



MERCY IS THE BEST

DR. BERNARD BRADY

An age-old question in Catholic life is the balance between caring for the physical needs of persons and caring for the spiritual/emotional needs of persons. Which is more important? Both are fundamental elements of our call as followers of Jesus. Both are concrete ways to love our neighbor and indeed to love God. Traditionally, we have called these ways the “Spiritual Works of Mercy” and the “Corporal (which literally means body) Works of Mercy.”

According to the *Catechism*, #2447, “Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead.”

In contemporary usage, mercy means forgiveness or leniency. In the tradition, mercy means something more. For St. Thomas Aquinas, mercy (*miseriordia*) is first, compassion, feeling another’s feelings, particularly when the other is suffering. When a person has mercy that person then is moved to do something to alleviate or diminish the other’s suffering. We have two “movements” here, one external, reaching out to the other, and the second internal, pushing us to respond to the other. But there is more: mercy is a reasoned response. Through mercy, a person chooses

the most appropriate response to the one in need. The merciful person acts in a way that best helps the other given what one can do. It is an expression of both the head and the heart.

Thomas comments that people who “think that they are unable to be afflicted by anything bad, are not so merciful. For a similar reason, the proud, who look down upon others and think them bad, do not show mercy.” He continues, “But among all the virtues that relate us to our neighbor, mercy is the best.”

He also considers our opening concern about the relation between the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. I can see him standing in the classroom with his students, some preparing to live lives serving the spiritual needs of persons, others preparing to serve the physical needs of persons. They look at each other across the classroom and ask, “Which is the better way?”

Thomas states, “generally speaking, spiritual works are greater than corporal works.” “Yet, in particular cases,” he writes, “corporal works can be greater than spiritual works. A person dying of hunger, for example, should be fed rather than instructed.” See, for example, the works of St. Mother Theresa. Thomas continues, “Corporal works of mercy can have spiritual effects” because they are done out of the love for God and neighbor. He concludes, “Love requires that we not only

want or wish the good of the neighbor, but that we work for the good of the neighbor. We do this by performing the works of mercy.” As Thomas refuses to abstractly rank the works of mercy, so should we.

I want to repeat a point from St. Thomas: “Through mercy, a person chooses the most appropriate response to the one in need.” Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* is often recognized as the beginning of modern Catholic social teaching. One of the reasons that the text stands out in Catholic tradition is Leo’s development of Thomas’ point. For centuries Catholics had lived mercy through the individual actions of persons meeting the concrete needs of the neighbor. Catholics had also, throughout history, built institutions such as schools, hospitals, and orphanages to meet the needs of groups of people. Many religious orders over the centuries have been formed with a ministry or charism focused on service to a certain group of people. Let’s call these the two spheres of mercy.

Pope Leo added a third sphere. To use a metaphor, alms and institutions address the immediate needs of people, like when a doctor treats the symptoms of a disease. Leo praised this and then moved to examine the underlying causes of the symptoms. His question was, why are working people poor? He wrote, “Today a small number of very rich people have burdened the teeming masses of the

working poor with conditions that are not much better than slavery.” As Dorothy Day famously said, “There was a great question in my mind. Why was so much done in remedying social evils instead of avoiding them in the first place? ... Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery?” Leo tried to do just that.

Back to St. Thomas on mercy. The first movement of mercy is compassion, feeling the other’s suffering. Compassion, whether leading to spiritual or corporeal works of mercy—in any of the three spheres, is key to a Christian expression of serving others. Yet, people can help and pray for others without it; charitable institutions can function without it; and laws to help people flourish can be enacted without it. The famous question in the gospel, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry?” and the answer, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me,” on the other hand, makes us vulnerable to a very personal and concrete experience of the sufferings of others. “Among all the virtues that relate us to our neighbor, mercy is the best.”+

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HOW DEEP DOES THE RABBIT HOLE GO?

Tyler Hambley

Long before I became Catholic, I stumbled onto a dinner hosted by a Catholic Worker community. That night, I felt a little like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. The shift from what I’d thought I knew to the new world being revealed in front of me was as exhilarating as it was bewildering. People from drastically different walks of life—rich, poor, black, white, young, old, clergy, and lay—deliberately sitting down together for a festive evening of agenda-less joy just didn’t register with the social experiences I’d had prior. For as little as these folks shared in background, they seemed to come alive—to bloom full—when praying, eating, and celebrating life *together*. And that togetherness, it was easy to see, was coextensive with the liturgical gestures of the Lord’s Table that had initiated it.

Naturally, I came back later that same week, and before long, I was hooked by that little community. I remain hooked to this day, some twelve years later, though I’ve never quite managed to stop stumbling and tumbling. Perhaps that’s because thick, Catholic community-life remains a definitive challenge to the culture of individualism that sticks so stubbornly within my veins.

Looking back, I was drawn to Catholic community for ulterior motives, though I didn’t know it. For example, I wanted to be around other people who cared about the “least of these” because I thought such concerns led to “activism”—an “activism” no different from the many secular efforts for “social justice” or “advocacy” I’d participated in elsewhere. Likewise, I was probably attracted to community life for the opportunity to save a little money through the sharing of resources or the chance to fill out my resumé with collaborative writing endeavors. Perhaps,

too, I wanted to be around other Christians who were serious about tradition and orthodoxy, though I was less trusting of the traditional pursuit of simplicity and poverty for love of God and neighbor that the Saints exemplified. Mostly, I found myself just trying to fill a gap in my otherwise full, but disparate social calendar. And hey, the food was good!

Yet the more I stuck around, the more my attempts to shore up my identity as a unique and “caring”—yet still self-sufficient—*individual* got frustrated. This community and the daily practices I shared with them wouldn’t let me turn the situation into a project of my own self-making. Furthermore, my attempts to “help” my poorer housemates—to do *for them*—seemed less and less substantial than our merely *being present with* one another as friends at a personal sacrifice. Favors were still asked of course, but I was the one asking for favors as much as my homeless friends were. One such friend helped me build a wood fence and a railing on the front porch of our hospitality house. I couldn’t have done it without him. And so, a mini economy of mutual gift-giving began to form through our fellowship. Communal presence itself was making each one of us whole in ways we could not imagine on our own. Yet despite all of this, bewilderment continued for me because I did not yet have—and almost certainly still do not have—a truly Catholic understanding of what a human being is.

Consider what we’re all up against. Our social order assumes that human beings are first and foremost *individuals*, and human society is a collection of individuals who, when associating together, must find ways to preserve a negotiated *freedom from* the conditions and burdens that the presence of others places on us.

Notice that the isolated individual is taken for granted as the starting point for social and political reflection. So when we individuals must interact, we do this largely through the categories of—but also all of the practices involved with—“rights,” contracts, and management. These categories only further enhance our individualism, even when we use them as the basis for “community.” Yet we have a hard time imagining what other basis for togetherness there could be. No amount of opt-in, voluntary social outings can cover over these more fundamental arrangements that keep us held at arm’s length from one another.

But is this social order, constructed as it is on the foundation of the human-being-as-individual, actually congruent with a Catholic view of the person? After all, we are made in the image and likeness of a triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yes, there are three persons, but only together do they share one essence. Community—not individualism—is written into the very image of God. If we are made in *that* image, our personhood is unintelligible—even incomplete—apart from a deeply shared life with others. In other words, how we understand our very being cannot begin with me or you as an isolated monad. There is no such being! Rather, to be a unique person—to be truly seen and beheld by others—is to be a community-being, or a being-as-community.

So, whenever I notice drastically different people finding new life together—when, for example, I recently experienced a group of Catholics who have committed to being present at a homeless encampment in St. Paul—I’ve come to believe it’s because God has made us for one another at our very core! We are not complete on our own,

not apart from deep interdependence. We are freed *for*, not *from*, one another. Counterintuitively, then, our individuality—our personhood—only truly comes alive within the confines of that social performance called Church, a performance so extensive that no area of our lives gets left untouched.

Most of us, of course, aspire to more substantive Catholic community. But like Alice chasing her rabbit, we can hardly imagine how deep the rabbit hole really goes. What new wonders might we find there? An outside observer could describe the community I am a part of as “advocating” for “social justice,” or as having “diversity-focused social events for Millennials.” But this would really be to misunderstand what we are up to from a Catholic perspective. For what we all need is not rehabilitation back into the production and consumption cycles of a society built upon cordoned-off self-sufficiency, but rather new mini societies which discover what is truly good, beautiful, and just for each only *along the way* of discovering shared sets of practices that extend out from our Lord’s table into our daily lives: preparing meals together, sharing our possessions, performing the works of mercy, giving and receiving forgiveness, pursuing friendship with the poor, gardening, praying together, practicing hospitality, and celebrating life. In all of this, there will be much stumbling. We may even appear “mad as a hatter.” But that’s what thick Catholic community is all about: opening up a new world of wonder, one little tumble at a time, “on earth as it is in heaven.”+

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COMBATTING THE IDOLS OF COMFORT, CONSUMPTION, AND CONSUMERISM

Fr. Daniel Griffith

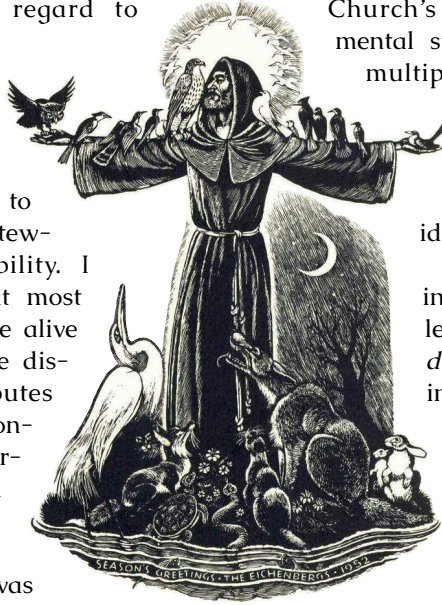
A number of years ago when I was pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes in Minneapolis, the parish hosted a talk on Pope Francis's encyclical on environmental stewardship, *Laudato Si*. The text is a sprawling document rich in theological reflection and practical wisdom. The timing of its promulgation was meant to galvanize global support regarding the immanent threat of climate change and its pernicious effects. *Laudato Si* was inspired by the timeless wisdom of the universally beloved St. Francis of Assisi who Pope Francis chose as the name from which he would serve as successor of St. Peter. St. Francis has been described by theologians and biographers as manifesting a preternatural relationship with the created order. What struck me about the talk, given by a professor in the Catholic Studies Department at the University of St. Thomas, was its synthetic understanding of the Catholic tradition and its wise analysis of the underlying causes of environmental degradation. The Church and her saints are a wise teacher of the essence of faith and humanity.

The Harvard Business School noted years ago, culture will beat strategy every day of the week. This is certainly true with regard to the grave harm to the environment—it beckons an invitation to delve deeply into our current American culture to discover a pathway back to personal and collective flourishing, including in the area of environmental stewardship and sustainability. Ultimately, *Laudato Si* is a call to conversion—not only ecological conversion, but personal, spiritual, and cultural conversion—inviting us to examine the root causes of our current crisis.

In the summer of 2017, I had the privilege to teach in an international law program that was hosted by a Catholic law

school in Budapest. Most of the law students were Catholic and my task was to offer a primer on Catholic social teaching and the Church's teaching on environmental stewardship. There are a number of takeaways from that experience. In my limited space here, I will share just a few. First, I was struck by the fact that most of the non-American law students were much more knowledgeable about the essence and vision of Catholic social teaching. Some international students were from countries that were taking important steps with regard to combatting climate change and others honestly conveyed that their countries of origin were too mired in corruption to leave time to focus on environmental stewardship and sustainability. I remember distinctly that most of the law students were alive to how American culture disproportionately contributes to a global culture of consumption and consumerism, onto environmental degradation.

The main text for my section of the course was *Laudato Si*. The research and writing of biographers of Pope Francis detail his own conversion which led him to understand more fully the multivalent harm of climate change, including its disproportionate effect on the poor. It was the testimony of Jorge Bergoglio's fellow South American bishops that fostered in the Archbishop of Buenos Aires a greater appreciation of the gravity of the harm of environmental degradation and the underlying cultural and spiritual roots of this harm. *Laudato Si* is known for its



novel presentation of an integral ecology, but I was as impressed with the documents's marshaling of wisdom from several episcopal conferences throughout the world and the employment of the wisdom of Francis's predecessor popes, including Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. For example, if you are not up for reading a sprawling papal encyclical on this topic, I would suggest reading a crisp section of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, *Caritas In Veritate* (CIV 48-52).

This section is a master class on the Church's teaching on environmental stewardship and presents multiple themes which Pope Francis more fully develops in *Laudato Si*, including the call to intergenerational solidarity and justice.

Earlier this year, I was invited to a national ecclesial gathering on *Laudato Si*. The convening included bishops, scholars, advocates, religious, and priests. The presentations and dialogue were informative and inspired me as a pastor and professor to focus more on the issue of environmental stewardship at The Basilica of Saint Mary, and in my writing and teaching. One area that could have been explored with greater depth is the spiritual roots of our present ecological crisis. At its core, our present crisis is a spiritual crisis. St. Augustine, with great clarity, teaches that we are made for God and that our hearts are meant to rest in God. When this does not occur in our lives, many idols invade, resulting in a harmful amnesia of our divine origin and horizon. This

happens personally and also manifests socially. A privation of God in our lives and culture results inevitably in the unquenched desire for comfort and consumption—anything to fill the void when we are not living in communion with God. This is the dynamic that the professor touched on years ago—that privation of God leads to the lust for comfort and consumption and pairs menacingly with a consumerist culture, which in turn devours everything in its wake, including a habitable environment.

The way back to right relationship with God, our neighbor, and the created order must be traversed from a spiritual foundation—there is no other sure path to human and collective flourishing. The wisdom of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, among other sources, has inspired this nascent Center for Catholic Social Thought and this publication. Day and Maurin's wisdom, borne of the Catholic spiritual and social tradition, also provides the seeds for healing and restoration of our present consumerist and individualist culture. In their quest for safeguarding the dignity of the human person and workers, in their daily acts of spiritual devotion and faith, in their intentional communitarian ethic, and in their simplicity of life, a *terra firma* emerges should we have the wisdom to follow their path. This is ultimately the path back to God and to a culture which is more just, sustainable, and befriending to humanity and the planet which shares our divine origin.+

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PROPERTY AND COMMUNITY, PART II

Colin Miller

In the February edition of the *Catholic Citizen* I wrote about a neighbor boy, Sam, who helped make concrete for me the Church's social teaching that property is only legitimately "mine" when it is used for the common good. We hold property not "absolutely"—to use and abuse it however we want—but for the sake of our communities.

Sam had been borrowing one of our bikes as he played with my kids, and, when it was time for us to go in for naps that afternoon, my first instinct was to think, "OK Sam, that's my bike, and so it's time for you to stop riding it." But this, I eventually realized, hardly squared with the ideal that property is for the common good, and so I changed my mind and let him keep using it.

But no sooner had I closed the door when the common worry hit me: "Oh no, all this high idealism just means Sam's going to hurt himself riding my bike on my sidewalk, and then we are going to get sued."

And this led me to further reflection. For it occurred to me, in a rare moment of clarity, that this kind of worry is itself part of the way that our culture's "absolute" notion of property becomes deeply engrained in each of our lives. What do I have in mind?

Let's consider what went into making me think it was "my" bike—in the absolute sense—in the first place. That idea didn't just fall out of thin air; it was shaped in me by a variety of common cultural experiences like this one. In other words, it was at least as much my worry about being sued, and the ever-present reality of lawsuits that stood behind it, that produced my idea of property, as it was the other way around. The practice of suing itself has, as part of its internal logic, a notion of property as "absolutely" be-

longing to one person and not another. So, when I think "I'm going to get sued because that's my bike," to use the word "sued" in this way must, at the same time, be to use "my bike" in a particular way—the absolute way. We receive many of our beliefs from our cultural environment in this way, even when we're not conscious of it.

But this means that we inevitably come to believe all kinds of things—some true, some false—simply by participating in common social practices. In this case, Sam helped me realize, the simple existence of law suits, and worrying about lawsuits, "train" me over time to see the bike as "my bike" in an "absolute" way. An unchristian way of viewing property is, in other words, like those Russian tea dolls, embedded within the common cultural practice of suing, and worrying about being sued. And this was as much a cause of my view of property as it was an effect.

Then I realized just how many more unconscious influences there are on my view of property. To live in a society where we regularly sue each other for just about anything is also inevitably to live in a society where we take out insurance policies on just about everything. This means that the logic of insurance increasingly reaches into the far corners of our lives, determining what we can and can't do, what we can and can't have, and sometimes even who we can associate with and when. Under these conditions, as sociologists have remarked, "risk" has for the first time in history become a dominant social category—even a sort of "entity" that we think we "see" in the world.

Lawsuits, insurance, risk—and we could add to this any number of other things like property codes, a money economy, liability, consumer culture, single-use-disposable containers—all of this and

much more do not only reflect an idea of property, but also produce it. For they help make a world where every item belongs "absolutely" to someone, rather than "loosely" as a trust for the purpose of building community. I realized that day with Sam that my life was woven into a network of such practices that made that view of the world seem "natural" to me.

And so, finally, Sam helped me realize yet another reason the Scriptures insist so strongly on Church community. For in the same way the broader secular community makes one view of property seem "natural," so too, if we want to live Catholically regarding property, we are going to have to have a Catholic community in which to realize it. The Church tells us that property is for the common good, for others, and for our communities, and that it is really only "ours" for this purpose. But if we want to actually come to see the world in this way, and to live this truth—to make it seem "natural"—we are going to have to embed those ideas in real material practices with real flesh and blood people.

And this, of course, is just what the early Church did in the Acts of the Apostles. Their sharing of life, of possessions, of daily prayer, of meals, so that they had "all things in common", were a means of training themselves into a brand-new way, God's way, of seeing their "stuff." The Scriptures and the more recent social teaching of the Church, call us to the same task.

But we can only start, obviously, from where we are. Most of us live nothing like the early Church did. But the good news is that we don't have to get there all at once. We just have to put one baby step in front of another. Let's not worry about what we can't do, and just get on with what we can do. We can share meals with friends more regularly. We can start to pray together. We can share a car with our spouse, or a lawnmower with a neighbor. We can, as I realized, just let Sam keep riding the bike, because it's for him as much as it's for me. Things like this go just a little way towards making the line between "mine" and "yours" just a little blurrier. And that's how it should be.+

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