



Second Sunday of Advent
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Pastor's Column

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Jesus, God's "Face of Mercy"

This is my reflection from our Prayer Service on Sunday, November 20, celebrating the end of the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

God is Mercy! Jesus, the Son of God, is the "Face of Mercy!"

To be a Disciple of Jesus, to be a Christian, to be a Catholic Christian, is to allow the face of mercy to smile and shine in all the thoughts and actions of our daily lives.

The definition of mercy from my Google search is, "*Compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone to whom it is within one's power to punish or harm...*"

With this definition of mercy in mind, it means that although I have a right to exact justice from someone for the harm that that person caused me, I choose not to do so. I have not exacted justice but have expended mercy. When the mind and heart of Jesus, the "Face of Mercy," is practiced, mercy is greater than justice!

Polarization and animosity among peoples is a growing concern not only in the United States but around the world.

Pope Francis has said, "*How many situations of uncertainty and suffering are sown by this growing animosity between peoples, between us!...The virus of polarization and animosity permeates our way of thinking, feeling and acting. We are not immune from this and we need to take care lest such attitudes find a place in our hearts... In God's heart there are no enemies. He only has sons and daughters. We are the ones who raise walls, build barriers, and label people. God does not wait for us be a little bit better or more perfect before he loves us...*"

Pope Francis begs us to see mercy as the antidote to this virus of polarization and animosity that keeps us from our true self, from our families and our communities, and our relations with the global village.

What are the ways in which we allow Jesus, the "Face of Mercy," to smile and shine in and through the thoughts and actions of our daily lives: in our own life, in our family and community life, and in our political life?

1. The "Face of Mercy" in our own life

We must surrender to the reality that we are not perfect people. We sin, and we are in need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

So often it is pride that keeps us from admitting our sinfulness. It is a lack of trust in God, that God really does forgive us and that God is merciful.

Over the years, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I have experienced people who keep confessing the same sin over and over again. Not that they keep committing this same sin, but, even though, they have confessed it before, they keep confessing it because they just cannot believe that God really and truly forgives them and has mercy on them.

They are not able to forgive themselves because they cannot or are not willing to comprehend God's great and total mercy and forgiveness.

I see this happen most often in women who have had an abortion and also in men who have helped a woman procure an abortion.

They cannot believe that this grave sin can be forgiven, that God's mercy and forgiveness is greater than that grave sin.

To allow the "Face of Mercy" to shine in our own lives, we must take a leap of faith! We need to surrender and trust in God's love, a love that is given without condition!

When we take this leap of faith, we then have the ability to stop looking back and instead look forward.

This leap of faith gives us a future that was not there before!

Pope Francis said, "*It is not easy to entrust oneself to God's mercy, because it is an abyss beyond our comprehension. But we must! 'Oh, I am a great sinner!' All the better! Go to Jesus: He likes you to tell him these things! He forgets. He has a special capacity for forgetting. He forgets. He kisses you. He embraces you and He simply says to you: 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more'" (Homily on March 17, 2013).*

2. The "Face of Mercy" in our family and community life

Sheila McKinley, our Parish representative to the recent San Diego Diocese Synod, "Embracing the Joy of Love," included this description of her extended family in a presentation she gave to our Parish in preparation for the Synod. She created an alphabetized list in her description of family characteristics: "My extended family: addictions, ADHD, alcoholism, anxiety that needs meds, arrests, Asperger's, children born out of wedlock, cancer, clinical depression, death of a child, divorce, DUI, drug use, dyslexia, falling out with family members, financial stress, family members who are LGBT, family members who have left the Catholic Church, family members who have married non-Catholics, infidelity, marriage annulment process (some did; some didn't), and suicide..."

Sheila describes not only her extended family, but mine as well and, if you are honest, yours as well.

As Pastor of St. Thomas More, I can attest that this describes our Parish family as well.

This is the challenging and difficult world in which we live today. Simply, this is our world today!

Pope Francis talks much about creating a spirituality and culture of encounter, of moving beyond our comfort zones and entering into conversation with the world around us. In his Pentecost Mass homily, he said, "*Newness always makes us a bit fearful, because we feel more secure if we have everything under control, if we are*

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the ones who build, programme and plan our lives in accordance with our own ideas, our own comfort, our own preferences... We fear that God may force us to strike out on new paths and leave behind our all too narrow, closed and selfish horizons in order to become open to his own... The newness which God brings into our life is something that actually brings fulfilment, that gives true joy, true serenity, because God loves us and desires only our good. Let us ask ourselves: Are we open to God's surprises? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit? Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths which God's newness sets before us, or do we resist, barricaded in transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new?" (Pentecost homily on May 19, 2013)

Mike Jordan Laskey, the Director of Life and Justice Ministries of the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey, in an article, "It's Time for a Theology of Encounter," in the June 4, 2015, issue of the National Catholic Reporter gives five requirements necessary for a Theology of Encounter:

1. *Encounter requires physical movement across traditional boundaries;*
2. *Encounter requires a willingness to change plans;*
3. *Encounter requires careful discernment;*
4. *Encounter requires follow-through; and,*
5. *Encounter requires systemic change.*

Can we simply encounter one another without judgment?

Can we patiently take time to get to know one another, without trying to change each other?

Can we live in areas of disagreement without trying to prove who is right and who is wrong?

Can we live in the gray, without everything having to be black and white?

I would suggest that this is where oftentimes we discover God in ever new and more vibrant ways, in those in-between spaces of encounter, non-judgment, and acceptance; knowing that there are differences, different ways of viewing reality, but yet celebrating our common humanity.

The "Face of Mercy" in our Family and Community Life is encounter not judgment. Encounter is an invitation to conversation, and in that conversation we discover God anew.

Pope Francis has said, "*God's mercy can make even the driest land become a garden. It can restore life to dry bones. Let us be renewed by God's mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish*" (Easter "Urbi et Orbi" message on March 31, 2013).

Mercy in the spirituality of encounter can bring the driest of families and the driest of communities back to life!

3. The "Face of Mercy" in our Political Life

For me to allow the "Face of Mercy" to smile and shine in my political life, I must look at the world and its many issues as a Catholic Christian first, and as a US citizen second.

I think that for many Catholics this may be a very difficult transformation. But how we look at issues, in terms of what is our starting point, makes all the difference regarding the conclusions we reach.

For example: How do we view the "The Affordable Care Act?"

What is our starting point? Are we pleased that over 22 million more people now have health insurance? Are we glad that people with "pre-existing" conditions can now get health coverage? Are we happy that children can now stay on their parents' health coverage plan until the age of 26?

Or is our only concern the rising costs of the insurance, and so the conclusion is that we need to scrap the entire program?

Affordable health care coverage for everyone is a Catholic issue and concern. If we start at that point, then the answer is not to scrap the entire program, but to come together, both Democrats and Republicans, to massage and fix what needs to make it workable for all.

A second example: Immigration reform is desperately needed.

What is our starting point on this discussion? Do we want to build walls and cut off immigration, and deport millions of undocumented people, breaking up families in the process? Are we falling into the trap of being afraid of the stranger?

Are we blaming whole groups of people because of the actions of a few?

Or in light of this massive situation, are we willing to trust in the foundational principle of this country? Our nation was built on immigration. We are a great nation because of immigration, and we will continue to be great as long as we build on that foundation as a nation, as we welcome the stranger, and not shut her and him out.

Do we no longer believe in the words graven on the "Statue of Liberty?"

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
'Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she
With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

—*The New Colossus*, Emma Lazarus

If we deny this foundational principle of our nation, we are on the road to oblivion.

If we need strength at this point in our nation's history to face the immigration situation, as Catholics, we only need to look at our own roots of faith. We have been a global community from our very beginning 2,000 years ago.

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The Apostles went to every known corner of the world at that time, and extended an invitation to all people to encounter and experience Jesus, the “Face of Mercy.”

In a very real sense, we Catholics are not bound by borders. We are a global community and we have global concerns and care.

We are global in our faith, and we have a global concern for all the people who inhabit Planet Earth. We are all brothers and sisters under one God.

From my perspective, our political parties and our political leaders have lost faith in the system, the structure of our government. They do not trust the system to work for the common good of our country.

They are not allowing the system to work. Political leaders’ egos and Political Parties’ egos are in the way, thus not allowing the system to function. They do not see themselves as instruments, as stewards, on behalf of the system.

For example, for many months now we have a Supreme Court with only eight Judges. It is the duty of a President when there is a vacancy on the Court, to nominate someone to fill that position, and the Congress acts on that decision either positively or negatively.

No action has been taken. Political Leaders do not trust the system of our government. Instead their egos are in the way. They do not realize that they are showing disrespect for our form of government, and in the process making a shambles of it.

Put faith and trust in the system. Use it. The gift of our government, with its checks and balances, is an amazing gift from our forefathers and it is falling apart because our Political Leaders do not place faith in the system. Their faith, unfortunately, is misplaced. It is selfishly in themselves and not in the structure of our government.

Several years ago I approached a local Congressman to talk about the need for immigration reform, and I was told: We cannot trust President Obama. Nothing can be done until he is out of office.

Where is faith in the system of government? It seems to be all about personalities and egos.

And now I hear people saying, we cannot trust President-elect Trump. Nothing can be done until he will be out of office.

Misplaced faith and egos bring great disrespect to our form of government, and are causing it to fail, because it is not being used. Nothing gets done and our country suffers!

The “Face of Mercy” in our Political Life is putting trust in the structure of our government. It is surrendering to the structure and seeing ourselves as stewards and instruments of the structure and having faith in it, thus allowing it to work for us.

The “Face of Mercy” in our Political Life is to believe in the definition of Politics: the art of compromise.

The “Face of Mercy” in our Political Life is about working for the common good through compromise, not about the glory of one party or the other or one individual over another.

We must apply the “Face of Mercy” to our Political Life:

Pope Francis recently said, *“Fear, besides being a good deal for merchants of arms and deaths, weakens us, unbalances us, destroys our psychological and spiritual defenses, and anesthetizes us to the suffering of others, and in the end makes us cruel. When we hear about celebrations for the death of a young man who may have lost his way, when we see that war is preferred to peace, when we see xenophobia is widespread, when we find that intolerant proposals are gaining ground; behind the cruelty that seems to prevail is the cold breath of fear... Mercy is not easy, not easy... it requires courage. Jesus tells us: ‘Do not be afraid,’ because mercy is the best antidote to fear. It is much better than antidepressants and anxiolytics. It is much more effective than walls, gates, alarms, and weapons. And it is free: it is a gift from God”* (Speech at the Vatican on November 5, 2016).

The Jubilee Year of Mercy is over, but our need for Mercy continues: in our own lives, in the lives of our families and our communities, and in our political life.

Mercy is not easy, but it is the only way out of sin, judgment, fear, and destruction.

Only Mercy brings peace!

Fr. Mike

