

# A CONSISTENT VISION OF LOVE AND COMPASSION

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## *Pope Francis: Towards a Compassionate Church*

From the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has laid a strong emphasis on mercy and compassion. For the Pope, the service of compassion is central to the mission of the Church. He once stated 'that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful.'<sup>1</sup>

Calling upon the church's leaders to be 'ministers of mercy above all,' he laid out this vision for the church:

I dream of a Church that is a mother and a shepherdess. The Church ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the Good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

On another occasion, the Pope said: 'We need Christians who make God's mercy and tenderness for every creature visible to the men and women of our day.'<sup>3</sup> In his first Apostolic Exhortation 'The Joy of the Gospel'<sup>4</sup>, Pope Francis restated this point: 'The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel' (EG n. 114).

Before Pope Francis, several Popes had already spoken about the virtues of mercy and compassion as central to the message of the Gospel. For example, Pope John Paul II wrote an encyclical entitled '*Dives in Misericordia*', which means, 'Rich in Compassion.' But Pope Francis appears to make the message and practice of 'Compassion' the fundamental

inspiration of the way he carries out his Papal ministry. In its preaching, he said, the Church 'has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary' (EG n. 35). That means, the Church should concentrate on the core message of the Gospel:

To respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured! All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love (EG n. 39).

As retired Auxiliary Bishop of Brisbane in Australia, shortly before his death in 1999, James Cuskelly MSC wrote a little book entitled, *Walking the Way of Jesus, An Essay on Christian Spirituality*<sup>5</sup>. For Cuskelly, this Spirituality articulates the foundation of our Christian faith and mission. He writes, 'What makes us Christians is that we 'have learned to believe in the love that God has for us'.

This is a simple vision of faith, but it is essential and central. Starting with this truth, ours needs to be a 'consistent vision of love' ... A 'consistent vision of love' begins with the text from St. John: 'God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son' (John 3:16). Then it sees everything that God does in and through Jesus as totally motivated by love' (p. 17-18).

Cuskelly admits that 'it is not easy for us to grasp the idea of an infinitely loving God, or to cling to the conviction that 'God is compassion and love' (Ps 102), but we need to do so' (p. 20), because it is the central message of Jesus himself.

**Cardinal Walter Kasper: 'Mercy, the Essence of the Gospel'**

This same 'consistent vision of love' has been elaborated by Cardinal Walter Kasper in his book, entitled 'Mercy, The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian life'<sup>6</sup>. Before becoming Pope Francis, Cardinal Bergoglio had read the book and commented: 'This book has done me so much good'. Key elements in Pope Francis' vision of the Mission of the Church can be found in the central themes of this book of Walter Kasper<sup>7</sup>. Kasper himself describes his book as an attempt 'to connect theological reflection with spiritual, pastoral and also social considerations concerning a culture of mercy.'<sup>8</sup>

**1. How to understand the word 'compassion'?**

Cardinal Kasper notes that these days, to the ears of many people, the words 'compassion' and 'mercy' may sound sentimental. In today's society, people are expected to be strong, healthy and successful. If not, they belong to the losers, who are often even blamed for having failed in life, as if it is their own fault<sup>9</sup>.

On the other hand, the Cardinal states that today there are also movements, which try to promote the values of empathy, compassion and solidarity. Thanks be to God, that victims of natural catastrophes, outbreaks of violence and structural poverty unleash again and again an impressive wave of compassion and readiness to help<sup>10</sup>.

Also modern psychotherapy, pedagogy, sociology and pastoral work emphasize the importance of a compassionate or empathetic approach. Putting oneself into the feelings, thoughts and situation of another person or culture is considered to be a necessary requirement of interpersonal relationships and intercultural encounter<sup>11</sup>.

Together with many other authors, Kasper understands compassion as empathetic feeling and merciful behavior, as well as alertness to the cry for justice. In the word



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'compassion', he hears the word 'passion', which encourages us to make a passionate response to the appalling injustice in contemporary society.

**2. The Revelation of God's name: 'I will be there for you'**

Central to Cardinal Kasper's understanding of compassion is God's revelation of his name to Moses in the burning bush. This revelation was the beginning of Israel's exodus. God said to Moses: 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows' (Exodus 3:7-8). And when Moses then asks God for his name, he receives the mysterious answer: 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3:14). According to Hebraic thinking, the word 'I am' does not refer to an abstract idea of 'being' in general, but to a dynamic and practical way of being present, here and now. By revealing his name as 'the One who is', God really says: 'I will be there for you. I will be with you in your suffering and accompany you on your life's journey'.

So, already the revelation of God's name in the Old Testament shows us that 'God is compassion', just as later on St. John will witness that 'God is love.' It is not the 'Almighty' or 'All-powerful' qualities, which express the core of God's divine being, but the words 'Love' and 'Compassion'. That means, as Bishop Cuskelly already noted, all God's works as Creator and Savior are

motivated by love and compassion. It also means that, when defining the meaning of the word 'compassion' in relation to God, we should not rely upon our own superficial understanding of 'compassion', for example by only imagining God as 'Dear Lord', but we should pay careful attention to the way God reveals himself as 'the One who is compassionate' in the Old and New Testament.

That is what Walter Kasper is doing. Based on biblical witness, he shows us that without any doubt, God has a compassionate heart, which is merciful and forgiving, but that this heart also may flare up in anger, when God's children are treated unjustly; and that in his compassion, God is also wholeheartedly committed to the cause of justice in society.

### ***3. Jesus' Heart as the Revelation of God's Compassion<sup>12</sup>***

God's name, 'I will be there for you' is definitively revealed in the person of Jesus that is, in his ministry, death, resurrection and outpouring of the Spirit. Jesus' words at the Last Supper 'express in summary fashion what was the core of Jesus' existence, namely Jesus' 'being for us and for all.'<sup>13</sup> By allowing Jesus to die 'for all human beings', by raising him from the dead, and by pouring out the Spirit, God definitively proved 'to be there for us'. In the midst of darkness, suffering and death, God shows himself to be 'a God full of mercy, who makes possible for us a new beginning and gives us a new birth by his great mercy.'<sup>14</sup>

Cardinal Kasper dedicates a special chapter to the veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as a particular expression of faith in God's 'being there for us'. In the Heart of Jesus, we recognize that God himself has a heart for us. From the pierced Heart of Jesus emerged blood and water as symbols of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In allowing his Son to die for us, and his heart to be pierced, God

went to extremes in 'being there for us'. Sent by his Father, Jesus carried his suffering in solidarity with all human beings in their suffering. At the same time the Father empowered us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, emerging from the Heart of Jesus, enabling us to bear our own suffering and that of others.<sup>15</sup>

### ***4. God's Compassion and Justice.***

Walter Kasper writes at length about the relationship between compassion and justice. He states: 'mercy is not opposed to justice'<sup>16</sup>; rather mercy is the source of justice and the fulfilment of justice. But the question arises: how can God simultaneously be compassionate and just? How can a God, who is perfectly just, be merciful and forgive the perpetrators without being unjust to the victims, when the victims demand justice to be done?<sup>17</sup>

In former days, we have been taught that God is first of all 'just'. God, it was said, rewards the good, and punishes the bad, while only as an afterthought, God will forgive the sinners who repent and ask for forgiveness. The picture of a punitive and avenging God was and is still widespread and, as Cardinal Kasper comments, 'has thrown many people into a state of anxiety about their eternal salvation.'<sup>18</sup> The old image of God created an impression as if we need to deserve God's mercy by performing as many good works as possible.

However, imaging God as essentially being there for all of us, full of mercy and compassion, sheds a new light on God's justice. Kasper states: 'God's justice is his mercy.'<sup>19</sup>

'Mercy does not abolish justice but fulfills it and exceeds it. Thomas (Aquinas) can even say: justice without mercy is cruelty; mercy without justice is the mother of disintegration; therefore, both must be bound together ... Mercy wants to do justice to the other in his or her unique personal dignity.'<sup>20</sup>

We are all sinners and we all need God's

merciful justice. St. Paul taught us that we are made 'just', not by our meritorious works, but by our faith, our trust in God. For a merciful God, 'justice' does not mean 'condemning' or 'punishing', but 'redeeming' and 'saving'. Without any merit on our part, out of pure grace, despite our shortcomings, God wants to make us just and holy people, by enabling us with the gifts of his Holy Spirit. St. Paul wrote, 'You cannot make God accept you because of something you do. God accepts sinners only because they have faith in him' (Romans 5:4). We only need to open our hearts to God and his Spirit and to trust in God's forgiveness and empowering compassion. Such an attitude of trust St. Paul calls faith (Romans 1:17; 3:21f.28; 9:32; Gal 2:16; 3:11).

### ***5. Where is God when innocent people are suffering?*<sup>21</sup>**

The message of God's boundless mercy seems to be in total contradiction to so many atrocities for which people are responsible, as well as with the natural disasters, which make so many innocent victims. How can a merciful God permit all of this suffering? Where is God when good people are in deep sorrow and grief? The prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus show that in the midst of atrocities, suffering and grief, God remains faithful, by being the God who is always there for each of us. Jesus also promised to stay with us, always, until the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20). Thus St. Paul could write that nothing can separate us from God's love, no suffering or misery, no persecution or deprivation (Romans 8:35 ff.). In every situation, no matter how hopeless, in life and in death, God is there for us in Jesus.

Moreover, according to the witness of the Prophets and the revelation of Jesus, God's heart turns angry when his sons and daughters are treated unjustly. God reacts in anger, not

because of feeling personally offended, but because of compassionate love for his children, above all the weakest in society. God is the Holy One, who has to resist evil and injustice. God does not protect the wrongdoers, while abandoning the victims. On behalf of God, Jesus cares for the poor and strengthens the weakest in society. He expects all of God's children to be merciful as God himself is merciful (Luke 6:36).

### ***6. Towards a Culture of Compassion*<sup>22</sup>**

Just like Jesus, we are sent to 'be there for others'. St. Paul said it in a few words: 'Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2). The Holy Spirit empowers us and enables us to carry out this mission. The mission to be compassionate applies also to the Church as a whole, as being the Body of Christ in the world.<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis writes:

The Church, guided by the Gospel of mercy and by love for humankind, hears the cry for justice and intends to respond to it with all her might.' She is 'working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter (EG 188).

She wants to carry out this mission in three ways: by proclaiming the mercy of God, by concretely offering people God's mercy, and by embodying God's mercy in its laws and structures.

Thanks to the Holy Spirit, who pours out her spiritual gifts everywhere, many works of love and compassion are also performed outside the Church. In this regard we can learn a lot from non-Catholics and non-believers.

We are all called to contribute 'a consistent vision of love' to the local Churches where we minister, and to help create 'a culture of compassion' in the society or community, in which we live.

## NOTES

1. See an interview published by *America* magazine in September 2013, quoted in the Preface to the book of Walter Kasper by William Madges, which he translated into English.
2. See the same interview quoted in the 'Preface'.
3. See the 'Preface'.
4. *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013.
5. St. Paul's Publications, Strathfield NSW, 1999.
6. I use the Kindle edition, prepared by Paulist Press, 2013, and can only refer to the Chapter numbers of the book. The original German edition has been published in 2012.
7. See 'Preface' by William Madges.
8. See 'Foreword'.
9. Ch. I.4: Mercy under Ideological Suspicion.
10. Ch. 1.5: Empathy and Compassion: A New Approach.
11. The Cardinal also refers to the *Charter For Compassion*, promoted by 'The Compassionate Action Network International', a worldwide network whose goal is to promote the spirit and practice of the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (See <http://charterforcompassion.org>).
12. See the chapters IV.4 'Jesus' existence for others' and V.5 'Jesus' Heart as the Revelation of God's Mercy'.
13. Ch. IV.4: Jesus' existence for others.
14. Ch. IV.4: Jesus' existence for others.
15. Ch. V.5: Jesus' Heart as the Revelation of God's Mercy. Note: while summarizing Walter Kasper's reflection, I put greater emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of God's redemption through Jesus.
16. Ch. II.1: *Philosophical Approaches*.
17. Ch. II.1: *Philosophical Approaches*.
18. Ch. I.1: Mercy: Criminally Neglected.
19. Ch. I.1: Mercy: Criminally Neglected
20. Ch. VII. 4: Ecclesial Praxis and the Culture of Mercy.
21. Ch. V.7: Hope for Mercy in the Face of Innocent Suffering.
22. Ch. VIII: For a Culture of Mercy.
23. Ch. VII.1: The Church, Sacrament of Love and Mercy.

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*We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.*

*We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.*

—From the *Charter for Compassion*.