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## From the Editor: The Quality of Mercy

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# The Quality of Mercy

Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp

I am among those who, in high school, had to learn by heart Portia's "quality of mercy" speech from *The Merchant of Venice*. "Be able to recite it next week." Learn it to recite it – or learn it to live it?

*"The quality of mercy is not strained,  
/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from  
heaven / Upon the place beneath; It is  
twice blest; / It blesseth him that gives  
and him that takes / 'Tis mightiest in  
the mighty. / It becomes the throned  
monarch better than his crown ... It is an  
attribute to God himself; / And earthly  
power doth then show likest God's /  
When mercy seasons justice. ... In the  
course of justice, none of us / Should see  
salvation: we do pray for mercy; / And  
that same prayer doth teach us all to  
render / The deeds of mercy."*

As Catholics, we recall how every Mass begins: "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy."

A church is a place of reconciliation. A case could be made that mercy is its primary purpose. If so, why is it so rigid at times? One of Pope Francis' gifts to the church is to turn those words into lived reality. Mercy is the central issue of his pontificate – and a great challenge to the rest of us. Not 'cheap mercy' – forgiveness without repentance, absolution without resolve to do better. But something like the Penalty Box time-out in hockey: reflect, repent, return to the ice.

## The gospel of John

I recall an evening at Walmer Road Baptist Church, Toronto. A dramatization of the Gospel of John by a man who knew

that gospel by heart – all 20,000 words! He didn't just recite the gospel – he dramatized it. When turned on one end, his table showed a cross traced with chalk. A stone banged on that hard wood became the noise of nails driven into that cross. It was very effective.

Before that Calvary event, some of those stones – small rocks really – were very much part of his dramatization of an earlier story from John's gospel. A woman found guilty of adultery is

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being taken out for public stoning. Stones in hand, the religious leaders stop in front of Jesus: "Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?" No answer. He just traced something on the ground with his finger. Question repeated: "Well, what do you say?" Then came his answer: "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." No stone was thrown.

Then the storyteller came down into the audience and offered a basket of stones to five or six different people.

There were no takers. Back on stage, he spoke Jesus' words to the woman: "Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir." "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again."

## The gospel of Luke

Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbour – this person I'm supposed to love as myself?" He answered the question with a story. Going down the road towards Jericho, a man was stripped, beaten and left for dead. Two "religious" people saw him but passed by on the other side: "none of our business." The hero of the story turns out to be a Samaritan – one of those people your mother told you never to talk to. He saw the mugged man – stopped, approached, lifted him up, applied first aid. He brought him back to life. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to the nearest inn, stayed with him all night, and gave the innkeeper some money for any further care. "A drop of help is worth an ocean of pity."

Who was the neighbour in the story? A kind, merciful man, who stopped to help and got involved in a time-consuming situation. Human being to human being trumped difference of religion. "This is a dangerous parable," wrote Dominican scripture scholar Wilfred Harrington.

*We do pray for mercy; / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy.* ■

