

Jesus, Compassion Incarnate

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1. Conversion: Call to Religions

“The heart of a heartless world”¹ is a pregnant and provocative phrase Marx employed to describe the nature and function of religion. He meant it to cover not only the Christianity in Europe but religion in general, any time anywhere. He sees it as originating from and a symptom of the alienating socio-economic condition of which the working class is the victim. It also, according to him, helps to perpetuate the exploitative socio-economic systems and structures by providing spiritual and theological legitimation to them. Further, he finds them, distracting the victims from the task of transforming such heartless conditions by diverting their aspirations and energies towards mere imaginary objects of devotion and an illusory future heaven where all earthly injustices will be righted and those who bear them with patience and without resentment towards their oppressors would be compensated manifold and beyond their dreams.

Such a view of religion would, of course, be stoutly contested and rigorously rejected by believers of all religions. They would rightly critique it as being ideologically biased, sociologically reductionistic and historically not concordant with facts. They would easily list the names of

innumerable heroic men and women who were inspired by religious visions and values to dedicate their lives in selfless service to the poor and afflicted and in the struggles for justice to the oppressed. That list would certainly include the prophets of the Old Testament and those of our own times such as Baba Ambedkar and Oscar Romero as well as saints like Francis of Assisi from the decadent medieval Europe and Mother Theresa from the degrading slums of modern day Kolkata. These are not exceptional figures but only the illustrious examples of the countless millions in whose lives religion has played and continues to play an ennobling and civilizing influence. Despite the various forms of heartlessness that abounded all around them, these men and women, with the aid of their religious faith, did not allow themselves to become alienated from their humanness but have shown forth in themselves humanity in some of its best, noblest and most authentic forms.

Besides, as Walter Kasper has noted, the Marxian interpretation of religion amounts to “a new injustice against those human beings, who in their distress, sought help in religion and found strength therein for dealing with life in this world. Religion and mercy have often been the source of protest against injustice and violence as well as an impetus for powerful action against them.”²

However, it would also be difficult for any honest observer not to recognize the fact that all historical religions do have a dark side and that Marx was not all in the wrong. To realize this fact one need not detail the various gruesome barbarities and atrocities carried out or promoted by religious authorities and preachers directly or indirectly. It suffices to just mention the persecutions, crusades,

jihads, inquisitions, forced conversions, caste discrimination, burning of widows and witches and other forms of women's oppression down the ages. In fact, what Albert Nolan has said rather mildly about Christianity's abuse of the name of Jesus is equally applicable to the gods and founders of others religious as well. "His name has been used and abused to justify crimes, to frighten children and inspire men and women to heroic foolishness."³

What is ironical is that many form of such heartlessness persist even today in many of our societies and religions are not found in the forefront in combating them. Though they are very much involved in relief activities rarely are they found raising their voices in protest and mobilizing their resources to fight against them. Rather, they are seen to be legitimizing them on the basis of their irrelevant traditions and outdated theologies. In fact, most of their energies and efforts are invested in constructing multi-core grandiose churches, temples and mosques, celebrating pompous festivals of gods and saints, ordinations and jubilees of their prelates, conducting extatic novenas, prayer meetings, gospel conventions and healing sessions with the assurance of instant miracles. All these become nothing short of sheer sanctified callousness in so far as they mostly fail to make the participants to recognize the God of the poor culling out from the plight of hungry children, homeless families, abandoned elderly, uncared for sick, abused women, ill-treated dalits and the polluted earth as well to experience the light and strength of their faith with which they are challenged to eradicate such evils. As they mostly help only to bulge the purses of the

priests and fill the coffers of the churches and temples, often blatantly exploiting the gullibility and despair of the poor and suffering masses they are in fact insults, masquerading as religiosity, to the true God (cf. Is 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24).

Enlightened religious believers may easily dismiss such magical forms of religion as aberrations and distortions and not its authentic expressions. Of course, they are right. But unfortunately, such aberrations are jar too many that not a few honest seekers may be lead to misjudge the true of religion by such its fruits. So, there is the urgent need for all religions to constantly rediscover their true essence or authentic core and strive to remain faithful to it. And thus, the best way for religions to convert others is that they first and foremost get converted to genuine religion.

Yes, religion is a double edged Sword. It can become the heart either *of* or *in* a heartless world. And the call to religions today is that they become, as Pope Francis has put it, "Oases of Mercy"⁴ in our heartless culture of individualism and consumerism in which many desperately seek happiness and fulfillment in feverishly pursuing frivolous enjoyments, unmindful of and even treading on the rights of the poor, weak and victimized. In fact, it is not enough that they become oases of mercy but it is imperative that they serve as 'springs of divine experience and energy' leading to self and societal transformation.

That in also precisely the call to the Church in this year of mercy. It has to discover its heart which is none other than the heart of Jesus himself which overflowed

with the loving compassion of God the father. It is this loving compassion of God whom Jesus experienced on *Abba* is what he preached and exhibited in all the actions of his ministry and exhibited supremely in his death and resurrection. It is also that which he wanted his disciples as individuals and communities to themselves experience and by their lives, relations and ministry enable others as well experience.

2. God, the Father of Mercies

What is uniquely new in the message and ministry of Jesus and that which defined his very person and formed the core of his identity as the son of God was his experience of God as *Abba*. Luke presents him as having such a consciousness already when he was twelve years old and giving expression to it in his reply to his parents when they, after three days of search, found him at the temple in Jerusalem: "Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?" (Lk 2:49). But the most crucial moment that decisively shaped such a consciousness was his God experience at the Jordan after his baptism when he heard the voice from the heaven, "You are my son, the beloved" (Mk 1:11).

Jesus' experience and understanding of God as *Abba* differs significantly from that of the Old Testament whose predominant perception of God was that He is king. Though there are quite a few places in the Old Testament in which God's tender love for His people is described (Deut 32:10-14; Hos 11:18; Is 49:15) and spoken of as 'Father' of the people of Israel (Ex 4:22; Is 14:1; 32:5-6; Ez 1:2; 30:9; Hos

2:1; 11:1) of the king of Israel (2Sam 7:14; 1Ch 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps 2:7; 89:19-37; 110:3) and of the just (Wis 2:13,18), He is never referred to or addressed as 'Abba', but is primarily regarded on the God of Hosts, the king of heavenly armies and the Lord and Maker of heaven and earth.

But Jesus, by the very fact that he addressed and presented God as *Abba*, regards not power, but love as constituting God's very essence with its characteristic qualities of concern and commitment for the life and well being of everyone, forgiveness of sinners and compassion for the weak and victimized. His perfection which Jesus exhorts all to imitate, is, according to Luke, nothing but His mercy. That is why the Matthean text, "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) is rephrased by Luke as "Be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). Thus, the supreme perfection or profound essence of God is compassion.

In fact, compassion is the essential attribute of the true God which differentiates Him from other gods who are false. The false gods need to be constantly placated, their capricious anger appeased, their majesty and power constantly adored and praised and any offence caused to them must be adequately atoned for. Indeed, they are believed to have created human beings because they need some to praise and honor them and perform sacrifices to them. In contrast to them the *Abba* God of Jesus is pure selfless love and desires nothing but human well being, growth and happiness. His love takes the form of compassion towards human beings because they are weak and wayward, sinful and subject to so many dehumanizing conditions.

Though God wants all to live abundantly and therefore “makes His sun to rise on both the wicked and the good and He gives rain to both the just and the unjust (Mt 5:45) he has a preferential love and concern for the poor and special compassion for the victimized. This is precisely because these have been deprived of or denied the fullness of life. That is why as He observes the misery of the people and hears their cry, while he is moved with compassion for them (cf. Ex 3:7-8) his anger also burns towards their oppressors, the Pharaoh of the world and those who sell the poor for a pair of sandals (cf. Amos 8:6).

It is because of His loving compassion that He becomes not only the God *for* us but also the God *with* us. Thus, He is not a distant God dwelling in the highest heavens in unapproachable splendour and might. Rather, He is cojourneying God who talks and has walks with us and established His dwelling among us. His name ‘Yahweh’, revealed to Moses, is expressive of this. It means, as Kasper has pointed out, “I am the one who is there for you, who is you and by you.”⁵

God’s cojourneying with human beings means much more than mere philosophical immanence of eternally creating and sustaining them as well as all other realities; nor does it refer to His occasional interventions in the course of nature or history to redirect their course or to rescue His devotees from some dire distress. Rather, it is a permanent and dynamic co-presence marked by self-employing solidarity and liberation. As Bryan Stone has put it, “God fully tastes of one’s most intimate sorrows and most outrageous joys. Solidarity with the human

predicament, then, is one of the most fundamental defying characteristics of the compassionate God of Jesus.”⁶

Such solidarity involves not only identification with the sufferings of the least and the last but also in their struggles. The other side of solidarity with the victims is commitment to and co-struggling for their liberation. Without a serious and sustained commitment to transform their situation of helplessness and hopelessness, alleviation of their suffering and restoration of their dignity no compassion is genuine. Such commitment to the emancipation of the poor and oppressed involves also taking sides with them and against their oppressors. These essential characteristics of genuine compassion are clearly found in the paradigmatic event of exodus in which Yahweh manifests Himself as the God who not only commiserates with the enslaved Israel (cf. Ex 3:7,9) but also is in solidarity with them and lights against Pharaoh (Ex 14:25) brings them to the land of freedom and prosperity.

The ultimate expression of God’s compassion is His self-giving for the life of the world through His son, Jesus. Yes, the true God does not need or call for human adoration and adulation nor animal or human sacrifices to appease Him or to express their abject self-humiliation before Him. But He is the one who has implied or sacrificed Himself through His son or the life of the world: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son...” (Jn 3:16).

3. Son, Most Compassionate

Nowhere else does one find the Father’s loving compassion so fully embodied and historically exhibited as

in His incarnate Son, Jesus. He is not only “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) in whom “the fullness of the deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:5) but also the supreme expression of “the goodness and loving kindness of God” who has “saved us according to his mercy” (Tit 2:4-5). As Pope Francis has put it, “Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion.”⁷

But being the human embodiment of the Father’s compassion was not for Jesus an once for all accomplished fact fully realized at the moment of his incarnation or baptism. It was, indeed, a life long process of identifying his self with the Father of compassion which was historically realized by his identification with his fellow human beings, especially the poor and victimized and through his message and ministry of compassion to them climaxing in his death on the cross and resurrection. Thus, as he “increased in wisdom and in age and in grace with God and Man” (Lk 2:52) and “learned through suffering what obedience was...” (Heb 5:4) he became the ever more transparent sacrament of divine compassion. So much so the people, who had witnessed his compassionate ministry, said “God has looked favourably on his people” (Lk 7:16).

Message of Compassion

Jesus inaugurated his ministry by announcing the good news of the arrival of the reign of God. It was indeed a gospel or glad tidings because the God whom Jesus proclaimed is the *Abba* whose nature is nothing but loving compassion and who is present to His people with His unconditional forgiveness and universal offer of salvation that is life in all its fullness. It is this reign God that

Jesus invited all, and especially the poor and marginalized who were the ones that were mostly considered as sinners to participate in. That is why Jesus' refrain in his preaching was "Blessed are you..."

In this Jesus differs from John the Baptist who had also announced the soon to happen inbreak of the reign of God but called his listeners to repentance and righteous loving with the threat "Woe to you..." Because the Baptist proclaimed a God of justice his reign would wreck vengeance on the wicked and punishment on the sinners unless they repent and perform works of righteousness. In Jesus' message, however, God is the *Abba* and all human beings being His beloved children His predominant attitude towards them, sinners and non-sinners alike, is one of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness. It is His initiative that comes first and He accepts them all not because they are worthy; rather, it is his loving acceptance and compassionate forgiveness that makes them worthy. This is brought out very well in the parable of this 'Great Dinner' (Mt 22:1-14 / Lk 14:15-23) and even better in those of the 'lost sheep', 'lost coin' and above all in that of the 'prodigal son' (Lk 15:1-32).

This gracious gift of the compassion of the *Abba* God when experienced by human persons implies also a call and enablement to show a similar compassion to their fellows. Thus, Jesus exhorts people to forgive "seventy times seven times" (Mt 18:22) and in his parable of the "unforgiving servant" (Mt 18:23-35) a servant is condemned because he refused to show to his fellow servant the compassion he himself had received. Such compassion is the more acceptable form of worship than sacrifices (Cf. Mt 12:7)

and the mark of the children of the Abba God: "Be merciful just as your father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). And it is the good Samaritan who showed compassion to the man beaten up by the robbers and left at the roadside who is presented by Jesus as the model worshipper of God and not the priest or Levite who failed to show him compassion (Cf. Lk 10:25-37). Such good neighborliness and compassion are the authentic ways of worshipping God in "Spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). That is why to the lawyer who posed the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' final answer is "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:25,37).

Compassionate Ministry

Not only Jesus' message but his entire ministry sprung from his compassion. That is why while the Markan gospel links his preaching to his compassion (cf. Mk 6:34), the Matthean shows his healing ministry as arising from it (cf. Mt 14:14). Many of his individual healings are also presented as having been motivated by his compassion. Thus, moved by compassion he cures the leper (cf Mk 1:41), restores life to the only son of the widow of Nain (Cf Lk 7:13) and gives sight to the two blind men of Jericho who cried out for his mercy (cf Mt 20:34). Also his heart was moved with compassion for the hungry crowd of five thousand who had followed him (cf. Mk 6:34) and his compassion turned into tears at the tomb of Lazarus when he saw Mary and the others who had come along weeping. "He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Jesus began to weep" (Jn 11:33-35).

Jesus, compassion was not that of a mere philanthropist who normally remains far removed from the suffering masses but is moved at the sight of the condition

of the poor and suffering people and condescends to provide relief for them but soon enough returns to this own security and comfort. Jesus' compassion, instead, is that of a fellow human person, a good neighbor who is in brotherly solidarity with the poor and oppressed sharing their insecurity and marginalized existence. It is because of such solidarity without which compassion is never authentic, that lead him to a life of insecurity, sharing their hunger and thirst as well as their homelessness. As he himself has said it "the son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 5:58). His passion and death on the cross are the ultimate expressions of his compassionate solidarity with the victimized people. For, as he himself has said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13).

However, his compassionate solidarity was not a gesture of helplessness and hopelessness or an expression of resignation to their suffering. Rather, it was the source of the power of his liberative ministry. It is his compassionate solidarity with the victims that also become the most important means of his union with God and provided him with constant energy to cure the sick, free people from demonic possessions as well as to call people to conversion. His call to conversion was an invitation to the interior freedom of the children of God i.e. to give up selfishness, greed, spirit of revenge and to turn to love, sharing forgiveness and peace. He who invited them to a counter cultural community life of non-cooperation with the oppressors, resistance of evil with good and living as communities of the reign of God in which socio-economic-political-cultural-religious structures of hierarchy,

exploitation, domination, purity – pollution and ritualism and legalism will be replaced by those of fellowship, sharing, service, compassion and love. It is only by such values and structures of interior and exterior freedom did Jesus seek to establish the reign of God in humans hearts and history. And it is only when human hearts and social structures are permeated by loving compassion can all human suffering be radical removed and permanently overcome.

Jesus' resurrection, which is the manifestation of the divine dimension of his death accepted because of his loving compassion for fellow human beings, is also the ultimate act of his solidarity with the suffering humanity and the supreme realization of his liberative commitment. For, by his resurrection Jesus is not removed to another world; but rather, freed from the limitations of his physical body, he has become ever more intimately present to all human beings in the depth of their selves and in the flow of human history with his life-giving compassionate love. He is not only with us till the end of time (Cf. Mt 28:20) but also continues his ministry of loving and life giving compassion generating in and inspiring human hearts to new forces of love, freedom, justice and peace as well as in history creative ideas and innovative movements to fashion "the home of God among mortals where Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev 21:3-4).

Conclusion

The Church is the community of Jesus' disciples called together to continue his mission. And as such the very foundation and heart of Church's life and action can

be nothing else than his loving compassion. Nothing in its life or liturgy, structures or services can be motivated by any concern other than compassion. Such compassion alone provides effective witness to its authentic nature as the church of Christ. When all its laws and liturgy, outreach and organizations enable its members and others to encounter and experience the compassionate Jesus and in turn themselves become compassionate as he is do they serve their purpose. Thus, as Pope Francis points out, “the time has come for the church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters. Mercy is the force that reawakens us to a new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope.”⁸

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Endnotes

¹ Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975, p.39

² Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, New York: Paulist Press, 2013, p.14

³ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, Mumbai: St. Paul's, 2001, p.14

⁴ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus (The face of Mercy). Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2015, no.12 (p.21).

⁵ Walter Kasper, *Mercy*, p.85.

⁶ Bryan Stone, *Compassionate Ministry: Theological foundations*, Marlknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 1996

⁷ Pope Francis, *Vultus*, no.8 (p.13).

⁸ Pope Francis, *Vultus*, no.50 (P.18)