

# **Mercy as a Sign of the Times in Our Spirituality**

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## **Introduction: Reading the Signs of the Times**

Time and again, Pope Francis has urged the Church to read “the signs of the times.” He has done so to a diverse group of audiences: in his morning homilies at the Casa Santa Marta, to meetings on the New Evangelization, and even to the International Theological Commission. In doing so, he has taken up a theme that came to be of great importance for the Church in the twentieth century.

The phrase “signs of the times” is of course taken from the Gospels. In the version in Matthew (16:1-4), the Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus for a sign from heaven. Jesus points to natural phenomena—the state of the sky in the morning and the evening—and then berates them for not being able to read signs of the weather. If they cannot read these, how will they be able to read signs from God? The only sign that can be given to this “faithless generation,” he tells them, is the sign of Jonah.

As presented in the New Testament, being able to read the signs of the times meant discerning God’s action in history. In the first half of the twentieth century, there was a renewed interest in

reading the signs of the times. At that time it meant engaging in social analysis in order to bring a Christian response to the needs that were being presented. It took special form in the “see-judge-act” methodology of Joseph Cardijn. Pope John XXIII used “signs of the times” in his first encyclical, *Pacem in terris*, as did Pope Paul VI in his encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam*. During the Second Vatican Council, a special sub-commission on Schema XIII worked for two months in 1964 on how to include it in the pastoral constitution which was to become *Gaudium et spes*. It appeared in that document in 1965 in paragraph 4:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.

As was just mentioned, Pope Francis has revived interest in naming and reading the signs of the times. He sees it as a grace from God that allows us to participate more fully in God’s saving action in the world. In this presentation, I would like to take up the Pope’s invitation to try to read the signs of the times, and see how spirituality of the blood of Christ enables us to respond to them.

The Missionaries of the Precious Blood have been trying to read those signs in their ministries around the world. They seek a way of responding to them in faith through the mystery of Christ’s blood. This practice has been presented succinctly by Father Barry Fischer under two headings: “the cry of the blood” and “the call of the blood.” “The cry of the blood” is to be heard in the cries of all those who suffer, who experience oppression and exclusion, who mourn loss, who

carry deep wounds. It was first heard in the Book of Genesis, when the blood of Abel, who had been slain by his brother Cain, cried out from the earth (Gen 4:10). Today, the Missionaries of the Precious Blood and all those devoted to the blood of Christ continue to listen for the cry of the blood.

“The call of the blood,” on the other hand, is God’s response to those cries, presented in the shedding of Christ’s blood as the sign of God’s desire to heal the wounds of the world that have been inflicted by sin and human wrongdoing of all kinds. In the presentations that you will be hearing during this symposium, there will be profound examples of the cries of the blood throughout our world today, as well as reflections on how the blood of Christ responds precisely to the wounds of that world.

In this opening presentation, I want to begin by recalling how we Missionaries have been trying to hear the cries of the blood and respond to the call of the blood in the years since the Council. Our responses to that call can be put under two headings: liberation and reconciliation. Then I will turn to a response to the signs of our times today as proposed by Pope Francis; namely, the call for mercy. As you all know, the Holy Father has announced an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy to begin on December 8 of this year. After reviewing Pope Francis’ approach to mercy, I will look at three ways in which mercy is a response to the signs of our times. And then to conclude, I will sketch how the spirituality of the blood of Christ might offer a concrete embodiment of God’s mercy. So let us begin.

### **Recent Precious Blood Spirituality as “Liberation”**

I must begin with a little history. After the Second Vatican Council, like all other religious institutes, the Missionaries of the Precious Blood undertook programs of renewal toward a deeper understanding of its charism or self-understanding. Part of that was a re-examination of our spirituality. The Founder of the Missionaries, St. Gaspar del Bufalo, had put devotion to the blood of Christ at the center of the new community's life when he founded it in 1815. The "divine blood" (*il divin sangue*), as he was wont to call it, was a sign of God's great love and mercy. This was an important message for the people of those times. Made weary by the years of war with Napoleon, the people of what is now Italy needed renewal and spiritual revitalization. Devotional prayers and meditations on the blood sheddings of Christ in his Passion formed the core of this spirituality.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the renewal of biblical studies, as well as deeper research into how the blood of Christ had been understood by mystics and theologians throughout the history of the Church, provided new resources for developing a more developed spirituality that went beyond devotional exercises. These new resources made it possible to re-examine the "call of the blood"—the ways in which the blood of Christ gave expression to God's saving activity in the world.

The cry of the blood that really provoked a new approach to this spirituality came about through a reading of the signs of the times in Latin America. In the 1970s and 1980s, the C.P.P.S. Missionaries working there experienced first-hand the oppression and poverty of the people. In Chile, the country was being ruled by a ruthless military dictatorship. Brazil was also under a dictatorship at that time, but what became an even greater pastoral challenge in that country was

discrimination against indigenous peoples and destruction of the environment. In Peru, an insurgency known as “The Shining Path” (*el Sendero Luminoso*) was mercilessly killing peasants and indigenous peoples. A civil war raged in Guatemala. The cry of the blood in all of these places was unmistakable and compelling.

If the response to the signs of those times in the 1970s and 1980s could be summed up in a single word, it was “liberation.” Liberation had become a widespread theme throughout Latin America after the meeting of the Latin American bishops at Medellín in 1968. God’s saving power, in response to the signs of those times, was the experience of that saving, liberating grace that fuelled the struggle against injustice and oppression.

A renewed spirituality of the blood of Christ was a response to the call for justice and liberation in those settings in Latin America. It was brought together in three biblical symbols that symbolized the saving work of the blood of Christ: covenant, cross, and cup. The covenant of God with Israel, sealed in blood (Ex 24:1-8), and the new covenant in Christ’s blood (Luke 22: 20) are signs of God’s deep solidarity with humanity, especially in times of adversity. The cross of Christ, where his blood was poured out for us, shows how Christ’s own suffering enters into and transforms all human suffering. And the cup offered at the Last Supper as his blood for us to drink is at once a cup of suffering (as the cup that Jesus accepted from his Father in his prayer in Gethsemani [Matt 26: 39]), as well as the cup of blessing by which God is praised, a sign of the heavenly banquet to come (cf. Luke 22: 16). A spirituality of the blood of Christ, therefore, is a spirituality of solidarity with those who suffer, and a spirituality of hope for the genuine liberation that only God can bring.

Liberation as a theme in Latin America (and beyond) continues to be important, especially for all those people who continue the struggle for justice and inclusion. The document coming from Aparecida, the site of the most recent meeting of the Latin American bishops in 2007, and the frequent words of its principal drafter, Cardinal Jorge Maria Bergoglio—now Pope Francis—are evidence of that. But as in every human effort to respond to God’s call, one encounters human limits. Among those in the call to liberation has been a realization how incomplete human justice always remains. Some losses—especially the loss of life and one’s homeland—can never be entirely restored. While the struggle for justice, endorsed by the first Bishops’ Synod in 1970, has rightly focused on the transformation of unjust structures as key to achieving a greater justice, the wiliness of the sinful human heart can undermine even the most genuine schemes and efforts to create a better world. These limits by no means negate either the pursuit of justice or the paths that have been chosen to do so. It simply reminds us of our finite selves struggling, even with the help of God’s grace, to make the world a better and more just place.

### **Recent Precious Blood Spirituality as “Reconciliation”**

The 1990s brought new signs of the times that needed to be read. These did not replace the ones that the Missionaries had read earlier; indeed the need for liberation continues unabated. But new events, and lessons learned from the previous decades, opened up a new theme; namely, that of reconciliation. Some of the new events included the collapse of Soviet Union and with it, most of the world order of the so-called Cold War. In 1992, the United Nations’ Year of Indigenous Peoples brought to world attention the plight of indigenous peoples, especially in the Americas and in Australia and New Zealand. The UN Year of the Woman in 1994 revealed that domestic

violence, especially against women and children, was to be found everywhere around the world. The genocide in Rwanda that same year prompted the relief and development agencies of the Catholic Church, under the umbrella of Caritas Internationalis, to realize that peace building was essential to the longer-term success of development efforts. In all of this “reconciliation” became the watchword for dealing with the past so as to make possible a different kind of future.

Indeed, if efforts at liberation were focused primarily on the future, the work of reconciliation looks more to healing the deep wounds of the past as the precondition for that different kind of future. It is a “different kind” of future inasmuch as wounds can be wide and deep, having dimensions that go far beyond the events and persons who have inflicted them. Reconciliation is more than redressing the past; it requires what the Apostle Paul called “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). From a Christian point of view, the complexity of wounds is such that reconciliation has to be considered first and foremost the work of God, a work in which we are called to participate. That is certainly the outlook of St. Paul, who preached what some have called “the gospel of reconciliation.”

From the perspective of a spirituality of the blood of Christ, it is Christ’s blood that brings about reconciliation (cf. Rom 5:1-11). Indeed, the Letter to the Colossians reminds us, “For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Col 1:19-20)

That the Missionaries of the Precious Blood have made the ministry of reconciliation a central part of their self-understanding can be found in two symposia on the topic from the 1990s, held

in Spain and Peru, respectively, as well as the message of its most recent General Assembly in 2013.<sup>1</sup> It is evident in their ministries as well, from work among the traumatized populations in Peru after the insurgency years in the 1990s, among youth gangs in Chicago today, and in care for creation itself, especially in Peru and Brazil.

### **A New Theme: Mercy**

The focus on liberation and on reconciliation continues among the Missionaries. But the election of Pope Francis has opened yet another set of new horizons. At his first celebration of the Sunday Angelus in St. Peter's Square, he sounded the theme that has come to characterize his pontificate up to this point: the call for mercy. God's infinite capacity for love and forgiveness has become a constant refrain in the Pope's proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis began to set out his understanding of mercy in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. He says there that at the very heart of being a Christian is our encounter with Jesus Christ. To experience that encounter is to experience God's mercy, which means the experience that "when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved." He quotes there the Book of Lamentations: "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." (EG 6; Lam 3:22-23). In his announcement of the extraordinary jubilee year of mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus* ("The Face of Mercy") he calls mercy "the beating heart of the Gospel" (MV 12) In both of these documents he echoes Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, a document that deserves revisiting during this Jubilee

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<sup>1</sup> Documents may be found at: [www.cppsmissionaries.org](http://www.cppsmissionaries.org).

<sup>2</sup> See his Angelus message from March 17, 2013.

Year. There Pope John Paul II says that “...mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of his mission.” (DM 6) Moreover, the late pope says, mercy reveals the truth about God and about ourselves. The truth about God is that mercy, unbounded loving kindness, is who God is. The truth about ourselves is that we have been created in God’s image and likeness. Each human being bears in this image and likeness a dignity that we struggle to understand (DM 6).

Now mercy must be understood in this biblical sense, and not be restricted to its more modern, juridical meaning as an indulgence extended to wrongdoers by a judge or magistrate who foregoes the right to punish wrongful acts. Nor does mercy mean indifference to evil, sin, wrongdoing, and injustice. Rather, mercy must be understood in its most biblical sense found in the Hebrew word *hesed*, sometimes translated as “steadfast love” or “loving kindness.” In the Old Testament it is considered as one of the most fundamental characteristics of God: One who is slow to anger and abounding in kindness (cf. Num 14:18). This great love is revealed to us in God’s forgiveness of sins and wrongdoing. God, Pope Francis reminds us, never tires of forgiving us; if anything, we are the ones who tire of seeking God’s mercy (EG 3).

What are the implications of embracing mercy as the central theme of the Gospel? Let me mention but three of them. First of all, embracing mercy requires an ongoing, even daily, encounter with Jesus Christ. Christ is “the door of mercy,” Pope Francis tells us (MV 3). It is in this encounter that we experience once again the overwhelming love that is offered to us, a love that calls us to a deeper conversion to Christ. In other words, we will only be effective in

witnessing to God’s mercy if we can mirror that mercy in our own lives and then show it to others.

Second, our witness to mercy finds its most suitable expression when it is manifested among those who have been pushed to what Pope Francis calls “the existential peripheries”, the margins of existence: those who are persecuted, downtrodden, oppressed; those whose precarious existence makes them most vulnerable to the vagaries of the indifference, neglect or outright wrongdoing of others—these are the places where God’s mercy is at once most manifested and most needed. To be instruments of God’s mercy is to “go forth” to those peripheries. Pope Francis exemplified this by making his first trip outside of Rome not to some important city or shrine, but to the refugee camps on the island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean.

This leads to a third implication of embracing mercy. Our “going forth” as a genuinely missionary Church is our participation in the “going forth” of the Son and of the Holy Spirit into the world for the sake of redemption and reconciliation. In this mirroring of the activity of the Holy Trinity, we become most authentically who we are meant to be, created in the image and likeness of God. We become “merciful like the Father,” which Pope Francis has called “the motto” of this Jubilee Year (MV12). Here the Pope holds up the image of the merciful father of the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, but also of the Father, the First Person of the Trinity, who sends the Son and the Holy Spirit into the world for the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of all things.

### **Mercy in the Concrete Today**

Up to this point, I have been exploring the biblical and theological meaning of mercy as it has been outlined by Pope Francis. I would like to take this to a next step and speak briefly about what the characteristics of an attitude of mercy might look like in concrete situations today. Or put another way, to what signs of the times might the rich concept of mercy be responding? Let me suggest three headings that might direct our action in a ministry of mercy and a witness to God's love in our time. This might be considered a way of reading the signs of the times for us today.

### ***Generosity***

The first is *generosity*. This is another way of speaking of the abiding love of God that far exceeds whatever we can imagine or hope for. Its sheer prodigality is the opposite of seeing the world through the lens of scarcity (there is only so much available to be shared) or of economic utility (anything that counts as important must be able to be measured; human beings are only important if they can produce goods and have the means to consume them). Mercy is not something to be meted out grudgingly and in ever smaller portions. Here we find the echoes of Pope Francis' criticisms of globalization and the market economy that have seemed harsh to some in this part of the world, but only reflect more than a century of Catholic Social Teaching. One hears this generosity too in the Pope's call for a Church that goes out to others and is not preoccupied with guarding its own privileges. The generosity of mercy redraws the boundaries that society has set up. Boundaries can help us define identity, but they can also become barriers to exclude people and make them outsiders. Again, Pope Francis has beautifully exemplified this redrawing of the boundaries in how he has been reaching out to the homeless in the city of

Rome: eating with them, making arrangements for them to see the Sistine Chapel, even providing for a pilgrimage for them to view the Holy Shroud in Turin.

At the same time this generosity of mercy cannot be mindless and uncritical. Still one of the most challenging questions to be answered is how this generosity of mercy relates to justice, especially regarding punishing wrongful acts. Likewise, are there limits to forgiveness? These are profound questions that we are invited to explore during the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

### ***Reliability***

In the work of building peace, Psalm 85:11 is often quoted: “Mercy and truth will meet, justice and peace will kiss.” Graciousness and faithfulness have to find one another in the complex world of healing the wounds of violence and war. Graciousness is needed to build a world not dictated by vengeance. But graciousness that does not stand by the victims and remember the victims’ history is not faithful to victims, and the need to rebuild their trust. There must be truthfulness in remembering the past as well as generosity that makes it possible to move beyond the past. In the Bible (and in the Old Testament especially), “truth” is seen as something that is reliable, dependable, and trustworthy. On this view, God does not have the truth; God *is* truth. In the Gospel of John, Jesus proclaims himself as “the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6)

God’s graciousness and faithfulness are both fundamental defining attributes of who God is. That graciousness and faithfulness is an especially strong experienced when the world is less than gracious and faithful to us. That is captured so well in Psalm 136, which begins: “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, his mercy endures forever!” The litany of occasions in Israel’s past when God’s graciousness and faithfulness meant the difference between life and death

shows, on the one hand, how strong that experience can be and, on the other hand, how often the poor and the marginalized must face a dangerous and inhospitable world.

Pope Francis has spoken out about what he has called “disposable people” in a “throwaway culture.” He has in mind, among others the poor, the elderly, those with disabilities, the refugees, and those imprisoned. There is a long tradition in Christianity of practicing the corporal works of mercy. These works, which take their cue from the parable of the final judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 are as practices of mercy addressed directly to an unsafe, unreliable, and often hostile world.

Another word that comes to mind today when we think of reliability, dependability and faithfulness is “sustainability,” a concept that is linked to the risks to the environment we are now facing. Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si* (“Care for Our Common Home”) has heightened our awareness of this.

### ***Empathy***

A third characteristic of a witness to mercy is *empathy*, the capacity to enter into the hearts and minds of others, especially those different from ourselves and those who suffer. This capacity for empathy figures into a witness to God’s mercy. In *Dives in Misericordia*, Pope John Paul II provided a long meditation on the parable of the man with two sons (or the merciful father) in Luke 15:11-32. A point that emerges in this story is how the perspective of the father about the return of the lost son is so different from that of the lost son’s older brother. Empathy allows us to explore our own feelings and imagine those of others. The generosity that marks mercy allows us to enlarge our capacities to understand the experiences of others.

Empathy manifests itself also in our capacity to enter into the world of those who suffer. Something which makes that possible is a certain vulnerability on our part—a mindfulness of our own wounds as well as a capacity to enter into the wounds of others. Mercy is perhaps experienced most acutely by those who have suffered and who live with the sometimes long aftermath of having suffered violence and traumatic loss. They know what it means to experience a God “who is rich in mercy.” (Eph 2:4)

### **The Spirituality of the Precious Blood: Source and Expression of Mercy**

I turn now to the final part of this presentation: how the need for mercy, a sign of our times identified by Pope Francis, might be seen and lived out in a spirituality of the blood of Christ. If covenant, cross, and cup have been the biblical symbols that have characterized the call of the blood in recent years in the work of liberation and reconciliation, might there be yet another biblical image the embodies mercy for our time? I would suggest that there is one such image, which I will offer in a moment.

In *Dives in Misericordia*, Pope John Paul II proposed that the Paschal Mystery was the culmination of the revelation of the mercy of God (DM 7). For in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, we see all the dimensions of mercy being manifested to us and to which mercy responds: the taking on of great suffering for the sake of others, of being pushed to the existential peripheries, of the faithfulness of God to Jesus even in death, and the utter transformation revealed in the resurrection. The themes of generosity, reliability, and empathy come through as the New Testament writers reflect on the meaning of Christ’s blood. As for generosity, the words of the Letter to the Ephesians come to mind: “In him we have redemption

through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” (Eph 1:7) For reliability, we hear in the Letter to the Romans: “But God proves his loves for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8-9) For empathy, we can turn to Jesus’ words at the Last Supper: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, that is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20), paired with the words of St. Paul: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not sharing in the blood of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16)

Having noted these passages, I would like to propose a biblical symbol that brings together how the blood of Christ might be considered both the source and expression of mercy: Christ the paschal lamb. Why the paschal lamb? The references to Christ as the paschal lamb, and the redeeming blood of the lamb, occur principally in the New Testament in the Book of Revelation. There the meanings of the paschal lamb from the Old Testament are summed up: the blood of the lamb which protected the Hebrews from the plague in which the all the first-born in Egypt were killed (Ex 12:21-23) is now the blood of the lamb who has rescued for God people “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev 5:9) As the blood of the paschal lamb rescued the Hebrews, so now it redeems the people who have come “through the great tribulation” (Rev 7:14). The lamb of Revelation has been mercilessly “slain” (Rev 5:9), but now stands once again and is the one who can open the seals of the book of life. The vision of the 144,000 in white robes, whose suffering has been washed away by the blood of the lamb, praise the lamb, now seated on the throne. Their lives have been shattered by violence, but now their traumas will never return, because of the victorious lamb:

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more, the sun will not strike them down, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their

shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Rev 7:16-17)

For the saints of the Book of Revelation, the blood of the lamb is at once the source and the expression of the mercy of God. God is the source of the “water of life” that bespeaks the generosity of God’s mercy. Its healing, redemptive power puts the lie to narratives of the world that hold that poverty and violence are inevitable, that some people are disposable and expendable, that strangers cannot be trusted, that everything is ephemeral and cannot be relied upon, and that people stand alone in their suffering. The traditional corporal works of mercy—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick—remind us that mercy always takes very concrete form, especially as we move to the margins, to those “existential peripheries” that Pope Francis is pointing us toward. That the lamb has suffered allows it to enter into and transform our suffering. The lamb was cut down, “slaughtered” but now stands once again in the power of the resurrection. This newest phase of the spirituality of the blood of Christ, embodied in the lamb of the Book of Revelation, knows the violence done to the vulnerable—both human beings and to the earth—and with his own blood marks the way out of violence into a place of safety and rest. Those who have been stricken are now raised up, the Book of Revelation tells us, and “they follow the lamb wherever he goes.” (Rev 14:4-5).

Blood is a symbol that embraces the paradoxes and even seeming contradictions we find in the Bible. The Hebrews believed that the life of all beings was in the blood (cf. Lev 17:14), but blood that has been shed is a sign of death. The lamb holds together contradictions as well: it is vulnerable and innocent, yet mediates God’s saving power. The blood of the lamb therefore has

an enhanced capacity to embrace the contradictions of our world that the mercy of God aims to resolve: a generosity to overcome exclusion and alienation, a reliability and faithfulness that overcomes the fragmentation of trust, the offer of empathy to end the isolation of suffering. The blood of the paschal lamb, then, beckons us into a future with the promise of God's outpouring of mercy on a world that is so much in need of it.