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# MERCY AT THE CENTRE

Kathy Murtha

**W**hen Pope Francis announced his intention to usher in a Jubilee Year of Mercy some people of other religions were slightly suspicious. They could not help but think: “There they go again, the Christians, proclaiming their God as the God of Mercy and ours the God of Wrath and Vengeance.” But by its very nature, Mercy is both bridge-builder and flowing water. It leads to transformative encounters with other people. It led the Pope to declare that our emphasis on Mercy goes beyond the confines of the church.

Francis asserts that Mercy is what unites us, not divides us. He fully acknowledges the rich Jewish revelation of the inexhaustible unlimited Mercy of God – the ever-flowing wellspring from which Jesus drew. In Islam Mercy is seen as one of the most glorious

names for God. The phrase “In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful” is constantly invoked by Muslims everywhere as they too long to situate themselves within the flowing fountain of God’s Mercy.

It is Pope Francis’ hope that “the Jubilee Year celebrating the Mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions and with other noble religious traditions: may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better.”

Mercy does indeed provide us with a welcoming table to encounter the religious “other.” Last March almost one

hundred people attended Scarborough Missions’ first session in a three-part series exploring Mercy in Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The exchange that followed Murray Watson’s brilliant presentation of the Christian Perspectives on Mercy was rich and promising. A Muslim woman attested to the beloved centrality of Mercy in her religious tradition. Not only does the Quran’s opening verse begin with the sacred words “In the name of God, the Most Compassionate

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and the Most Merciful”, but virtually every chapter starts with the same invocation. She alerted us to the fact the Arabic and Hebrew word for Mercy is rooted in the word “womb.” What a fascinating avenue for common exploration that opens up.

I was privileged to sit beside a Zoroastrian, Jehan Bagli, who was bursting to inform us that 600 years before Christianity, a Zoroastrian ruler named Cyrus the Great mercifully freed the Jewish people from captivity in Babylon and sent them back home to Jerusalem with money to rebuild their Temple. Among the 101 Names for God, “Mercy” holds a prominent place in his religious tradition – a tradition which predates Judaism by approximately 1,000 years.

### **Mercy in women’s theology**

As I delved into Pope Francis’ writing on the centrality of Mercy, I was also struck with the idea that this Reclaiming of Mercy might provide a fuller inclusion of Christian women’s experience and theology. In his conversation with

the journalist Andrea Tornielli, the Pope vividly recalls a touching encounter with a small elderly woman dressed in black. With great humility and profundity the woman informed Francis that without the mercy of God the world would not exist. Stunned by the wisdom of this simple woman, Francis exclaimed, “You must have studied at the Gregorian University!”

While this woman may never have crossed the threshold of any formal theological institution, her intuitive wisdom is strikingly in keeping with a long legacy of women’s theology that has consistently placed love and mercy at the forefront.

### **Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich**

Way back in the 12th century, Hildegard of Bingen, now recognized as one of the four woman doctors of the Church, saw a magnificent vision of the earth held up on pillars of love. Near the end of her long life she still vividly recalled the profound impact of this revelation which “made all her inner parts tremble” and brought on one of her rare ecstasies.

The central message of the great 14th Century Mystic, Julian of Norwich, like

many mediaeval women mystics, was that God is Love and that God’s love will triumph. In one of her famous visions, God places a small hazelnut into the palm of her hand. Julian reflects: “I was amazed that it could last, for I thought it was so little that it could suddenly fall into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: “It lasts and always will because God loves it, and everything has being through the love of God.”

In her often-repeated refrain: “All shall be well, All shall be well, And all manner of thing shall be well,” St Julian was ‘mercifying’ her people of Norwich, reeling from the devastating effects of the Black Death that had carried off most of the children. The people were suffering from the belief that a Vengeful God was unleashing his harsh judgement upon them for their sins. But, having experienced the inexhaustible love of a Merciful God, Julian protested that our God would do nothing of the sort.

She ventured into the darkest, most wretched corners of the world and into the sufferings of Jesus to find light. She returned with astounding Good News: “First there is a fall and then there is the recovery from the fall. Both are the mercy of God.”

In other words, in some mysterious way, sin and suffering are part of the pattern of love, not a punishment inflicted by an angry God. According to Julian, “God sees our wounds not as

**and flowing water.**  
**ve encounters with other people.**



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scars, but as honours ... For he holds sin as sorrow and pain to his lovers. He does not blame us. What's more, our 'courteous and homely' God is eagerly waiting to use our sins to transform us. "Sin shall not be a shame to humans but a glory," she wrote.

Woman's theological legacy affirming the primacy of Love continues down through the centuries and finds expression in such modern women theologians as Sr. Illia Delio who reiterates and expands upon the notion that "Love is the physical structure of the universe." "If it is love that moves the sun and the other stars, as Dante once wrote, then love must move us as well if we are to be at home with one another in this cosmos."

The Medieval Women Mystics' proclamation of the centrality of love burst on to the scene at a time when the Church was beginning to stray. The 13th century witnessed the expansion of the tragic divide between clergy and laity that remains with us till today. The newly centralized Roman Church was becoming increasingly clericalized. This is aptly described in Pope Francis' introduction to "God's Name is Mercy" as the drive to build "borders regulating the lives of people through imposed prerequisites and prohibitions that make our already difficult daily life even harder." Most importantly, this was the

time of the rise of Universities. Aristotle had just been rediscovered and countless eager students were flocking to the new establishments of learning enthralled by the power of logic and reason.

### **Women began to carve their own way**

Unfortunately, one had to be a male cleric to participate in this exciting learning revival. It seemed that wherever religious women turned to give expression to their faith the doors were closed. Women were not even allowed to initiate new religious communities. Hence they took it upon themselves to carve their own way.

The path they embarked upon was that of Love. Steeped in a profound direct experience of God's love they found creative and original means to attest to the absolute primacy of Love. In contrast, many of the men of their time clung to the path of Reason. They asserted that it is in our reasoning capacities that we most resemble God. And since women were not known for their reasoning capabilities, they were consequently assigned a lower position on the ladder to God-likeness.

They begged to differ. While men argued about faith and reason, women expounded on love and intimacy. The women mystics argued that reason indeed had an important place in the spiritual journey, but only as a humble servant of love. They claimed that the path of love provided us with a more

direct, intimate and accessible way to God open to all.

Eventually women's voices were silenced and their ink stopped flowing onto the page. Many were persecuted for their teachings and writings.

But women's voices, or more importantly their actions proclaiming the primacy of love, were heard again through the Women Founders of active religious orders after the Council of Trent. While the Council could not see any particular role at all for women, these women, inspired by St. Theresa of Avila's call to put love into action, saw plenty of ways to en flesh and extend God's Mercy in the world. They suffered greatly in their attempt to follow Jesus by "mercifying" the world. They were constantly blocked, frustrated and persecuted by the Church's persistent restriction that women's place was either under a bishop in strict enclosure or under a husband in a home. Nevertheless, they persevered and the world is a much more loving place because of them. We owe a great deal of our social structures to them.

Women already have a very rich theological legacy. We just need to reclaim it, to bring it back into the fold and allow it to develop in response to our present age. It fits perfectly with Pope Francis' crucial proclamation that the name of God is Mercy. ■