

Compassion as an Indispensable Ingredient for Authentic Leadership: Exploring the Mind of Pope Francis

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Abstract

Pope Francis has adopted a compassionate style of leadership and has proposed the same style as a template to those in leadership positions; those who are charged with the task of exercising authority whether in the religious or secular circle. Our study has shown that compassion is biblically founded; it is the nature of God and indeed, a gospel value lived by Jesus Himself. Jesus is compassion personified through His words and actions. For the reason that authority comes from God and those in position of authority represent and deputize for God, they should therefore adopt the style of God; the style of compassion in exercising authority. The study also demonstrates that adopting a compassionate leadership style does not in any way endanger the principle of justice and equity; rather, it has the capacity to engender and enhance other principles; justice and equity inclusive.

Preamble

Mercy or compassion feature so much in Pope Francis' expressions. Mercy, according to him should permeate every aspect of human endeavour including leadership. At the same time, these two (Mercy and Compassion) can function as synonyms, mercy points directly to forgiveness and compassion to sympathetic pity for the sufferings/misfortunes of others. Yes, you can forgive someone out of compassion but that will be to show mercy. What does Pope Francis mean? Does he use the terms interchangeably since they are synonyms? Or does the use of the two terms imply and mean different things? This study will bring to the fore the understanding of mercy or compassion as used by Pope Francis, especially in the context of leadership and the exercise of authority.

Pope Francis and Mercy

Mercy has characterized the pontificate of Pope Francis. Shortly after his assumption of office, the Roman Pontiff, with the Bull of Indiction *Misericordiae vultus*, declared the Extra-Ordinary Jubilee of mercy which began on the 8th of December 2015, the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and ended on the 20th of November 2016,

the solemnity of Christ the King (*Misericordiae vultus* 3; 5). Pope Francis called on all to seek, find, receive and give mercy. In his proposal, for mercy to be experienced by everyone and be part of every human sphere, the Pope prayed,

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 everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the kingdom of God is already in our midst! (*Misericordiae vultus* 5).

The above is indicative that mercy/compassion should colour every aspect of human endeavour not excluding leadership. On assumption of office as the leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis practically demonstrated that compassion cannot be dispensed with in the exercise of authority. For the Pope, take away compassion and there is no leadership. His position on the indispensable place of compassion in leadership has however raised a lot of worries on many minds (especially those in positions of authority). So many questions are raised such as should certain principles like justice, fair play, equity etcetera be overlooked/sacrificed on the altar of compassion (mercy)? The understanding of mercy shall put to rest these perplexities.

Mercy is a noun from Anglo-French ‘*merci*,’ a derivative from medieval Latin ‘*merced*,’ ‘*merces*,’ which is further derived from classical Latin ‘price paid’, ‘wages’; it is a broad term that refers to benevolence, forgiveness and kindness in a variety of ethical, religious, social and legal contexts. It is a combination of *miserere*+*cordis* from which we get the Latin *Misericordia*, referring to compassion or forgiveness shown towards a person in one’s power to punish or harm. In this sense the adjective merciful/compassionate depicts a person who is capable and is willing to be sympathetic and grant forgiveness. The adverb mercifully/compassionately on the other hand expresses the way and manner in which such acts of benevolence are shown to bring about a great relief to a person. From the above explanations of the word mercy, it is evident that God is mercy itself (noun); He is merciful (adjective); and He acts mercifully (adverb). God by nature is mercy. He is merciful and acts mercifully. This is the understanding of Pope Francis when he uses the terms interchangeably. He maintains that ‘Jesus Himself is the Father’s compassion and mercy toward us’ (Pope Francis, *Homilies*). The same idea was earlier expressed by *Dives in Misericordia* which presented God as not being only rich in mercy but also ready to show mercy for the pleas of many human hearts, their sufferings (compassion) and hopes, their anxieties and expectations which are in themselves demands on this mercy (no. 1). St Thomas Aquinas also earlier on affirmed the same idea about the nature of God as mercy. God’s mercy, according to him, is the mark of his omnipotence (*Summa Theologiae*).

St Augustine expressed the same idea when he said that, “It is easier for God to hold back anger than mercy” (St. Augustine).

The nature of God as mercy/compassion has always been there; both the Old and New Testaments bear witness to this characteristic of God. “The Bible is the great story of the marvels of God’s mercy. Every one of its pages is steeped in the love of the Father who from the moment of creation wished to impress the signs of his love on the universe” (*Misericordia et misera* 7). At the very beginning of the New Testament, two voices resound in Saint Luke’s Gospel in a unique harmony concerning the mercy of God; a harmony which forcefully echoes the whole Old Testament tradition. Mary, entering the house of Zachariah, magnifies the Lord with all her soul for “his mercy” which is bestowed on those who fear God from generation to generation and afterwards, in the same house, when John the Baptist is born, his father Zachariah blesses the God of Israel and glorifies him for performing the mercy promised to our fathers (*Misericordiae vultus* 5). As a result, what the Pope did with the declaration of the Year of Mercy is draw our attention to this “taken for granted” virtue. Notice that Pope Francis speaks of the “tender mercy of our God” from the second meaning of this word in the Hebrew *raḥmim* translated in Latin as *vicera misericordiae*. This *vicera misericordiae* identifies God’s mercy with a mother’s love. It is not an exaggeration to say that this is a *visceral* love, the Pope continues; a love that gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion (*Misericordia vultus* 6). It is also interesting to note that the *Hausa rahama* is from Arabic *raḥima*, a word that shares the same root with the Hebrew *raḥmim*.

God has always been merciful as noted earlier, although comments like “God of the Old Testament was not a merciful God” is often heard. This is quite unfortunate because passages in the Old Testament speak of the mercy of God. In the book of Psalms for instance, a lot of passages speak of the tender mercy of God. See for instance Psalms 103:3-4; 146:7-9; 147: 3.6; 136; 51. At the same time as the adjective “merciful” is attributed to God, the concept becomes simpler and profound in the person of Jesus who is the perfect manifestation of the mercy of God. In other words, mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth; reaching its culmination in Him (*Misericordiae vultus* 1). All that Jesus did and said (cf. Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:37; Lk. 7:15; Mk. 5:19) during His 33 years of earthly existence expressed mercy/compassion. The signs He works, especially in the face of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in Him speaks of mercy. Nothing in Him is devoid of compassion.

Compassion and Leadership

The deepest influences on Francis’s concept of compassionate leadership came from what would become known as *teología del pueblo*,

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which embraced the preferential option for the poor which is more closely related to popular piety than did other forms of liberation theology. Pope Francis has continuously indicated compassion as the route to follow in leading others. Compassion is an ingredient for authentic leadership whether in the church or in the secular sphere. For secular leaders whose responsibility is to govern over the temporal affairs, compassion is a veritable tool for exercising authority. For religious leaders, the compassionate Christ must be the model to emulate. This style of mercy/compassion stemming from the Lord Himself is proposed as a sign of authentic leadership and right exercise of authority. Only the merciful are like God the father: "Be merciful, as your father is merciful." This is the path.

Commenting on this position of Pope Francis, Castelli observes that, this path goes against the spirit of the world. The path of the world is that of being merciless. This is the opposite of acts of benevolence that mercy enshrines (Castelli), God, whom leaders (religious or secular) represent, is mercy itself. For the reason that they occupy the place of God (Rom. 13:1-2; Rom 13:4; Matt. 23:1-3) and are seen as His servants, delegated to maintain law, order and to administer justice (Rom. 14:4, 1 Chron. 16:21-22). They are expected to adopt the mind of God in the exercise of authority over those put in their charge. The failure to adopt this characteristic of God leads to abuse of power and arbitrary exercise of authority. It is disturbing that a lot of authority figures abuse power both in the Church and in the secular world. Examples of these abuses abound. At a recent angelus address, Pope Francis used the occasion of our Lord's criticism of the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew's Gospel chapter 23: 1-3 to caution against the abuse of power in our own time.

Brothers and sisters, a frequent defect, in those that have authority, be it civil or ecclesiastical, is to exact from others things that, although just, they, however, don't put into practice personally. They live a double life. Jesus says "They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger" (v. 4). This attitude is an evil exercise of authority, which instead should have, its first force in fact from good example. Authority is born of good example, to help others to practice what is right and due, supporting them in trials that are met on the way of goodness. Authority is a help, however, if it's badly exercised, it becomes oppressive, it doesn't let a person grow and creates an atmosphere of mistrust and hostility, and also leads to corruption (Francis, Angelus address).

Pope Francis's remarks during this angelus address are not uncharacteristic but conform to a consistent criticism he levels against those in authority. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, on the Joy of the Gospel, the

Pope discusses the need for a “pastoral conversion” of ecclesiastical structures and the exercise of authority in the Church. This “pastoral conversion” is necessary to ensure that the Church’s pastoral activity remains “mission-oriented”- an impulse *ad extra* that provides orientation for the Church’s mission in the world. This is in the bid to present power and authority in the church as service and not the contrary, which for him is an aberration.

The Church must be converted by God’s mercy, Francis believes, so that it can be more a field hospital than a citadel. The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love (*Misericordiae Vultus* 10). Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activities should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. Legal principles and moral rules cannot create these new paths. That new direction lies in following the way of mercy (Ivereigh); thus, the path way for a Christian and moreover, a Christian leader is that of mercy. Being Christian is not easy but makes us happy: the path pointed out to us by the heavenly Father is that of “mercy” and of “interior peace.” In his commentary on the Gospel from St Luke 6:27-38, Pope Francis clarified the distinctive traits of the “Christian style.” He said that the Lord always indicates to us what the “life of the disciple” must be. He does so, for example, through the Beatitudes or the Works of Mercy (Castelli).

The place mercy holds in religious leadership is no different from secular leaders. Pope Francis is quick to remind world leaders of this fact. He says, “whether you are a world leader dealing with terrorism or a CEO fighting against competitors who are trying to beat your business, it is easy to succumb to negative feelings”. For the Pope, however, you need to be merciful: “Before the spiritual and moral abysses of mankind, before the chasms that open up in hearts and provoke hatred and death, only an infinite mercy can bring us salvation.” As such, only by putting Christ (who is mercy) at the centre can every other human endeavour be turned into mission that serves the poor.

Compassion for the Marginalized

Those who are disadvantaged in society are often vulnerable and “at the mercy” of others; they thus deserve to be shown some kindness in the form of mercy. Geoff notes that an aspect of the vulnerable that has taken the attention of the Pope concerns immigrants. He urged the United States to be more open to immigrants and advised both America and the UN to work on the refugee crisis. The Pope is conscious of how easy it is to have prejudices against people who are different from one. Despite that, some of the responsibilities of leadership, the Pope insists, are to bring people together, to keep employees safe and make sure others feel protected. As such, he admonished world leaders, “You should not close your doors to people in need”. Pope Francis says you should show love and compassion as a leader

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for those “who hunger and thirst, strangers and prisoners, the marginalized and the outcast, the victims of oppression and violence” (Geoff). Pope Francis is quoted to have said “If we start by feeling compassion for the poor and the outcast, surely we will come to realize that we ourselves stand in need of mercy” (Allen).

Compassion for Every Human Being

Pope Francis says it is important to “water the seeds of hope and prospects for peace.” His advice is for all and sundry to practise good will and cooperation. As a leader, one should realize that you govern a community within your office and you need to build “a fraternal society respectful of the dignity and rights of each citizen.” The business of leadership can be cut throat, but you should be leading through positive and life-affirming tactics. When something bad happens in your company, you should “work for the common good, seeking spaces of dialogue and cooperation with all”. He then adds, “May efforts be made everywhere to promote the culture of reciprocal respect, which alone can guarantee the spiritual and material welfare of all people.” Putting the economy before people would be ‘viral genocide.’

Compassion for Mother Earth

Pope Francis calls on world leaders to show mercy for mother earth and ensure that she is preserved from exploitation. No matter how important money is, it does not warrant us sacrificing the environment to earn it, especially sacrifices that have side effects on the climate. It is hence the duty of everyone to protect our planet from destruction (*Laudato Si* 25). Loftus observes that the Pope has pushed his “show mercy to mother earth” message by endorsing the protection of the environment (Loftus). “... let the earth rejoice, in shining splendour, even though it is so often mistreated and greedily exploited, resulting in an alteration of natural equilibria” (Yakowic).

Compassion vs Justice

Does the exercise of compassionate leadership not imply that justice will be overlooked or sacrificed? This question will require a clarification of how justice can be juxtaposed with compassion/mercy. Justice allows each person to get his or her due. To give each person his or her due reduces injustice by challenging the powerful in attending to the needy (Harakas 669). To give each person his/her due will demand some degree of compassion on the part of the leader. Those in authority moved by compassion are able to do justice for those over whom they are placed in-charge. In essence, a compassionate leader would ensure that justice is done, for instance, a leader who is compassionate will ensure that salaries are paid to workers as at when due and the basic social amenities (food, housing, water, electricity, health

etc.) of the citizens are provided. Such a leader will ensure that policies put in place have a human face; in other words, policies ought to be human-friendly. Compassion makes a leader to treat subjects fairly which is justice. As God whom they represent, they are expected to secure justice for the oppressed (*Misericordiae Vultus* 9). In fact, a leader is compassionate-driven in ensuring that the common good is preserved, rather than promoting selfish agenda that cater for a few greedy citizens (Agule 88). Understanding justice as giving each person his or her due and compassion as the propelling force to do so demonstrates that these two virtues are not mutually opposed as some people may think; rather, mercy or compassion has the capacity to engender and not to endanger justice. Justice and compassion are therefore not contradictory realities but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love (*Misericordiae Vultus* 29; 21).

Conclusion

Mercy or compassion has and is always at the heart of the pontificate of Pope Francis. He is of the view that this virtue is capable of resolving all issues, be they secular or religious, thus, world and religious leaders have the responsibility of exercising leadership that is characterized by compassion. With mercy as a veritable tool in the exercise of authority, they can comfortably tackle every issue that they encounter as leaders. Whether they are issues bordering on slavery, the global sex trade, international arms deal in pursuit of profit. Mercy is the answer in dealing with all of these ills (Loftus). Pope Francis understands leadership as tantamount to compassion. For him, to be an authentic leader, one must be merciful. He does not mince words when he says that to be a good leader, one must have the virtue of compassion.

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