

FRANCISCAN LIVING

The Challenge of Mercy

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During the Year of Mercy, we are encouraged to pray, study and act for mercy.

We are exhorted to meditate and pray the Divine Mercy chaplet, study the Mercy documents of the Church (*Misericordiae Vultus* by Pope Francis and *Dives in Misericordia* by Pope St. John Paul II) and to perform the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy.

However, these efforts can become empty and meaningless unless we confront how we show or do not show mercy toward others in our everyday lives. Mercy is not meant to be just another program in the Church or a “feel good” exercise. Rather it is meant to be a tough-love challenge in changing our approach to others.

Lately I have been finding myself being very judgmental toward others and have realized that this attitude begins within my thoughts as I think of others. When I went to confession, the priest pointedly asked me whether I look at people seeing the bad in them, and if so, shouldn't I be looking for the good in them instead? After all, God always looks for the good, and isn't compassion one of the main attributes of God?

As Pope Francis says: “To refrain from judgment and condemnation means, in a positive sense, to know how to accept the good in every person and to spare him any suffering that might be caused by our partial judgment and our presumption to know everything about him.”¹

Pope Francis goes on to say, “Human beings, whenever they judge, look no farther than the surface, whereas the Father looks into the depths of the soul.” If we don't truly believe and act on these words, then we are missing the whole point of Jesus' crucifixion. God loves us, wildly, passionately and immeasurably!²

God's compassion is open to everyone: “...for he [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (Lk 6:35) . NO ONE is exempt from God's mercy no matter what they have done... not even me! I need to live this truth and act towards others with compassion, mercy and love.

I have begun to realize that my judgmental attitude started with some unresolved hurt from my past. The

hurt left me with anger and a fear of being hurt again. So subconsciously I projected my anger and fears outward, and I began to approach others negatively, judging people with my impossibly high standards, and finding scapegoats for my unresolved feelings. As you know, violence toward others (and being judgmental is a type of violence) begets violence, and a vicious cycle is perpetuated. Instead of acknowledging and accepting the hurtful injury, embracing my wounds in unity with Jesus' cross and forgiving the person, I chose to wallow in my self-victimization and attack others through my critical attitude — not very Franciscan at all!

For as Pope Francis says in *Misericordiae Vultus*:

“The Lord Jesus shows us the steps of the pilgrimage to attain our goal.

‘Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back’ (Lk 6:37-38).”³

Christ is *the* model of forgiveness and mercy. He not only forgave his enemies, but also loved them. He embraced his wounds and transformed them into love by forgiveness. This forgiveness breaks the cycle of condemnation and harm.

But what about justice, you might say? Pope Francis clarifies this when he states: “Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God's way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert and believe... Mere justice is not enough... anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price. However, this is just the beginning of conversion, not its end, because one begins to feel the tenderness and mercy of God.”⁴

It has been said: “the compassionate person offers salvation by offering healing and love.”⁵ Isn't that what we are about as Secular Franciscans?

Meditation: “What makes us most like Christ is our frail and fragile humanity. If we truly loved our frail and fragile humanity, we would love the frailty of others as well.”⁶

¹ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 14

² op. cit., 14.

³ op. cit., 14.

⁴ op. cit., 21.

⁵ Ilia Delio, *Compassion: Living in the Spirit of St. Francis*. Cincinnati OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011, p. 58.

⁶ Ilia Delio, p.72.