

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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Eggemeier, Matthew T. and Peter Joseph Fritz. *The Politics of Mercy*.

*Catholic Life in an Era of Inequality, Racism, and Violence*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2020. Pp. 169. \$49.95 (paper).

Scanning the book's title, *The Politics of Mercy*, triggered in me at the outset a feeling of puzzlement over the apparent incoherence between two concepts: "politics" and "mercy." It eventually led me to consider that, perhaps, this book will give me the opportunity to "solve" the seemingly unresolvable polarities of justice-mercy, justice-love, peace-justice. By now, we have enough knowledge about what constitute each of these virtues and we have no problem about appreciating the respective value of each. But, when, we put them together, we begin to figure out how to balance them. When Jesus narrated his parables, they drew inevitable attention from the hearers because they were "intrigued" by the juxtaposition of apparently irreconcilable concepts or situations.

Let us look at the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" (Lk 15:11-32) as example of the apparent irreconcilability between the elder Son acting out of a sense of justice and the Father acting in the name of mercy. The audience of Jesus must have been intrigued at the beginning and they were just too curious to know the understanding that Jesus would like them to have. After all, the Old Testament is full of stories, familiar to the Jewish audience, about the good being rewarded and the bad being punished. We are familiar with the classic *Lex Talionis* (Law of Retaliation): Life for life, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." (Dt 19:21b). The Ten Commandments are accompanied by the corresponding punishment for their violators. Even the New

Testament comes up with an exhortation for fairness, which is, more or less, a call too for justice. Here, we quote St. Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians: "In fact when we were with you, we instructed you that is anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat" (3:10). Fair enough, isn't it? How about these lines in the gospel that call for a *quid pro quo*? "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16) Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). So, if a man does not believe, he cannot be saved. Fine, that is fair enough. But then, where is God's mercy?

In the book under review, the authors, Eggmeier and Fritz, mentioned Pope Francis' use of the "Parable of the Good Samaritan" (Lk 10:25-37) as an example of the politics of mercy, in which the action of a considered enemy (Samaritan) which benefits the victim (Jew) flies in the face of a culture which values justice and fairness: "Love your neighbor and hate your enemies" (see Mt 5:43). The sense of fairness of Jesus' Jewish audience makes them expect the Samaritan to ignore the victim and the Priest and Levite to come to the aid of their countryman, after all they are religious by profession. These two people would have been torn, too, between the corporal work of mercy (see Is 58: 7-10) as encouraged in the Old Testament, and the Levitical laws of purity that prohibits touching the body of the dead (see Lev 21:1). Be merciful or be loyal to the law, that is the question; you cannot be both.

These dilemma-drawing binaries are found in biblical literature, and they have been the experience of the Church and its members. How can one practice mercy, when injustice has been committed? Would that not condone the wrongdoing and encourage similar offenses if, after all, the wrongdoer can go scot-free by appealing for mercy. Rightfully, do the authors term it "politics of mercy", because, I think, the one who exercises mercy goes through a lot of discernment and exploration of how to make the merciful act not do extensive damage to society. If politics is the "art of the possible," in the politics of mercy we must explore possibilities of being merciful to the one needing

mercy and, at the same time, giving what is due to those concerned, which is what justice is all about.

To have certain understanding of these apparent contradictions is also what I would like to benefit from my reading of the book, even if the authors have expressed their own objective on producing it. It is only fair enough to present first the objectives of the book's writers and look at their data in connection with their claims and conclusions. But in this book review essay, I take the liberty of extracting from it the answer to my query earlier: how can we make mercy and justice work together and still remain faithful to Jesus' new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34).

In this book, Eggemeier and Fritz have written a book "apologizing" for the existence of the Catholic Church in an age when the credibility of the Church has suffered due to highly publicized sexual abuses and child abuses by some of the clergy. They do not do the apology by insisting on the orthodoxy of Church doctrines or the legitimacy of ecclesiastical authority. They do it by the rightfulness of praxes in a world of unrighteousness. Specifically in the context of the Church in America, although these can happen too outside of it, the book deals with current social ills and problems: "inequality, migration, mass incarceration, war, and environmental degradation." They sum up the thesis of their work: "Catholic life in an era of inequality, racism, and violence should reimagine the traditional works of mercy as a politics that entails spiritual practices, direct action or charitable work, and long-term structural transformation or justice" (1).

The authors have grouped the "five crises" in this book on the headings of "inequality," "racism," and "violence." Under the heading of inequality are the phenomena of wealth and poverty, under racism are migration and mass incarceration, and under violence are war and ecology. When at first sight, they seem to have been mixed together as the proverbial apples and oranges, they prove to be consistently "connected" to one another as demonstrated during the reading.

Eggemeier and Fritz do not just show their mastery in research, analysis, and synthesis of theological issues, they also

demonstrate their expertise in theological education. In the heading of “How to Use this Book” (9), they have arranged the matters in a way that is reader-friendly. In the introduction are “stories about and/or data to describe a particular crisis. In crisis, is the consideration...from both secular and theological points of view” (9). All these crises are respectively responded too by the Catholic social thought in which “texts from the Bible, encyclicals and other official documents, and theological ideas that can help us formulate responses to the crisis” (9). The politics of mercy is presented at three levels: “spiritual works of mercy, corporal works of mercy as charity, and spiritual and corporal works as a framework for structural transformation” (9). The conclusion presents some Catholic communities which can be viewed as example of the living out of the “politics of mercy”. One has to read the whole book to appreciate its logical structure and orderly presentation. For my readers, I take the liberty of presenting the content of the book in the popular framework of liberation theology: See-Judge (Discern)-Act. The authors themselves suggest this framework in their introduction. (If this book helps you to understand what’s going on, to judge the crises as unacceptable and the Catholic action to address them as desirable, we hope that this understanding and this judgment will impel you to act” (2).

In “Seeing,” I present what the authors see and what they want us to see: contemporary crises mentioned above. This is followed by the “Judging” or “Discerning” in which the authors evaluate and critique those data in the light of the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church, specifically, her Social Teachings. Last is the “Acting,” in which lines of action can be formulated as praxes. But, in this case, the lines to be taken have been progressively realized already by local and global Catholic organizations, such as: the Catholic Worker, Jesuit Refugee Service, Catholic Relief Services, Bethlehem Farm, etc. As its title indicates, ultimately, the works of mercy are the best apologetics of Catholicism and offer signs of hope in a world that needs healing from the social ills of inequality, racism, environmental degradation, etc.

## INEQUALITY: WEALTH AND POVERTY

### Seeing

In this heading consisting of the issues of wealth and poverty, the authors bid us to see the global economy through the eyes of Pope Francis and St. John Paul II. The former looks at the present culture as a “throwaway culture” because of the free-market system in which what matters more is the movement of the market and not its impact on people. It is a culture in which “everything has a price, everything can be bought, everything is negotiable. This way of thinking has room only for a select few, while it discards all those who are unproductive” (Quoted by Eggmeier and Fritz, 14). The same pontiff invites us to look at “how a loss of 10 points in the stock market is deemed newsworthy, but neither the death of a homeless person from exposure to the cold nor children starving in various parts of the world generates any news coverage” (15).<sup>1</sup> The disposability of that person earns the category of “throwaway” or “trash”. An alternative offered by state-run communism criticized as well by Pope St. John Paul II should be seen as another extreme that fall short of the traditional Christian approach to a humane management of goods.

### Discerning

To guide the Catholic in this area, the following principles are presented: “spiritual works of mercy,” “corporal works of mercy,” “universal destination of goods,” “a social vision

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis sees more of this problem with international significance, as read in his encyclical, *Laudato Si, On Care for Our Common Home* (2015). “Inequity affects not only individuals but entire countries; it compels us to consider an ethics of international relations. A true “ecological debt” exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time” (LS, 51)

that properly balances economics, politics, and civil society” (15-16). The bible is full of exhortations on doing works of mercy, both spiritual and corporal, just as it is full, too, of expressions describing instances of “structural sins” and idolatry of possessions. Catholic social thought holds as bible-based principles “human dignity,” “*imago Dei*,” and “universal destination of goods.” The biblical books on creation, exodus, prophets, among others have inspired breakthrough Church documents such as: *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Laudato Si* (2015).

Pope Francis’ exhortation on inequality cannot be more explicit. “As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of the markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world’s problems or, for that matter, to any problem. Inequality is the root of social ills”.<sup>2</sup> In the same paragraph, the pontiff reminds us of the traditional basics of Catholic social morality: human dignity; this principle is applicable to all the themes of this book. “The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies”.<sup>3</sup>

## Acting

Eggmeier and Fritz present the spiritual works of mercy (instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, and comforting the afflicted) as reminding us of looking out for the needs of others. In maintaining the dignified life of the needy, we are advised to apply the corporal works of mercy (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and clothing the naked) (29). Actions on these needs have already been exercised by Catholic Charities USA and the Catholic Worker; these are the more prominent organizations. Let me add a datum not mentioned in the book

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *A Church That Is Poor and for the Poor*, <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/centers/church21/publications/c21-resources/c21-resources-articles/A-CHURCH-That-is-POOR-and-for-the-POOR.html>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

with regards a line of action in response to poverty in both the United States and other countries where the Catholic population is considerably big. I am referring to the work, both national and international, of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, an organization mainly of lay people founded in 1833 by a layman in France, by the name of Frederick Ozanam, now a beatified saint. Their work parallels, to a certain degree, that of the Salvation Army.

## MIGRATION

### Seeing

In these pressing social issues (inequality, migration, mass incarceration, war, and climate change) the authors want us to see first, migration. Lately, the media have shown people in shipwreck especially in the Mediterranean Sea, a body of water between the poor south (developing countries) and the rich north (developed countries). These people were trying to migrate to places of better economic life but are not always received with hospitality. Also, we read of migrants from South and Central America stationed in the borders of North America suffering not only from starvation and sickness but also from the exploitation of unscrupulous human traffickers. Back in Europe, a survivor of a capsized boat of migrants in the sea between Africa and Europe recounts this: "For five hours we were floating, using the dead bodies of our companions... there is nothing worse than this. There were many children. There was a mother with her four children, a mother with an infant, all lost at sea" (49). Back in America, there was an image of a dead migrant from El Salvador who was found floating dead with her dead daughter in the Rio Grande, border between the United States and Mexico. They were swept away by the raging flood waters. This is telling of a crisis in migration in that part of the world which includes separating children from their parents (50). By the way, we don't have to go far, for here in Southeast Asia we have the sad cases of the Rohingya, migrating from Myanmar to Bangladesh and beyond and only to live in similar squalors. Fresh are still the images of the boat people from

Vietnam who also took perilous journeys to lands they thought were greener pastures.

The authors rightfully related migration to racism and viewed U.S. history as a “history of racialized exclusion,” “settler colonialism,” and “foreign interventionism (50). More sad is the fact that, at times, the U.S. has conveniently made alliances with dictators in a global economic system which benefits the center North (the United States) and takes advantage of those in the periphery (the developing South).

### **Discerning**

In the bible, God’s people is depicted as a traveling and journeying people; in short, they were a migrant people. In some of their migrations, it was Yahweh calling them to move to another place as in the case of Abraham leading his tribe going to Canaan, and Moses, as well, leading his people back to the Promised Land. But in all these, God was always their companion, because God has a preferential option for the poor. In the scriptures, a sin that cries to heaven for vengeance consists of an oppression of the strangers (equivalent to migrants) and together with the widows and the orphans). They were supposed to be under the special protective care of the king of the land.

Catholic social thought has a lot to say on migration. The book authors cite Pope Francis’ writings and preaching on the sad plight of the migrants. He is telling his hearers that God in the Bible accompanied the people throughout their journeys and whereabouts in mercy and so does He today. In the pontiff’s preaching near the border of the U.S. and Mexico, he used the biblical Jonah’s travel to Nineveh where the prophet, according to God’s instruction, alerted its inhabitants to the incoming destruction if they did not repent (cf. Jon 3:4). The narration further exposes the reason for such possible destruction such as maltreatment of one another, oppression, and causing suffering on others. God instructs Jonah to tell the king and his subjects that that was not the way to live together.



God's way shows mercy in reprimanding the wayward ruler and subjects, but there is also the pursuit of justice in the process. "Francis notes that this is how God's mercy operates. Since God's mercy always coordinates with God's justice, often the first way that God shows mercy is by rejecting wickedness – and telling the wicked so" (55). The way of God, according to the Holy Father, in which mercy is prominent, is to consider the basic goodness of people, God-given and from within. God's justice is not an arbitrary imposition from the outside but, as it were, an invitation for people "to see the damage for themselves" (55). "This is how God's accompaniment works. It is not a neutral co-traveling. It is the consistent and constant operation of mercy that condemns the insensitivity to others' pain and works to undo structures that oppress" (56).

## Acting

In Church history and tradition, religious orders, like the Benedictines and the Cistercians arose to take care of the needs of travelers and pilgrims. The assistance consisted of sheltering and feeding them along the way and providing necessary rescue for those who suffered accidents. In the United States today, there are Christian groups that continue this work of mercy. In the context of the U.S., the authors recommend as acts to be taken are three spiritual works of mercy and one corporal work of mercy. The former is to enable those exhorted to do the corporal work of mercy (welcoming the stranger or "harboring the harborless"). This corporal work of mercy of taking in strangers (migrants in this context) is not difficult to imagine. It just needs logistics, but it is, however, the process in those persons exhorted to do the harboring that needs elaborate collaboration and practical measures among the citizens. Exploring pragmatic possibilities to effectively assist the needy would certainly need the art of the possible (politics) in the realm of mercy.

The authors express this in strong terms. "The spiritual works of mercy pertain primarily to the need for reconciliation with God. The unwillingness of nations like the U.S. to welcome strangers and harbor the harborless is a grave sin, a breach of

communion that cries out to heaven, and that demands dramatic conversion” (58). Welcoming the strangers demands direct action in resisting expulsion and in providing a welcoming sanctuary for them (58). The three spiritual works of mercy that constitute the **act** are “admonishing sinners, forgiving offenses, and bearing wrongs patiently” (58). Eggsmeir and Fritz sum up the **act** into three categories: reconciliation, charity, and justice. They also remind the practitioner “to recognize his own need to be warned against sinning, to be forgiven, and to be borne with patience” (58). So it is basic tenet that the helper in admonishing the sinner should accept himself or herself as a sinner too. Here, to criticize, resist, and even oppose alternatives to the “current, racialized, repulsive system of mass deportation in the U.S.,” is considered a deviation from the social teachings of the Church. He or she would be in need of restoring communion with God and love of neighbor, especially the needy ones (59). In the context of reconciliation, let the practitioners be reminded that an act of reconciliation is not an act of condescension and, therefore, superiority which has a “racial overtone”. In avoiding this, can the practitioner exercise a real reconciliatory spirit and a sense of accompaniment.

The authors depict actions already being done as acts of praxis. The examples given are the Jesuit Refugee Services or JRS (representing act of charity) and Sanctuary (act of justice). For instance, the JRS undertakes for actions of charity for the refugees in actions of service, accompaniment, and advocacy (once termed “defence”). Accompanying the refugees or the migrants is God’s way in the Bible. This entails being present to them, showing empathy and suffering with them, which is what compassion is all about. The act of serving is dispensing humanitarian assistance to migrants and refugees, not just “dole-outs” but “livelihood programs, psychosocial services (to promote healing and well-being) and lastly, educational opportunities.” The act of advocacy is one of seeking “structural remedies” on the plight of migrants (66). After all, as the authors narrate, [Pope] “Francis has argued that when we spend time with others, begin to understand their stories, and develop relationships with people and communities

different from our own, it becomes more difficult to scapegoat them or to be indifferent toward their suffering” (66).

One **act** which is significant in the area of justice is the “sanctuary”. This, of course, involves both the local and national leadership in the current policy regarding immigration and deportation. This also calls into question, according to the authors, the “interventionist policy” of the U.S. in Central America (from where many migrants come from). Sanctuary calls, too, for the transformation of economic policies that are oppressive to the undocumented and calls, as well, for the protection of “the rights of the stranger who bears the face of Christ by resisting the view that anyone would be labeled illegal” (63). Of course, welcoming the stranger in the “sanctuary” is a great act of mercy, a practice of charity, that even clashes with the policies of a government whose history was not free from the practice of “racist exclusion” (61).

## MASS INCARCERATION

### Seeing

Put under the headline, “Racism” together with Migration is Mass Incarceration. The authors want us to see the glaring data about race-based percentages in prison population. For example, the African American population in California is more or less only 7% of the general population and yet they constitute 28% of that state’s prison population. However, the same racial group constitutes 45% of the three-strikes legislation (“mandatory minimum sentences on person convicted of three felony offenses”) (71). According to the authors, what makes this law suspect of the “crime” of inequality and racism is that the law was the product of presidents and legislators catering to the “white electorate” (73).

The traditional political response to crimes punished with incarceration is retributive justice which is highly punitive. But here is an alternative offered by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB): restorative justice. This “seeks to repair the harm done in members of the community because of a criminal

act (75). The bishops' response was inspired by John Paul's *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) in which he exhorts the faithful to come up with "a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God's plan for man and society" (*EV*, par. 56, Quoted in Eggmeier and Fritz, 75).

The American bishops' document on crime and punishment, "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice" (2000), recommends measures that are consistent with the Catholic social thought. It emphasizes restorative justice "by taking into account the harm done to victims and communities (75). Punishment should be meted out in the context of correcting, treating, restoring, and healing of both victims and offenders (76). The document also brings up the issue concerning the many causes of why crimes are committed in the first place. Obviously, without condoning crimes committed and blaming the victims, the bishops suggest that in the reform of criminal justice lawmakers "must begin with the recognition of the role of the economic inequality and racism" (76). These factors, according to the bishops, can be partially righted by "measures like fighting child poverty, educating people, and supporting families" (76).

### Discerning

The restorative part that is pushed by the bishops has as its biblical basis, the Paschal Mystery of Christ. The soteriological or salvific significance of this Mystery is to bring salvation to the sinner which consists mainly of the sinner's return to the fold, that is, to God's mercy and to the community's acceptance. The authors, Eggmeier and Fritz, make a follow-up. "Catholic life must consider the whole of the Paschal Mystery: Christ's suffering and death as a criminal, his resurrection as one vindicated by God, and consequently as one who is revealed to have lived as God wills—and even to be God himself—with his ministry of healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace" (77). Accepting the sinner without condoning the sin is very much the way Jesus handles his encounter with "prominent sinners" in the gospel. He told the woman caught in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you, go and

sin no more” (Jn 8:10). Likewise, Jesus told the repentant thief, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43).

### **Acting**

What actions have been taken on the crisis of mass incarceration? Abolition of death penalty has been advocated by the bishops and the Church at large. This has inspired the creation of The Catholic Mobilizing Network. This organization does not intend to abolish the “prison industrial complex” but merely to reform “the criminal justice system from a punitive to a restorative model of justice” (81). In fulfillment of the corporal work of mercy, visiting the prisoner, two organizations arose in the U.S.: Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition and also Dismas Ministry. Related to these organizations is a multi-business venture named Homeboy Industries, which is engaged in “gang intervention, rehabilitation, and re-entry program” (87). In his visit to different countries and regions of Italy, Pope Francis makes as one of his priorities, the visit to prisoners in jails.

## **VIOLENCE: WAR AND ECOLOGY**

### **Seeing**

Eggmeier and Fritz see their country’s policy as “predicated on endless war and therefore endless sacrifice” (96). War is a social system that uses violence to neutralize threats and to oppose even with death-dealing force those perceived to be threats. This is often called militarism, which involves not just individuals but the whole military industrial complex. In a way, it is similar to the policy on mass incarceration which is also to neutralize perceived harms to society (96). The policy of war brings in other problems like military bases here and abroad and military spending; these obviously can have negative effect on the population.

It is a public perception that the U.S. military easily turns into a world police, going to places often for intervention in conflicts. This is often justified by the American image of defender of democracy. “American exceptionalism” is the phrase used for the special role of America in a world of conflict. “According to this ideological framework, everything that the United States does is justified (tragedies of past) and authorized (future interventions) because it possesses a unique moral standing among nations and has a distinctive mission for the world” (98).

### **Discerning**

The way of blessedness is found in being peacemakers (see Mt 5:9), the nonviolent stance of offering the other cheek instead of a retaliatory act (see Mt 5:39), loving even one’s enemies (see Mt 5:43) and warning against the use of sword to solve conflicts, for it will be an instrument of death for its very user (see Mt 26:52). I will suggest to the readers of this book to consider the following points. In the beatitudes it is not right to simply emphasize the first part of the sentence even if it includes the word “blessed” (“blessed are the poor,” “blessed are the meek,” “blessed are the persecuted,” etc.), it should give equal emphasis to the promised results of the righteous acts (“they shall inherit the earth,” “theirs is the kingdom of God,” “they shall be comforted,” “they will be called the children of God.” In short, the good, the true, and the fullest life consists in being with and relying on God after recognizing our needs and predicaments.

The authors brought up the Church’s changing policies along the way. The early Church was mainly pacifistic due to its literal interpretation of Jesus’ mandate on loving enemies and nonviolent response even to injuries. This pacifism evolved into the just war theory, justified by the circumstances and situations of “self-defense,” “last resort,” “probability of success,” and “proportional response” (101). However, lately understandably so in the nuclear age where no one is an ultimate victor, just war pacifism is held and is argued “that just war principles virtually rule out the moral legitimacy of contemporary warfare” (101).

Papal encyclicals that further enlighten the faithful on war events and policies are: John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* (1963), Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Pope Francis's "Nonviolence: A style of Politics for Peace" (2019).

## Acting

"In praying for the dead" and "burying the dead" are the corresponding **acts** in the politics of mercy. The book mentions again the Catholic Relief Services and the Jesuit Refugee Service. It adds the existence of Pax Christi, Sant' Egidio, similar organizations that "integrate the just peace focus on development and reconciliation in their attempts to build a more enduring peace" (113). We may add here that the United Nations Organization, for all its imperfect structures and policies, is in business of preventing wars among warring members by sending "peace troops" or "blue-helmeted soldiers" to areas of conflict. In the past, the Vatican using its moral influence through its representatives, served also as a reconciliatory go-between for peace among Latin American countries disputing about matters that concerned borders.

## ECOLOGY

### Seeing

Indeed, true is what the Pontiff is saying about "everything is connected" with regard ecology. There is a connection between the environmental situation and racism, migration, and war. In *Laudato Si*, he juxtaposes the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (LS, 49). Yes, environmental crisis covers the whole earth but the damage it causes creates a negative impact more among the poor. Racism reaches to the area of environmental degradation. "Communities of color are often located in sacrifice zones, or places deemed disposable on the path toward economic progress" (127). In the case of the U.S., "Federal and state governments often place housing projects for poor

communities of color next to petrochemical plants, oil refineries, and locations vulnerable to natural disasters” (127).

Migration has been triggered, according to the authors, by extreme weather events like “droughts, flooding, unbearable heat, hurricanes.” These have given origin to a new category of people: “climate migrants” or “climate refugees”. It is not difficult to connect environmental degradation to war. The U.S. military industrial complex, according to Eggmeier and Fritz, is the “single greatest institutional emitter of fossil fuels in the world” (128).

### **Discerning**

Since ecology is connected and related to the other crises which the authors want us to see, biblical accounts and social teachings of the Church including papal encyclical directly addressing environmental concerns can be applied to ecology. Of course, in theological matters, the doctrines of creation and incarnation can be directed to and speak of ecology. In brief, the doctrine of creation reminds us of the intrinsic goodness of creation and incarnation reveals God’s condescension on His creation by becoming like you and me, a microcosm, meaning a miniature version of the universe (cosmos). If the Incarnation is inseparable from Christology and soteriology, then, our treatment of creation should be patterned after the life of Christ in solidarity with us that climaxed in the ultimate transformation of all, the Resurrection. Thus, “solidarity” and “transformation” are two key concepts that propel us to treat with respect and esteem our creation and our fellow humans regardless of race. Conforming to Christ of the Paschal Mystery makes us uphold human dignity, allow ourselves to be directed by the common good, and revere the image of God in each human being. And, because we are connected and related to every creature with intrinsic worth by being God’s creature, then anthropocentrism (inordinate putting the human in the center of creation and as its sole beneficiary) at the expense of full ecological well-being has no place in the cosmic life.



## Acting

Praying for the living and caring for the sick and visiting the sick are the works of mercy recommended specifically in this area. Lifestyle changes and ecological education are foremost activities. Mentioned in the book is Bethlehem Farm as a concrete example of structuring and institutionalizing care for the environment and every creature in it. Still on the issue of ecology, Eggmeier and Fritz, do not, perhaps, see the need to intensively include the warnings and the exhortations of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*. But for present readers today, especially in the context beyond North America, this encyclical cannot be missed for its worldwide and deep analysis of the present environmental problems.

Discerning and acting are actions we are encouraged to by Pope Francis, in his second encyclical, *Laudato Si, On Care for Our Home* (2015), partly, a lamentation on impulsive consumerism, environmental degradation, irresponsible development and dire consequences of climate change. It is good to hear some of these quotations from the Holy Father, himself. "Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (LS, 49). Further on, he says: "We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it. We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty. It is time to acknowledge that light-hearted superficiality has done us no good. When the foundations of social life are corroded, what ensues are battles over conflicting interests, new forms of violence and brutality, and obstacles to the growth of a genuine culture of care for the environment" (LS, 229).

## CONCLUSION

What we learn from this book on our discussion of the problematic binaries? The work of mercy is given to the neighbor. But who is my neighbor? In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the neighbor is the one who is in need of assistance, with no question asked on race, social status, or religion. But those needs also create a moral imperative on the potential helper to be a neighbor in that contingency. So, one must feel the pain of the other or what we call empathizing. The work of mercy is transformative for both the helper and the person being helped. We cannot separate mercy and justice. Mercy is not to deny true justice. Only when we know the full consequence of the failure to be just, that we can waive aside a just punishment and that is mercy. In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, there is no problem with what violates justice in the failure to pay (punishable) in an agreement made. But it is in the meting of punishment that mercy is needed. Justice without mercy is to refuse to feel the pain of the other; mercy without justice can point to other ulterior motives. The message of the parables of The Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan is: do not measure God's mercy according to our human sense and standard of justice. Is it not that when the Samaritan helps the Jewish victim, the latter has an intrinsic dignity that makes a moral demand on the Samaritan's capacity to help. He is not obliged to help but in fact and in reality, he helps (that's mercy); but there is a "worthiness" in the person to be helped that merits help, and that is justice. That worthiness besides arising from the victim's humanity also arises from his/her primal connectedness with the victimizer. The late, Jose De Mesa, a prominent promotor of Filipino theology, in one of his lectures mentioned one example of that appeal to a connectedness in one incident. As one woman was about to be assaulted violently, she appealed to the would-be perpetrator with a statement: *Utang loob naman, huwag mo gawin!* The would-be victim is appealing to the would-be rapist to acknowledge the connectedness of their shared *loob* (inner self) which would be violated by a crime.

In the Bible, especially the Old Testament, God's assistance to the people is always viewed as grace and mercy. There is nothing in Israel and the Israelites have not done anything that would make just claims on Yahweh's providence. Says the Scriptures, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than the burnt offerings: (Hos 6:6). The people can perform all kinds of traditional religious activities for God and still would not merit God's response. But in my article, "From Pure Religion to Human Rights," in the *Hapag* journal, I wrote about the development of a shift in the Christian communities of emphasis from the gratuitous help given to the "widows, orphans, and strangers" (devoid of rights in the OT) to their basic human rights that create a moral demand from others, even from the authority.

In *The Politics of Mercy*, the authors actually present that shift in the Church from purely charitable acts to acts of justice, as still within the "politics of mercy." From the issue of punishment of mass incarceration, let me explain. To exercise justice for those convicted of crimes, the Church advocates restorative justice rather than retributive justice (75). What is its significance? It is based on the conviction that a crime or wrong-doing has not deleted or removed the intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual; neither has it totally disabled his or her basic freedom. Visiting the prisoner is a corporal work of mercy, but his or her basic potentiality to be restored to the community is a response to the moral imperative of that condition. In other words, people convicted in court of crimes have not lost their basic human rights that call for "just" responses.

Aren't laws created so as to structure society in a way that people's rights are protected not only against unjust people but also against unjust traditions? So, society's laws corrective of unjust structures is meant to give to people what's due to them and in that instance is eliminated, among others, making acts of mercy which can be mere expressions of condescension and paternalism. It is tantamount to saying that "benevolent dictatorship" is preferable to an integral democracy because that dictatorship eliminates the unnecessary bureaucracy identified with democracy. But, how far can a benevolent dictator go with all

his or her acts of condescending and paternal mercy and not eventually end up in arbitrary actions against his subjects either by him or by his successors. Ultimately, what would it do to the basic dignity of the subjects and their sense of intrinsic worth? A blog on the *Wisdom of C.S. Lewis* offers a wise reminder from this British writer and lay theologian on the potential “abuse” of mercy: “Mercy detached from justice grows unmerciful.”<sup>4</sup> Failing to judge and to correct one who is in need of fraternal correction in the guise of mercy might hinder that person from growing, and that is being unmerciful.

I have presented the inseparability of justice and mercy; that is, one without the other would not make any of them be appreciated by the people, both the governing and the governed. Indeed, appropriate is the attachment of “politics” to mercy; for, after all, as we have seen, for a society to be merciful, it has to do a lot of “politicking”, meaning, making pragmatic decisions and, at times, compromising deals to achieve the common good. Of course, it is understood that this is politics in the human sphere or level; we cannot apply this to a complete understanding of how God mysteriously rule the world and deal with His creation. We are like the elder son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son who cannot understand his father’s apparent lack of justice, when, in fact, there is another way of viewing the whole affair from the father’s side: an act of mercy. It reminds us, too, of the owner’s statement in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Mt 20:15). This encapsulates in folksy terms what God’s mercy is all about even in the face of human sense of fairness and justice which seems to contradict the Divine Way.

As a way of conclusion, let us be reminded by the difference this book makes in the midst of other approaches to

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<sup>4</sup> <http://cslewiswisdom.blogspot.com/2011/06/mercy-detached-from-justice-grows.html>

the contemporary crises presented above. In the introduction, the authors delineate distinctiveness of “Politics of Mercy” (7-8): its insistence upon the “importance of a spiritual component in order to enliven our efforts and to strengthen our hope” (8), in distinction from the secular models offered by some sectors. In the Philippine setting I would propose the addition of Popular Catholicism in the country as an opening to an inspiration of developmental endeavors. In contrast to the secular and humanitarian approach to charity, the authors have proposed a “holistic culture of encounter and accompaniment,” “out of compassion” intended for “structural transformation” in the socio-political realm. The methodology of liberation theology as utilized by the Base Ecclesial Community in the Philippine context is very much in place. In the face, sometimes, of insistence purely on justice with the absence of charity, “the book insists on the centrality of charity and direct action to Catholic life” (8). Inspired by the papal encyclicals that maintain the indispensability of charity, the Philippine Church has in its programs always the formative component of biblical and liturgical education even as they are engaged in the socio-political processes.

As a Filipino religious and theological educator, I encourage the Base Ecclesial Community as a methodology and setting, by which and in which to accomplish the politics of mercy as envisioned by Eggmeier and Fritz: “a way of gathering of people together into community based in the ability to feel another’s suffering in one’s own heart” (8-9). The authors were able to connect rightfully and adroitly the seemingly disconnected topics presented above, even only in the context of their country, belonging to the Rich North and Developed West. If there is a literature that makes all these issues get connected in almost every aspect, it is the more popular writing of the Pope, *Laudato Si*, crafted in continuity with the best of Catholic social thought. The more simple folks engaged in Base Ecclesial Community or any local church, for that matter, can understand and appreciate its wisdom and feel its power to transform a world threatened by degradation to a world flourishing in peace and integrity, because its history makers are compassionate, just, and loving.

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY**

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