a sinner, but one who is good, able to be a great catcher of people. He says: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (v. 10).

If we fast-forward to the end of the Gospel, we see Peter's frailty once again. Three times he has declared he does not know Jesus, and then "...while he was still speaking, the cock crowed." (Luke 22:60)

Again, there is a unique detail in Luke's version: "The Lord turned and **looked at** Peter." Luke does not say what kind of look Jesus gave him. How do you picture it? A look of remonstrance? Anger? Disappointment?

I am inclined to think it is the same way he looked at him when he called him: with the same mercy & love, seeing still his great potential to be a fisher of people, a preacher of mercy.

Luke continues: "Then Peter **remembered the word of the Lord.**" (22:61-62). Peter's remembering is key to his ability to let himself be mercy'd so that he can be a preacher of mercy.

I will return to this theme – to elaborate more on the relationship of remembrance and mercy in a few moments.

c.) **A woman forgiven who loves greatly (Luke 7:36-50)**

One more example from the Gospel of Luke speaks about the divine gaze of loving mercy. It is the story of the woman in Luke 7:36-50, a woman who had been known in the city as a sinner and who had experienced great forgiveness. She came into a dinner gathering at the home of Simon the Pharisee, where Jesus was a guest. She washed his feet with her tears---most likely tears of joy---and dried them with her hair, and kissed them and anointed them with costly ointment. All these lavish demonstrations of love were prompted by her having been mercy'd, having been looked upon with divine love and having let it free her.

The host, Simon, however, has a different kind of gaze. Verse 39 says, "Now when the Pharisee who had invited him **saw it**, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner."

To try to get him to see differently, Jesus tells a short parable.

Look out whenever Jesus starts telling parables! They are dangerous stories that catch you off guard and turn the accepted ways of thinking and seeing upside down! The one in this story is quite simple. Jesus tells of a creditor who canceled the debt for someone who owed him a huge amount of money and also for one who owed a tiny bit. He then asks, "which of them will love him more?" When you put it in story form, Simon can see the correct answer quite easily: "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." "Right!" says Jesus. But then he brings Simon back to the real world and the real person in front of him: "Do you see this woman?" (v. 40). We don't hear Simon's reply. Jesus goes on to contrast what he saw in Simon's actions---or rather his lack of gracious actions---with the extravagant loving

actions of the woman, which gave evidence to the mercy she had received and which opened the wellsprings of love for her to offer love to others.

Jesus tries to tutor Simon into seeing the way he does: to let go the image of her only as sinner and to see her as he does, as a woman who loves greatly, who is the very image of himself, pouring out her tears and her ointment in love, much as he pours out himself for those he loves in his ministry, and ultimately his very life on the cross.

The story remains open-ended and we don't know, ultimately, whether Simon's eyes were opened to see as Jesus did.

As much as we may not want to stand with Simon in the story, it may serve as an invitation to us to let Jesus teach us to see as he does, so that we look with the gaze of God, the lover who always sees the goodness in what she has created, the one who sees our the ability to be fishers of people, preachers of mercy, icons of the Christ. It is still a great challenge for many in the church to see in a woman an icon of Christ, one who is as fully able to minister *in persona Christi* as our brothers.

And so we see that the first movement is to let ourselves be mercy'd.

I would invite you to reflect on:

What is your experience of being mercy'd?

How are we to respond to such mercy?

How do we becomes preachers of mercy?

II. Mercying: Remembering, Proclaiming Justice, Praying for Mercy

Once we have let ourselves be mercy'd, the next step is to become mercy as a way of being in the world as icons of the Creator and of Holy Wisdom revealed in the Christ. Three of the ways we can do that are: by remembering, proclaiming justice, and praying for mercy. I will rely primarily on the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel for this year's lectionary cycle, and the one that most often uses the vocabulary of mercy.

A. Remembering

In the Bible, remembering means far more than simple recall: remembrance is accompanied by commensurate action. When God remembers, it is with saving action, e.g., Gen 8, the story of the flood:

“God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided” (Gen 8: 1-3)

When God remembers, it results in saving action.

Likewise, in a poignant scene at the end of the Gospel of Luke, one of the criminals crucified alongside Jesus implores him: “Jesus, **remember me** when you come into your kingdom” (23: 42). He is asking Jesus not simply to bring him to mind, but is pleading for concrete saving action, of which Jesus assures him.

So too, when God’s people are told to remember, as in “remember the covenant,” it is not simply to call it to mind, but it requires action: E.g., when God instructs Moses to have the Israelites make fringes on the corner of their garments, it is so they will **remember and do** all the commandments (Num 15: 39).

This meaning is clear in Luke’s opening chapter, as first Mary then Zechariah sing of God’s remembrance of mercy manifest in saving deeds toward the ancestors and promised to all their descendants evermore.

Magnificat:

Mary sings of how God “has helped his servant Israel, in **remembrance of his mercy**” (1: 54)

Zechariah echoes the same thing:

“Thus he has shown the **mercy** promised to our ancestors, and has **remembered** his holy covenant” (1: 72)

The divine “mercy” (ἔλεος) of which Mary & Zechariah sing is more than a compassionate feeling; it is expressed in concrete saving actions by God and by those who are devoted to God, from Abraham and Sarah to all their descendants.

Remembering Mercy is recalling **past** divine saving action and recognizing it is **yet present**.

Mary names several concrete ways in which God’s mercy is visible in an ongoing way:

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has **looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant**.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One **has done great things** for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His **mercy** is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has **shown strength** with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has **brought down the powerful** from their thrones,
 and **lifted up the lowly**;
⁵³ he has **filled the hungry** with good things,
 and **sent the rich away empty.**
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in **remembrance of his mercy,**
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to **Abraham [and Sarah] and to his [their] descendants forever."**

I want to pause and explore two of the ways in which Mary sings of God's mercy.

1. God has looked with favor on the humiliation of his servant and lifts up all the humiliated (vv. 48, 52)
2. God fills the hungry with good things (v. 53)

First, the way God **looks** at her: The NRSV translates: "God has looked with favor." Now "with favor" is not in the Greek text—the Greek simply says God has "looked upon" (*epeplepsen*, ἐπέβλεψεν, v. 48)--but it is correct, I think, to add "with favor," as it recalls for us what we have seen already: God sees every part of creation as good and with the potential to choose the good. Mary says God has "looked upon" (*epeplepsen*, ἐπέβλεψεν, v. 48) the "humiliation" *tapeinōsis*, ταπεινώσις of his servant (v. 48).

It is puzzling: what is Mary's "humiliation" (*tapeinōsis*, ταπεινώσις) that God has "looked upon"? Part of the difficulty resides with the way *tapeinōsis*/ταπεινώσις is translated. Most modern English translations render it "lowliness" (NRSV, NABRE), or "low estate" (RSV), "lowly state" (NKJV), "humble state" (NET, NASB, NIV). But the noun *tapeinōsis*/ταπεινώσις (vv. 48) primarily means "humiliation, abasement." The verb *tapeinoō*/ταπεινώω means "to humble, abase," and also "to violate" a woman. Only NJB renders it "humiliation," which is the more accurate translation.

How might we understand what is Mary's "humiliation" (*tapeinōsis* / ταπεινώσις) that God has "looked upon" with favor?

Many interpreters understand this to be a reference to Mary's spiritual humility. Others suggest it refers to her actual social position. In her book *Truly Our Sister*, Elizabeth Johnson explains, "Young, female, a member of a

people subjected to economic exploitation by powerful ruling groups, afflicted by outbreaks of violence, she belongs to the ... poor in Luke's gospel, a group given a negative valuation by worldly powers."² Some scholars understand Mary's *tapeinōsis* / ταπεινώσις as part of her people's degradation, most especially that suffered by women.³ However we understand Mary's humiliation, she rejoices that God sees it with merciful eyes.

There are five other times in the Bible where God "looks upon," (*epiblepō*/ἐπιβλέπω) peoples' "humiliation," *tapeinōsis* /ταπεινώσις, and responds with saving mercy. In Genesis 16:11 God heeds the affliction (*tapeinōsis*) of Hagar and she conceives Ishmael. In Genesis 29:32 God sees the affliction (*tapeinōsis*) of Leah, and she bears Reuben. In 1 Samuel 1:11 Hannah prays for God to look upon (*epiblepō*) the misery (*tapeinōsis*) of God's servant (*doulē*) and grant her a male child (1 Sam 1:11). Likewise, in 1 Samuel 9:16, when Samuel is shown whom to anoint to be ruler over Israel to save them from the Philistines, God says, "I have seen (*epeblepsa*) the suffering (*tapeinōsis*) of my people." Finally, in the book of Judith: When the Israelites are threatened with destruction from the Assyrian commander Holofernes, they implore God, "have pity on our people in their humiliation (*tapeinōsis*), and look kindly (*epiblepson*) today on the faces of those who are consecrated to you" (Jdt 6:19).

Just as in these instances, God looks mercifully upon Mary (v. 48) and all those who are humiliated (*tapeinous*, v. 52) and raises them up. This claim also has political overtones: it paints God in contrast to the agents of imperial Rome, who used humiliation to keep their subjects submissive, using such means as crucifixion, levying tribute, and erecting Roman standards.

There is another important nuance to the verb *tapeinoō*. It also refers to the sexual humiliation of a woman: in the LXX it refers to the rape of Dinah (Gen 34:2), the abuse of the concubine of the Levite (Judges 19:24; 20:5), Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Kgs 13:12, 14, 22, 32), and the ravishing of the wives in Zion and the maidens in the cities of Judah by the enemy (Lam 5:11).

When Mary sings about God looking mercifully and lifting up all the humiliated, she announces a time when God's mercy is fully manifest, when

²Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister. A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 265.

³Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters. A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*. Trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 193.

women will no longer fear being humiliated by sexual violation, economic exploitation, or any other form of violent degradation.

Mercy and Meals

A second way Mary sings of God's mercy is that God fills the hungry with good things while sending "the rich away empty" (v. 53).

In first century Palestine, the majority of the people were struggling and starving, even as Roman imperial propaganda boasted that its citizens enjoyed abundance. As Warren Carter describes,

. . . food was about power. Its production (based in land), distribution, and consumption reflected elite control. Accordingly, the wealthy and powerful enjoyed an abundant and diverse food supply. Quality and plentiful food was a marker of status and wealth . . . that divided elites from nonelites. It established the former as privileged and powerful and the latter as inferior and of low entitlement. The latter struggled to acquire enough food as well as food of adequate nutritional value. For most, this was a constant struggle. And it was cyclic whereby most dropped below subsistence levels at times throughout each year. Food, then, displayed the injustice of the empire on a daily basis.⁴

That God's mercy is manifest in feeding hungry people is a theme that recurs throughout the Gospel. Jesus declares blessed those that hunger now, and assures them that they will be satisfied (6:21). In the Third Gospel, Jesus is very frequently found in meal settings, providing not only physical sustenance, but also, as did Woman Wisdom (Proverbs 8—9), teaching that nourishes the spirit.⁵ At these meals, he challenges the assumptions of the Roman imperial world and, like his mother, offers an alternative vision of God's reign.

Feeding the hungry is still a dangerous, subversive activity, as is seen in the example of the women who ran community soup kitchens and supplied milk for children during the reign of terror of the *Sendero Luminoso* ("Shining Path") in Perú in the 1980s and 1990s. The women's vocal denunciations of the violence of *Sendero* and their strong support among the people made them a threat to the terrorist organization. Juana López, coordinator of the *Vaso de Leche* ("Glass of Milk") program for children was murdered in 1991; twenty-nine more leaders were killed in 1992. One of the most notorious murders was that of María Elena Moyano on February 15,

⁴Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 109-110.

⁵In some episodes Jesus is host (9:10-17; 22:14-20), while at others he is a guest (5:30; 7:36; 10:38; 14:1; 19:7).

1992, who was gunned down in front of her children and other women and her corpse was then blown up with dynamite. The comments of one of María Elena's friends tell how the rallying cry voiced in the Magnificat may be acted upon today, "Presently in Peru we, as women, have taken on a political role of more importance than ever before in the history of the country. We are leaders, citizens, women's rights activists, organizers, and mobilizers of the grassroots efforts to survive, to overcome the crisis, and to protect the life and livelihoods, as well as the democratic spaces and values that have cost us so much effort to construct."⁶

We see that Mary's Magnificat is no sweet lullaby; the divine "mercy" (ἔλεος) of which Mary sings (vv. 50, 54) is more than a compassionate feeling; it is expressed in concrete saving actions for those who have been most debased.

The result of these saving actions is not simply a reversal of fortunes, so that those who were previously enthroned and powerful are now debased. Rather, a simultaneous movement of relinquishment on the part of those who are rich and powerful and empowerment on the part of those who are humiliated and hungry results in a leveling of goods and power.

It is notable that there is a contrast in the way the Magnificat depicts divine mercy and the way the victory hymns of Judith and Jael depict God's violent destruction of Israel's enemies. All three women are declared blessed (Judg 5:24; Jdt 13:18; Luke 1:42, 45), but Jael and Judith are portrayed as violent warriors, while Mary is a peaceful listener and doer of God's word. "Whereas Jael and Judith accomplish God's will by the hand of death, Mary accomplishes God's will by her obedience and by bearing the one who ultimately defeats death by dying."⁷

To summarize: when we have been mercy'd, like Mary we sing in remembrance of God's saving action in the past and we participate in its manifestation in the present, most especially by lifting up those who are humiliated and feeding those who are made hungry.

We see in the example of Mary that remembering and proclaiming justice are intimately intertwined, not two separate actions. I will come back in a few moments to explore further the relationship between justice and mercy.

The Magnificat also gives us a powerful portrayal of a woman who was called not only to bear God's unique prophet, but herself was to exercise a

⁶ <http://www.yachay.com.pe/espeicales/moyano/INGLES.HTM> (accessed 24 February 2007).

⁷ **Error! Main Document Only.** Wilson, Brittany E. "Pugnacious Precursors and the Bearer of Peace: Jael, Judith, and Mary in Luke 1:42." *CBQ* 68 (2006): 436-56, here 456.

powerful preaching ministry, as her song continues to be sung by Christians every day, calling us to envision an alternative rule by divine mercy. While most Christians celebrate Mary's obedient "yes" to God's call, it is equally important to preserve and pass on the dangerous memory of her faithful "no" to all that debases God's beloved.

From the remembrance of God's saving mercy at the outset of the Gospel, let us turn briefly to the end of the Gospel.

In a saying unique to Luke, Jesus says: "Do this in **remembrance** of me" (22:19). He is asking the disciples not simply to bring him to mind as they break bread together, but to **make him present** through their merciful actions and their proclamation of justice.

B. Remembering & Proclaiming: The Women at the tomb (24:6-8)

The first disciples we see who carry out this command are the women who come to the empty tomb. When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women enter the tomb, there are two men in dazzling clothes inside who say:

⁶ **Remember** how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." ⁸ Then **they remembered** his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, **they told** all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who **told** (*elegon*) this to the apostles.

That the women at the empty tomb **remember** Jesus' words (24:8) signifies not only that they were **present** when he spoke to the disciples in Galilee, but also that they **faithfully continue his mission of embodying God's liberating mercy**.

Narratively, the women at the cross (23:39), burial (23:55-56) and empty tomb (24:1-10) are the crucial link to the crucified and buried Jesus whose tomb is empty. The women are also the connection back to Galilee, providing the necessary link for remembering what Jesus told the disciples there (24:6-8). Luke has twice noted that the women who saw the crucifixion and how the body was laid in the tomb were the ones who had followed from Galilee (23:49, 55). At 8:1-3, Luke introduced Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and the other Galilean women as accompanying Jesus and ministering to him while he was preaching in cities and villages. Luke now implies at 24:6-8 that they were present among the disciples who heard the passion predictions in 9:18-22 and 17:22-37. These women have been there throughout; they are faithful, persistent disciples who both hear and act on the word.

The exhortation to the women to remember Jesus' word (24:6) "echoes various statements earlier in the Gospel about hearing the word and taking care of it." Like Mary, who kept the word (*rhēmata* / ῥήματα) in her heart (2:19, 51), the Galilean women "remembered his words (*emnēsthēsan tōn rhēmatōn autou* / ἐμνήσθησαν τῶν ῥημάτων αὐτοῦ, 24:8). As in the parable of the sower, seed, and soil in chapter 8, they are the good soil, who have heard the word, and "hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance" (8:15). They are not one-time messengers to the other disciples; rather the imperfect tense of the verb *elegon* / ἔλεγον, "told," in 24:10 indicates that their telling is repeated. They continue to proclaim the word as faithful witnesses and preachers of mercy. We see again the intimate link between having been mercy'd, and responding by remembering and proclaiming justice.

For Reflection / Discussion: As we remember God's past saving deeds, how do we proclaim justice & mercy in the present?

III. God's Justice / Mercy

We have seen how proclaiming justice is a constitutive part of our response to being mercy'd. I want now to address a troublesome question about the relation between justice and mercy. Theologians and believers have long struggled to understand God's mercy in relation to divine justice with questions like: If God is all merciful, how can God also be just? Doesn't it re-victimize a person who has been hurt if the perpetrator is let off with mercy? What is the point of trying to live a good Christian life if God mercifully saves all---even the most egregious of sinners? Theologians through the ages have tried to work out answers to these deep questions, but it is never possible to fully explain the mystery of God. The Scriptures and our Dominican tradition help us to live into the mystery of divine mercy.

As Pope Francis urges us to open ourselves more fully to receive divine mercy and to practice works of mercy, he also speaks of the relation between mercy and justice. He reminds us that unjust structures of domination, including that of humankind over the earth, cut off the wellsprings of mercy: "Dominion over earth....seems to have no room for mercy."⁸

⁸ Pope Francis, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Par. 11. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html

Further, he insists that **mercy is not opposed to justice**: mercy is God's way of reaching out to the sinner, offering that one a new chance. "God's justice is his mercy given to everyone as a grace that flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus."⁹ Moreover, Mercy is not just one of God's attributes. It is the very core of who God is.¹⁰ Pope Francis has put it simply: *The Name of God is Mercy*.¹¹

One insidious manifestation of the false dichotomy fixed in the minds of many of the faithful is that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, while the God of the New Testament is a God of love and mercy. Nothing could be further from the truth: the God of the Old Testament is the same God as that of Jesus in the New Testament, whose mercy is manifest over and over in saving deeds. For example, in Exodus 34:6-7, when Moses cuts two new tablets, he proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation."

Very often in the Bible, divine mercy, is expressed in female form: the Hebrew word *rachamim*, "compassion," is derived from *rechem*, "womb," and it is through the wombs of women that divine mercy is manifest. New life bursts forth from those who were barren or who were thought to be past the age when new life was possible, or in the case of Mary, one who partnered solely with God in bearing new life.

From a biblical perspective there is really no opposition between justice and mercy. When God is portrayed as wrathful, it is an expression of divine resistance to sin and injustice. And as Walter Kasper puts it, "Evidence of justice in an unjust world is already a work of mercy for the oppressed and those whose rights have been denied."¹²

Pope Benedict XIV also spoke at length about the relationship between justice and charity in *Deus Caritas Est*. He referenced the great social encyclicals beginning with *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 as he elaborated on the one hand the Church's commitment to work for the just ordering of the State and society and organized charitable activity on the other. He pointed us to the parable of the Good Samaritan as a prime example of what mercy asks of us.

⁹ Ibid., Par. 21.

¹⁰ Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy. The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (trans. By William Madges; New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 88-89.

¹¹ See his book by this title, published in English by Random House, 2016.

¹² Kasper, *Mercy*, 53.

The parable (Luke 10:25-37) begins with a scholar of the law approaching Jesus with the question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"

27 He said in reply,
*"You shall love the Lord, your God,
 with all your heart,
 with all your being,
 with all your strength,
 and with all your mind,
 and your neighbor as yourself."*

28 He replied to him, "You have answered correctly;
 do this and you will live."

29 But because **he wished to justify himself**, [*dikaiōsai heauton / δικαιῶσαι ἑαυτὸν*] he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Note what the scholar's intent is: to justify himself—this is most ironic in a book where justice, right relationship, is not something one can accomplish for oneself; it is a free gift of God, accomplished by Christ, which we appropriate by faith (as Paul formulates it in Rom 3:22-26). In the parable that follows, Jesus will try to help the lawyer shift his focus from justifying himself to seeing with his heart the one in need of mercy and how to be the merciful face of God.

Note that one of the critical features in the story is how one sees. Recall our remarks earlier about the divine gaze and think about how each of these characters "sees" and what action results:

A priest happened to be going down that road,
 but **when he saw him**, he passed by on the opposite side. (v. 31)

Likewise a Levite came to the place,
 and **when he saw him**, he passed by on the opposite side. (v. 32)

But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him
 was **moved with compassion** (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη) **at the sight**. (v. 33)

The Greek verb, *splanchnizomai*, is visceral: it is literally "gut-wrenching compassion." Four times in the Gospel of Luke, seeing evokes gut-wrenching compassion. When Jesus saw the widow who had lost her only son *esplanchnisthē* ["he had compassion" (NRSV) is a very weak translation] (Luke 7:13), and he raised the boy back to life; when the prodigal father saw his returning younger son, *esplanchnisthē* ["he was filled with compassion"] (Luke 15:20) and he ran to him. And when Zechariah sang about the knowledge of salvation and forgiveness of sins we are given, he says it is through the *splanchna eleous theou*, "through the tender compassion of God" [literally, the gut-felt mercy of God] who has looked upon us (*episkepsetai*).

We know the actions that followed when the Samaritan *esplanchnisthē*, was moved with compassion at the sight:

“He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, ‘Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.’

Jesus concludes the story by asking the scholar, “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?” He answered, “**The one who treated him with mercy** (*ho poiēsas to eleos*/ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἔλεος)” (vv. 34-36).

Note that the question has been inverted: the scholar of the law asked “who is my neighbor” and was seeking to justify himself; Jesus asks “who acted as neighbor?” and points the scholar to how to “do mercy;” how “justice and mercy kiss,” (Psalm 85: 10).

There is a profound twist: the Samaritan demonstrates correct interpretation of the Law and is justified by his doing of the Law, not the scholar of the Law who is seeking to justify himself and who should know how to interpret the Law.

Like most parables, it is open-ended and we do not know whether the scholar of the law was able to see as the Samaritan did, as Jesus does.

It leaves us to ask ourselves if we too sometimes slip into focusing on how to justify ourselves, rather than doing justice, doing mercy, having been mercy’d, justified by the only One who can do that.

The parable also challenges us to accept mercy from the most unlikely sources.

If we put ourselves in the place of the one who was attacked and left for dead, the parable invites us to see the merciful face of God in one we thought was a hated enemy. For some of us, it is only possible to accept this message after having reached the depths of need, having been stripped of all of one’s own resources. Accepting godly mercy from one once regarded as a hated enemy opens the wellsprings of compassion so that one may come to regard every person as neighbor and in turn be a doer of mercy across boundaries of difference.

It is a way that leads to “formation of the heart” of which Pope Benedict spoke in *Deus Caritas Est*: “to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their [our] love and opens their [our] spirits to others.” (#31).

There is another parable in Luke's Gospel that speaks to us of the dire consequences if we do not let our heart be formed in this way.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, **he looked up and saw** Abraham far away with **Lazarus by his side** (*en tois kolpois autou/έν τοῖς κόλποις αὐτοῦ*). ²⁴ He called out, '**Father Abraham, have mercy on** me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' ²⁷ He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' ³⁰ He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Notice that in life, the rich man **never saw** Lazarus, who sat at his gate every day. And when he finally **looks up**, when he is in Hades, he still does not **see** him as his brother, even though they are both children of "Father Abraham." He would have Abraham send Lazarus like a messenger boy to his blood brothers.

Many translations mask the intimate image in v. 23, which we see captured in this carving on the South Portal of the Church of Saint Pierre, Moissac, FRANCE c. 1115-30.

"he looked up and saw Abraham far away **with Lazarus by his side** (*en tois kolpois autou/έν τοῖς κόλποις αὐτοῦ*)." The Greek says literally that Lazarus "in the bosom of Abraham." It is the same expression that the Fourth Evangelist uses in the Prologue to the Gospel of John to express the

intimacy of the Father with the *Logos*. It speaks about how even when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, he is yet “in the bosom of the Father (*eis ton kolpon tou patros/εις τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς*)” (John 1:18). This same expression occurs again in the Last Supper scene, where the Beloved Disciple is reclining on the bosom of Jesus (*en tō kolpō tou Iēsou/ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*, John 13:23). The Beloved Disciple, who is never named, and thus can be a figure for any disciple, female or male, experiences the same intimacy with Christ, lying at his bosom as he did with the Creator. It is the image of a nursing mother, as the prophet Isaiah also elaborated: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (49:15).

The rich man has not let himself be mercy'd; he has refused the motherly intimacy with God that had been offered him day after day. His plea, “Have mercy on me” now rings hollow and comes too late. I would propose that the parable is not warning that if you don't accept the God of Mercy, then the God of Justice & Wrath will punish you. This is a false dichotomy, as we have seen. Rather, God who is ever the God of Mercy, is broken-hearted, as she still throbs with womb compassion for her child who refuses the mercy extended to him day after day after day. The God of Mercy opens the way to right relation, but she will not force anyone. It is always our choice.

For Reflection / Discussion: How do Luke's parables speak to you of divine justice and mercy?

IV. Praying for Mercy

We have explored the divine gaze of mercy, and how we respond by remembering and proclaiming justice / mercy. We turn now to how we must also pray for mercy.

There are many examples in Luke of those who plead for mercy:

- A. In chapter 17: **“ten lepers** approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, **“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”** When he **saw** them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. (17:12-14)
- B. In chapter 18, **a man who was blind** who was sitting along the roadside begging when Jesus approached Jericho, called out twice: **“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”** and he regained his sight (18:36-43)

C. Also in chapter 18, there is a parable found only in Luke that illustrates the stance we are to take when praying for mercy, and it brings us back to the relationship between justice and mercy (18:9-14):

⁹ He [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, '**God, be merciful to me, a sinner!**' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Pharisee: One cannot help but notice that although the prayer begins with an address to God, every other pronoun is "I": "I thank you . . . I am not like [others]. . . I fast . . . I pay [tithes]. . ." His whole prayer is centered on himself and his accomplishments. While he does begin by acknowledging God as the source of his blessings and achievements, his prayer sounds to contemporary Western ears like one of self-congratulation and self-aggrandizement. He seems to need nothing from God.

A further difficulty with the Pharisee is not only that his relation with God seems out of kilter, but there is a yawning gulf that he has placed between himself and all "the rest of humanity" (v. 11). He labels others as rapacious, unjust, and adulterers and keeps apart from the toll collector. In so judging others he has usurped God's prerogative.

All that he has received from God has not served to give him a compassionate heart toward others.

His stance appears to be one of entitlement rather than gratitude, by which he might recognize all as gift, and to see himself as inextricably bound with all of humanity as brothers and sisters. He is neither in right relation with God nor with other people.

The toll collector's prayer is a simple cry for mercy, in the spirit of Psalm 51, "Have mercy on me, God, in your goodness; in your abundant compassion blot out my offense" (v. 3).

His plea *hilasthēti* literally means, "make atonement for me." This is different from others who ask for mercy from Jesus, as the lepers in 17:13, who plead, *eleēson me*. His hope is that the atonement sacrifices offered in

the temple may apply to him. Although he has made no restitution for any offenses, he returns home justified. He is righteous because he recognizes who he is in relation to God and that any good that comes to him is by God's mercy. In the despised toll collector, we see an image of the Crucified One, who is seemingly cursed by God (Deut 21:23), but is actually God's Righteous One (Luke 23:47).

Luke 18:1-8 – Persistent Pursuit of Justice

By coupling this with the story with that of the widow and the judge in 18:1-8, Luke provides a fuller picture of righteousness. Right relation is expressed in both prayer for God's mercy and in persistent action in the pursuit of justice. A widow who is expected to be helpless and acquiescent, letting her nearest male relative argue her case, is instead a powerful force who successfully moves a corrupt judge toward a just act. She does it by her persistence, never relenting, coming day after day after day, with no weapon but the power of truth. She is an icon of God, who is always with those who are abused and made poor.

For Reflection / Discussion: What do you hear in the toll collector's prayer for mercy?

V. Our Dominican Tradition of Mercy

Our Dominican tradition is also a rich resource for reflection on mercy.

St. Dominic's quest for Truth went hand in hand with mercy. His commitment to study and preach Truth was not an end in itself, but motivated by his heart-felt compassion for those who had distanced themselves from God's mercy. He was known to have spent many nights before the cross, pleading with God to have mercy on sinners. Another of his acts of mercy was when a severe famine broke out and he sold everything, including his precious books to feed the starving.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote of God's mercy as "the primordial root and the prior element to which everything else must be traced back."¹³ Mercy is not just one of God's attributes. It is the very core of who God is.¹⁴ Thomas defined the virtue of mercy as "the compassion in our hearts for another person's misery, a compassion which drives us to do what we can to help him" (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II.30.1).

¹³ *Summa theologiae* pt. I, q. 21, a 1 ad 2 and 3.

¹⁴ Kasper, *Mercy*, 88-89.

St. Thomas tells us of the “infinity of the Divine Mercy, which is greater than any number and magnitude of sins.” Moreover, “the mercy of God grants pardon to sinners through penance without any limits” (*ST* III.84.10).

Our sister, St. Catherine of Siena invites us, “If I were wholly inflamed with the fire of divine love, would I not then, with a burning heart, beseech my Creator, the truly merciful One, to show mercy to all my brothers and sisters?”¹⁵

And one of her prayers:

O immeasurable love!

O gentle love!

Eternal Fire!

You are that fire ever blazing....

You are direct without any twisting,

Genuine without any duplicity,

Open without any pretense.

Thurn the eye of your mercy on your creatures.

I know that mercy is your hallmark, and no matter where I turn

I find nothing but your mercy.

This is why I run crying to your mercy

to have mercy on the world.

---*Prayer 9* [Dominican Praise, 249]

For Reflection / Discussion: How does our Dominican tradition on mercy alive today?

¹⁵ Quoted in Kasper, *Mercy*, 110.

VI. Continuing our Mission of Preaching the Gospel of Mercy

After 800 years of preaching the Gospel of Mercy, how do we continue into the next 800 years? For some of us, especially in Europe and North America, this appears to be a time of diminishment, aging, declining numbers, while new life is blossoming forth in the global South.

We are moving from a time when we might have thought of ourselves as a huge force of worker bees, staffing innumerable schools and hospitals. Now, we are beginning to embrace the call to be a small, but incisive prophetic presence in the church and the world. As Pope Francis said in his letter to us when he declared the year of Consecrated Life: "the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy . . . This is the priority that is needed right now."

So our call is to be a vessel of divine communication: women who are the bridge between God's dream for the cosmos and people's longings. As Bryan Massingale put it, prophets, help the community to see: What is the death that is difficult to embrace? and what is the hope we cannot dare to imagine?

Leaven

An image for us comes from a parable that Jesus told about leaven "that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened" (Luke 13:20–21).

Only a small amount is needed to transform an entire loaf.

Take the example of only one branch of our family history:

Four German nuns came to America in 1853 from the Convent of Holy Cross, Regensburg. From them sprouted Dominican congregations in Amityville, New York; Great Bend, Kansas; Mission San Jose, California; Newburgh, New York; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Edmonds, Washington; Tacoma, Washington; Caldwell, New Jersey; Akron, Ohio; Racine, Wisconsin; Adrian Michigan; Blauvelt, New York---spanning the whole U.S. from the East to the West coasts. From the tiniest bit of leaven, has come phenomenal growth.

Yeast is an agitating, fermenting agent, it permeates the whole loaf, making it rise and transforming its taste and substance into something desirable and nutritious. Our prophetic call is like this: to be such animating agents, at the prophetic edges.

While some might see in this parable traditional images of women providing support for the mission through bake sales and other behind-the-scenes ministries, there is another possibility. The divine revelation of the inbreaking of the reign of God in the person and ministry of Jesus is symbolized by the transformative action of the woman putting yeast in the dough. The image of the godly bakerwoman can open the way for women to minister in all ways that cause the church and the world to rise and be transformed. For some members of the church, when women take on the ministries of leadership and decision-making, this agitating action seems a corruptive influence, the way Jesus characterized the false teaching of his opponents as “yeast” (Mark 8:15; Matt 16:11-12; Luke 12:11). Instead, Jesus’ parable can serve as an invitation to see instead a manifestation of the divine in the ways women bake, bless, break, and share from the gifts given them.

Stepping Out on the Word of God

In this time when it is possible for us to be more & more connected across the globe, there are challenges for us as we attempt greater collaboration, for receiving the gifts of others in our intercultural interchanges. As Tina reminded us on Saturday, true collaboration does not mean that those of the dominant culture invite others to participate with them; rather, the project is to listen deeply to one another and create something new under the guidance of the Spirit.

That this has been a challenge since the earliest days of the church is evident from the Acts of the Apostles. We have just been reflecting on passages from Acts 15, in the lectionary this week.

A church that started wholly from Jewish members, struggled with changes when Gentiles started to join them. As Acts 15 recounts, Peter and Paul took the lead, as first they related to the leaders in Jerusalem what their experience was, and how they interpreted the signs of the times. Then they turned to the Scriptures and tradition, to interpret what God was doing and finally, they let themselves be led by the Spirit to take a new step, a risky action, that would change them forever.

We, likewise, are in a time when we, led by the Spirit, must step out in a different way on the Word of God. The African American poet laureate Maya Angelou¹⁶ wrote about how her grandmother did this:

¹⁶ Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothin' for my Journey Now* (New York: Random House, 1993) 73-74.

She remembers her grandmother, who raised her in the little town of Stamps, Arkansas:

One of my earliest memories of Mamma is a glimpse of a tall cinnamon-colored woman with a deep, soft voice, standing thousands of feet up in the air on nothing visible.

That incredible vision was a result of what my imagination would do each time Mamma drew herself up to her full six feet, clasped her hands behind her back, looked up into a distant sky, and said, "I will step out on the word of God."

The depression, which was difficult for everyone, especially for a single black woman in the South tending her disabled son and two grandchildren, caused her to make the statement of faith often.

She would look up as if she could will herself into the heavens, and tell her family in particular and the world in general, "I will step out on the word of God."

Immediately, [Maya Angelou recalls] I could see her flung into space, moons at her feet and stars at her head, comets swirling around her.

Naturally it wasn't difficult for me to have faith. I grew up knowing that the word of God has power.

Another image for us about how to claim the power of the Spirit is given us in the Gospel of John (20:19-23):

The disciples are gathered behind locked doors, locked in fear, when Jesus stands in their midst and says, "peace be with you." Then he showed them his hands and his side and he said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; whomever you hold are held fast."

It is claiming the power of the Spirit that enables us to be able to move from paralyzing fear to peace and to go forth in mission. How does this happen? Notice that Jesus says "peace be with you," then shows them his wounds, then again, "peace be with you," verbally surrounding the woundedness with peace. The wounds never go away, but they can be remembered in a different way and healing can bring about transformation to peace. The way to this transformation is to accept the power of the Spirit, which is able to engender new life

through death. Just as the Creator breathed into the nostrils of the first human creature, so that it became a living being (Gen 2:7), and again breathed life into the dry bones of shattered Israel at the exile as prophesied by Ezekiel (37:1-4), so the Spirit revivifies those whose hopes were shattered at the crucifixion, as well as those shattered by senseless violence and displacement today.

Two practices that open us to receiving this Spirit are offered us in v. 23: forgiveness and solidarity with one another. First: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them"---forgive everything you can and everyone you can---this is the way of mercy that empowers us for preaching. Second: whomever you hold on to are held fast---hold on to one another in communion, in solidarity. The second half of v. 23 is often mistranslated, usually as: "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (NRSV). But the word "sins" is not in the Greek text. What the risen Christ is saying is akin to what he said earlier in the Gospel:

■ John 6:37, 39:

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away;

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day

■ 10:27-29:

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.

■ 17:12: While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

■ 18:9: This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me."

There is an image that comes to mind to help illustrate what I think is the sense of John 20:23.

Do you remember Sr. Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, who died in 1990? She should have been a Dominican---she was a great preacher! In 1989 she was invited to address the U.S. Bishops about the needs of black Catholics in the U.S. At the end of her speech, she asked the bishops to join her in singing---she loved to sing her preaching! She was already weakened from cancer, but her voice was strong as she sat and began to sing "We Shall Overcome." The bishops chimed in, but then she stopped them and said, "Stand up to

sing, brothers!" So they stood and began again, "We shall overcome." Then she instructed them, "Take the hand of the brother next to you while you sing!" So, they reluctantly reached out to take the hands of the brothers alongside and began again, "We shall overcome." "No, brothers," not like that, she said. "Cross your hands over like this to take the hand of the brother next to you. That's right," she said, with a twinkle in her eye, "you have to move together to hold hands that way! That's how we did it during the civil rights marches in the 1960s, where we had to hold on to one another tightly, so we wouldn't lose anyone in the struggle. That way, when the police came, and the dogs, and the batons, and the tear gas, and the water canons, we wouldn't lose anyone in the struggle. And you know where we asked the priests and the bishops to be? Right up in front to lead the people!"

That's the image I have for what the risen Christ asks of us---to hold on to each one, and not let anyone get lost in the struggle. That's what I hear our sisters in Iraq doing.

We've talked a good deal about solidarity with one another in our meeting this week.

What would holding on to one another mean concretely in our actions together for the future of our preaching the Gospel of Mercy? How, for example, might those of us who have more resources partner with those who have less so that women throughout the Order have opportunities to study theology, Scripture, and preaching, not only so we ourselves can preach, but so that we can teach others to do so---even teaching seminarians and priests!

One final text that may be helpful for us to reflect on as we ask how our preaching will continue into the next 800 years, is found at the very end of the Gospel of John (21:15-19). Jesus has just fixed breakfast for the disciples and afterward, Jesus asks Simon Peter if he loves him. It's his final exam and there's only one question and only one right answer: "Do you love me?" Three times Peter says yes, not so much because Jesus needed to be reassured of Peter's love after his three-fold denial, but for Peter's sake, as he remembers that merciful gaze that first drew him to Jesus. And each time, Jesus reminds him that this love bears fruit in mission: "feed my sheep, tend my sheep."

Their exchange concludes with Jesus telling Peter (vv 18-19),

"Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

There is a kind of death which we are experiencing now, in different ways in our different contexts, but we also have been given the gift of living resurrected life even now. The Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel talks about us being “threatened with resurrection.” Life is being birthed anew in the most unexpected places, just as the blood and water that flowed from the pierced side of Jesus, the liquids that accompany the birthing process, signaled that through the death of the Crucified One, would arise new life in his followers. Our only instruction is to follow, extending our hands in obedience, and letting ourselves be led in ways that we would not choose.

Conclusion:

As we conclude these reflections, let me summarize and say a brief word about how our four pillars of Dominican life can support us into the next 8 millennia of our preaching mission:

In **Contemplation** we open ourselves to the loving gaze of the All Merciful One and let ourselves be mercy'd.

In Contemplation we also learn to return that loving gaze to our Beloved and to all who are given to us to be part of our lives. We learn to see like Jesus, with gut-felt mercy (*splanchnizomai*) that leads to action for justice.

Like the Creator, we behold all of the cosmos as good, and every individual as one who has been mercy'd and who has great capacity for loving.

And like the toll collector, our contemplation includes a constant prayer for mercy, which frees us for preaching justice/mercy with joy.

Our **remembering** through **Study** of the Scriptures and tradition impels us not simply to recall, but to make God's justice & mercy present and visible through our preaching **mission** and acts of mercy.

And finally, in **obedience**, we are led together, committed to **common life** and to solidarity with one another, to follow the lead of the Spirit in ways we did not plan and would rather not go.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to listen to your experiences of Dominican life in these days we have been together and to share these few reflections on our call to preach the Gospel of Mercy.

One of my hopes is that Pope Francis will extend the Year of Mercy to a Decade, a Century, or perhaps 800 more years, for by then we may be even more “wholly inflamed with the fire of divine love,” as our Sister Catherine put it, knowing how much we have been mercy'd, and how greatly a gift we have been given: sent to preach the Gospel of Mercy.

For Further Reading:

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