

Seeing Persons with Justice and Mercy

- Red Mass
- Seattle University
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In this year's Red Mass I wish to speak to you – members of the bench, the bar, professors, law alumni, legislators, friends – in light of the very recent visit of Pope Francis to America. You may know that I had the great privilege last November of having a 45-minute conversation with him together with a family from Seattle in Pope Francis' private library. We sat in a circle and had a friendly exchange with the man in white who has become our era's moral leader and servant of dialogue. Recently I was asked what one thing most stood out from that experience for me. I responded that what stood out was the way the Pope looked at me and the others so clearly, intently and warmly and how fully he listened to me and them. It is a disarming experience to have the Pope so look you in the eye and so see you! One member of the family was overwhelmed by how compassionately, understandingly, and lovingly he looked at her when she told him of a troubled daughter she asked him to pray for. I have come to think that more than anything else Pope Francis sees.

In his address to Congress he saw laborers, the elderly, the young, African Americans, the indigenous, refugees, the faces of children traveling north to our country as our own children, the hopeless under the death penalty, those trapped in the cycle of poverty, the discarded by our economy, the violent with sold weapons drenched in innocent blood, the children of families, the abused, the despairing, the free and the brave. Pope Francis sees, he sees faces, he looks into eyes. He is the Pope who puts persons before ideologies, the poor before economic systems, seeks dialogue which starts with friendship, and says "who am I to judge" and stresses mercy over justice because he sees the faces of people and looks into their hearts.

He gets this from places like our gospel today:

"Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you to drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and visit you." And the King will say to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers (or sisters) of mine, you did for me."

Or as in the other reading, true worship of God is:

"releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed...sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and homeless into your house, clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh."

Again it is all about seeing, seeing all as persons, putting persons first.

Pope Francis says that when others tell him they gave alms to a beggar, he asks them, “Did you look the person in the eye?” Few answer yes. He then asks, “Did you touch the person?” Almost no one says they did so. He believes and he shows by his own actions that we must see and touch the poor both for their dignity as well as for our own.

I wonder if this is not an invitation for all of us. I know it is for me. I’d like to think that by serving on the Governing Council of the Committee to End Homelessness or on United Way’s Committee for Disconnected Youth or by what I do as president of a university committed to justice I serve the poor. Of course I do, but how much do I see and touch them and what difference does that make? How about you: you work for justice, you serve the imprisoned, homeless, abused. Indeed you do, but do you see and touch them? Are we invited to do so and what difference does it make?

I wonder if the difference between what you and I do for the poor in our careers and actually reaching out to see and to touch them is the difference between justice and mercy. Pope Francis is the Pope of Mercy; everything he does and says is about mercy. I’ve come to say, because of him, “While everyone deserves justice; all need mercy.” Not a mercy which is paternalistic, but a mercy which is humble. We ourselves are not excluded from needing mercy.

Pope Francis writes about the relation between justice and mercy in the following way:

It would not be out of place...to recall the relationship between justice and mercy. These are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love...Mercy is not opposed to justice, but rather expresses God’s way of reaching out to the sinner...If God limited himself to only justice, he would cease to be God, and would instead be like human beings who ask merely that the law be respected. But mere justice is not enough. Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in its destruction. This is why God goes beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness... God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice (Misericordiae Vultus: The Face of Mercy)

(By the way I would love to have the opportunity for Pope Francis to unpack that statement of his: “Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in its destruction.” I wonder what he means.)

All of us here without exception by profession are dedicated to justice. Are we missing something both for the meaning of our own lives and also for the meaning of the justice we serve if our justice does not culminate in love by being joined with humble mercy? Do we need to teach ourselves, or learn from the poor, how to join mercy to justice? Is the way to learn this the way of seeing and touching the poor, the homeless, the migrant, the imprisoned, the discarded and discriminated against, the hungry, the unloved, the unemployed, lonely elders, despairing youth? The very first thing anyone of us needs in life after our births is to be seen with love in the eyes of another so that we can know that we are and who we are. Nothing is more fundamental to our humanity than being seen. In a similar way, is the seeing which is mercy fundamental to justice? We, as practitioners of justice, can be deservedly proud and should receive the gratitude of others for our dedication to justice, but does the humanity we bring to our

work for justice and the kind of justice our work produces invite us, as Pope Francis invites us, to see persons, the poor, and so to be practitioners of a just mercy and a merciful justice? Here is a good place to stop in a Red Mass and to invite the Spirit to illuminate each of us as we look into ourselves and are seen by God.