



THERE'S A WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY

Be there for the whole Church. Be there as a pardoned sinner who has found peace and rejoices in the merciful love of God. (Const.6)

As I scrambled for a title for this article the words of an old familiar hymn came to mind: "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea" by Father Frederick Faber. What I wish to share here is a personal experience of this wide and wonderful mercy. For me it resonates deeply with our charism, our call to be instruments of mercy in the hands of God.

Several years ago, while on retreat, I was struggling through a period of inner darkness and ambiguity. After receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation the priest said: "For your penance, pray Psalm 103" – a psalm that was unfamiliar to me at the time.

So started a phase of prayer and inner healing that far outlasted the retreat. I discovered that this psalm is an extraordinary affirmation of God's steadfast love and mercy. Some of the most consoling verses were the following:

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Full of comfort and hope as these verses were, I found it hard to believe they were true for me. Doubts persisted and my prayer was up and down, momentarily engendering hope but then would come the "if only..."

One phrase from the psalm that I resisted, but that kept calling me back was from the first line:

Bless the Lord my soul and all that is within me bless his holy name.

The phrase "all that was within me" proved to be my stumbling block. I felt that I could not bless the Lord with all the guilt and confusion within me. Yes, I could express my sorrow and ask for forgiveness, but no way could I bless the Lord. My wrongful perception was that I was not acceptable to God or worthy of his love.

Mercifully, grace took over and gradually, very gradually, God let me see that even my sinfulness, my struggles and my doubts were also blessings insofar as they kept me humble and kept me coming back to Him. And I began to realize, as did St. Paul, the healing power of God's reassurance: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.* (2 Cor. 12:8)

This realization, this special grace, brought peace of mind and a new relationship of trust. God's mercies to me have been numerous throughout the years and have richly enhanced my life and my ministry. For all of this I am eternally grateful. I have also come to realize how much we all are a communion of saints, and a communion of sinners, God's beloved ones, called to support and befriend each other on life's journey.

Our Founder realized the power of weakness when combined with great confidence in God and the importance of being there for others. His exhortation is very clear in our Constitutions:

We live joyfully and thankfully, recognizing our own weakness and God's mercy. In becoming compassionate towards ourselves and others, we reveal the merciful love of God amid the brokenness of the world in which we live. (Const. 49)

His teachings and the charism he passed on to us is powerfully affirmed in the following quote from St. Paul:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the merciful Father and the God who gives every possible encouragement; He supports us in every hardship, so that we are able to come to the support of others in every hardship of theirs because of the encouragement that we ourselves receive from God. (2 Cor.1: 3-5)

I find that there is a remarkable affinity between Constant Van Crombrughe and Pope Francis in their understanding of mercy. This is not to say that our Founder was a man ahead of his time, for mercy is a perennial need, but rather, that he was profoundly concerned with and involved in the sufferings and needs of his time, as is Pope Francis today.

Following the example of these holy men, we, Daughters of Mary and Joseph and DMJ Associates are committed to be instruments of God's merciful love in today's world, especially in this Jubilee year of Mercy. In the opening words of "Misericordiae Vultus", the Papal Bull announcing the holy year, Pope Francis states: "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy". However, Christ has commissioned the people of God to be the incarnation of His mercy in the world. We are the Body of Christ for our troubled times. Christ chooses to use our hearts and our hands, our compassion and our involvement, and especially our prayers to minister to those in need. Aware as we are of our weakness and limitations and, perhaps, because of them, we can be 'holy doors' to allow God's mercy to flow freely to our brothers and sisters, to our world and to all of creation.

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