Reflections on Mercy: Pope Francis and Joseph Cardinal Bernardin

by Daniel T. Lunney

Pope Francis has declared December 8, 2015 (Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception) through November 20, 2016 (Solemnity of Christ the King) to be an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. In this essay, my purpose is to reflect on some parallels between Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and Pope Francis in their focus on mercy. This is not meant to be an academic treatment of the subject, but rather reflections with the hope of promoting thought and discussion. Mercy is to see another honestly—with all one’s flaws and blessings—and to relate with the other in ways that affirm their dignity as being made in the image and likeness of God. Mercy is our participation in the ushering in of the Reign of God in ways which recognize the trials and tribulations and blessings and grace of being embodied and created beings. The many stories of Jesus seeing the goodness of people behind their labels or behaviors are prime examples of mercy. Jesus shared table fellowship with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. Jesus recognized the goodness of the woman at the well despite the fact that she was an outcast from her community (John 4: 1-26). Both Pope Francis and Cardinal Bernardin recognize the importance of participating in the mercy of God as central to discipleship and to the mission of the Church.

The first and most prominent parallel is that both Pope Francis and Cardinal Bernardin are sons of Vatican II. They live out a spirit of aggiornamento—captured in the image of opening the windows of the Church to discern the signs of the times. Central to discipleship for both of them is the importance of dialogue, and, in the words of Pope Francis, “creating a culture of encounter.” Mercy is the most prominent characteristic of dialogue and encounter. Pope Francis demonstrates mercy through the way he lives his life and the choices he has made in his leadership of the Church. Papal expert and journalist John Allen points out that Francis’ first trip as Pope outside of Rome was to the island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean Sea. Before the refugee crisis had become front page news, Francis recognized the looming disaster and used the power of his office to shed light on the tragic plight of migrants making the treacherous trip from North Africa to Europe in search of a better life. In visiting Lampedusa Francis set the tone of his Papacy as one of mercy, condemning our lack of care for our fellow human beings and particularly the victims of our “throwaway culture.”

Pope Francis went to the fringes of society, to those most marginalized, to demonstrate that they are central to the mission of the Church of mercy and to the Reign of God.

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Joseph Cardinal Bernardin used the image and the term “the seamless garment” to describe the breadth and width of Catholic Social Teaching. All of life is sacred. Pope Francis, speaking in this same spirit, borrowed Bernardin’s imagery of a seamless garment in his address to the United States Bishops. Participating in the mission of God means being in right relationship with our fellow human beings and all of creation. Mercy, justice, and peace are different but overlapping means to participate in ushering in the Reign of God. Cardinal Bernardin was a key author of “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,” the 1983 pastoral letter issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (known at that time as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops). Cardinal Bernardin affirmed the importance of life from conception to natural death in many of his writings, especially in his book, Consistent Ethic of Life. Working for peace is a work of mercy.

Although I only met Cardinal Bernardin twice, I feel connected to him through his legacy. I was involved in HIV/AIDS ministry from 1995-2007 through the AIDS Pastoral Care Network in Chicago, and later through the National Catholic AIDS Network in various capacities, including executive director. In 1996, as the coordinator of volunteer services for the AIDS Pastoral Care Network, I developed the Communities of Care Program, which linked care teams from congregations with families in which at least one member was living with HIV. Holy Name Cathedral had a care team whose care partner was a family in which both parents were living with HIV but the two children were not. The mother in the family was AIDS-diagnosed and was in and out of the hospital. When the mother died, Fr. John Boiven invited the family to have the funeral at Holy Name Cathedral, where he presided. Her death was within days of Cardinal Bernardin’s death. I have vivid memories of people coming up throughout the funeral of this woman—who was shunned in life—to touch her casket, thinking it was the casket of Cardinal Bernardin, who had just died. I could not help but think that Cardinal Bernardin was smiling that this woman would be treated mercifully out of people’s love for him. The two young children, facing life without their mom, had the consolation that she was treated with great love and mercy by a group of compassionate people from Holy Name Cathedral who surrounded the family with love. It was because of the environment cultivated by Cardinal Bernardin that this event took place.

The Fifth General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) took place in May 2007 in Aparecida, Brazil. Pope Francis, then Cardinal-Archbishop of Buenos Aires, was a key author of the document from Aparecida, which forms the foundation of his life of and teaching on mercy. This document calls us to leave our safety zones and to encounter the other with openness and a readiness to dialogue. Pope Francis calls for a missionary Church whose primary goal is not proselytizing but being with others. Pope Francis calls for a poor Church for the poor with Christ as our center, reaching out to those on the margins. For Pope Francis, mercy is a way of living in communion with God and is a participation in the mercy of God. We are able to be merciful because God has shown us mercy.

Both Pope Francis and Cardinal Bernardin lived out mercy toward gays and lesbians, who have more often experienced the judgment rather than the mercy of the Church. Cardinal Bernardin moved to a place of mercy after taking a stance against a city council ordinance in favor of gay rights in 1986. Several prominent gay Catholics requested a meeting with him to share how painful it was for them to have the Cardinal use the power of his office to oppose the inclusion of sexual orientation into the existing city anti-discrimination ordinance. Cardinal Bernardin listened to the concerns of these members of his flock and established the Archdiocesan Gay and Lesbian Outreach (AGLO) in June 1988, as a place of mercy and dialogue. AGLO introduced a weekly mass in which

members of the gay and lesbian community could nurture faith in a nonjudgmental atmosphere, and this Mass continues to this day. Pope Francis created an opening of mercy with five words uttered in a press conference held on the 2007 flight from Brazil to Rome when he responded to a question on homosexuality by asking, “Who am I to judge?” These examples are not meant to exclude other areas of marginalization that demand a merciful response, including dire poverty, racism, sexism, forced migration, slavery, and war. Mercy is needed in all cases of injustice.

Encounter and dialogue are essential to the ministry and mission of the Church. Cardinal Bernardin was distressed by the divisions he saw within the Roman Catholic Church. There was little place for dialogue for people who had different visions of the Church, with each group being more exclusive than inclusive of the others. Cardinal Bernardin launched the Catholic Common Group Initiative in 1992 in a statement to priests entitled “The Parish in the Contemporary Church.” The statement’s goals had a sense of urgency because Cardinal Bernardin knew his life was limited. “A dying person does not have time for the peripheral or the accidental,” he wrote. “He or she is drawn to the essential, the important—yes, the eternal. And what is important my friends, is that we find the unity with the Lord and within the community of faith for which Jesus prayed so fervently on the night before he died.” Dialogue is essential for both interfaith and intra-faith encounters. Pope Francis stresses some key characteristics of encounter: “may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination.” Mercy necessitates a paradoxical stance of radical openness to the other while affirming our faith.

Ironically, it is in ministry with people living with dementia that I am learning (or being taught) the meaning and importance of encounter. The mutuality of the ministry of mercy is a gift those I am privileged to interact with each day demonstrate for me. People living with dementia are often viewed as “less than” and are systematically excluded from our society and parishes. Mercy allows me to see the unique personhood and abilities each resident still possesses, while providing space for them to grieve the losses they experience. I am struck by the mercy they extend to me when I am challenged in trying to understand what they are trying to communicate, and when they accept what I can offer them—and the love they give when I accept what they have to offer.

Mercy also demands honesty about oneself. The importance of reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins is central to mercy. Forgiveness is included in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Pope Francis stresses that God never tires of forgiving; it is we who tire of asking for forgiveness.

While I have limited space to delve into the richness and varieties of mercy, I hope that by providing some examples and resources from Pope Francis, Cardinal Bernardin, and my own experience, I have encouraged you to make mercy a habit of the heart, especially during the Jubilee of Mercy. Ultimately, our mercy must be a participation in the mercy of God. While study may produce the spark, mercy must be lived. I close with the words of Pope Francis, which are a call to all of us:

   How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God! May the balm of mercy reach ev-

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everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst!

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