

Mercy in the Spiritual Life

Sr. Zhang Jiaqin

Translated by Eleanor Foo

On Divine Mercy Sunday last year, Pope Francis announced that this year would be the Jubilee of Mercy. As we are now in the Jubilee of Mercy, let us reflect upon the meaning of mercy from the perspectives of spiritual life and spiritual counselling.

“Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sorrowful, be merciful to sinners....” All these are acts of mercy as well as the precious teaching of the Lord. The Pope says, “Mercy [is] the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life” (*Misericordiae Vultus, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, 2). Speaking of mercy, it is very easy for people to think that it means we can “do” something for others, even though our own lives are sometimes not so affluent. Doing good and saving others are, indeed, an expression or an extension of mercy. From the point of view of the spiritual life, real mercy for a person begins with treating oneself with kindness and completely accepting one’s own inner shadows. It means believing that “everything that happens has its own meaning and value” (Romans 8:28). For every practitioner of spirituality, being merciful to oneself is the first step towards the authentic self.

The traditional mode of education (family, school and the Church) puts a person into a presumed model. Every parent, teacher or spiritual superior has his own ideal or standard of a good child, a good student or a good subordinate. Such expectations exist everywhere in our lives, and spiritual life is no exception. As we grow up, we learn to be a “good” person. Spiritually speaking, we have a certain kind of desire or dream to become holy, and we see this dream as God’s desire for spiritual aspirants. Pilgrims on a spiritual journey have a high and perfect ideal target, and we live

and reflect according to this goal. We urge ourselves to try hard in the search for this perfect ideal. It is similar to the experience of climbing a mountain. We see the peak, or a target at a high level. We climb towards that target with great effort. However, when we think that we are getting nearer and nearer, we discover that the target is actually in another, an even higher place. At the end of a day, a monthly recollection or an annual retreat, we pause and reflect upon our lives. Perhaps we would also find that we were still very far away from holiness or perfection. We blame ourselves or feel guilty for never achieving the “goal” that God desires of us.

Our education trains us in such a way that we habitually put ourselves into a certain kind of expectation, instead of putting ourselves in God, and seeing ourselves right in the moment we are living in. We focus more on original sin and its impact than on God’s mercy. We try hard to scrutinise the imperfections in our lives and to be rid of them. We seek to expel the imperfections in our lives, so that we can become holy like God. We do not allow ourselves to receive light and nourishment in God’s mercy, and let Him cure the agony in our hearts caused by frustration. Such helplessness or negative emotions are the shadows of life.

“Shadows” are the archetypes of human unconscious. They represent the parts we are afraid of, deny, ignore, prohibit or reject. They are the psychological force that lies within us, but we do not dare to integrate it. It is a force that is at once repulsive and difficult to handle. It is very easy for us to project such force or characteristics upon other people, particularly of the same gender, and react strongly to them. There are two kinds of shadows: positive and negative. Negative shadows consist of those weaknesses we find unacceptable and deny. We are not conscious of this part of ourselves, but we are very sensitive to that of other people. Consequently, we would condemn these flaws strongly without awareness. In fact, we are only condemning our own shadows. Positive shadows, on the other hand, consist of the good characteristics that lie hidden in us. We appreciate, envy and respect this part of others, but we deny subconsciously that we have these characteristics in us too. Before we become aware of and identify these characteristics in ourselves, subconsciously we may envy, or even become jealous of some good points in other people. There are

some parts which belong to the authentic “me,” but our shadows make them seem like characteristics which exist only in others. All shadows, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, need to be accepted.

When we cannot face our shadows with mercy, our biggest wish is to get rid of, expel or overcome them. This is because many think that God also dislikes these “undesirable” parts of the self. As a result, we treat them as enemies and seek to defeat them. In the end a war is started. On the one hand, it is a war against oneself, (just like a person who always wants to get rid of her own shadow); on the other hand, it is a war against other people. We would project onto others the shadows we fail to take away from our lives. When we see certain “bad deeds” by other people, we would criticise them harshly. But if we accept our shadows completely—having befriended our own shadows and experienced the mercy of God the Father—our heart will be really filled with mercy towards other people. After going through a war against our self and experiencing the hardship of struggle, we finally discover that we still cannot “be perfect as the Father” and learn to treat ourselves mercifully. Consequently, we can truly deal with other people mercifully.

When we see those who commit all sorts of bad deeds, we feel that we are looking at our own inner shadows. We once entertained similar thoughts, were tormented by the same stubbornness, agony and perplexity, but only when we have confronted and transcended them that we can sympathise with the suffering of other people; we may even be willing to help others awaken. In fact, if people want their shadows to disappear, the best way is to kneel down and embrace them well.

Try and learn to befriend our own shadow, accept it and allow ourselves to be complete, so that we can rediscover our hidden and unrevealed internal strength. Acknowledge that “I am a creature”, and all created things have their own “limitations” (imperfect parts). When I am confronted with my own shadows, such as anger and rage, I would acknowledge these emotions and accept these shadowy parts of myself. Allow myself to be angry without condemning myself, and then let these emotions pass. Understand my limitations and helplessness. We can only accept life, accept the people around us mercifully and treat them with mercy only after

accumulating such experience. The goal of human life is not to seek to “be perfect as the Father,” but to live out the original, authentic self that God created. “Lord, you willed that your ministers would also be clothed in weakness in order that they may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error” (*Prayer of Pope Francis for the Jubilee of Mercy*).

Treating oneself mercifully also means that one should accept one’s own life and its present state totally. It means treating oneself with mercy. “You in your current state” is the one whom God loves. He does not wait until you become perfect to accept you. In the same prayer, Pope Francis reminded us that the welcoming gaze of the Lord Jesus “freed Zacchaeus and Matthew from being enslaved by money; the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things; made Peter weep after his betrayal.” In the merciful acceptance of the Lord Jesus, these people also accept the current state of their own lives. Acceptance is the beginning of transformation.

In spiritual companionship, mercy means putting down our expectations and accepting the life of the person we accompany as it is. No matter her current state of life and her emotions; whether she is happy and peaceful or despairing and hurting, all these are what life itself bears, goes through and flows through. Underlying all this is a divine force that supports its movement. We accompany it, accept it, allow it, without setting up standards of good or bad. We do not seek to distort or change it, and we do not judge it; this is mercy already. “We cannot change anybody. As the sun shines, some people feel warmth, some people feel they are dying of thirst. All these are irrelevant to the sun. However, all these are like a piece of mirror, reflecting what is alive in us, and letting us see the mud that, layer after layer, encircles our pure inner essence” (Jung). And the meaning of spirituality is to penetrate this mud and see the originally divine essence—the presence of the divine Lord. When accompanying others, such an insight is mercy. In the process of companionship, the director believes in the “contentment” of life. What the director does is only to be present and to build up a holy and safe environment for the person she accompanies. She sets up an atmosphere in which the image of God, hidden in the person accompanied, can “manifest itself.” In this way, the soul may

manifest in God's mercy the goodness of being the image of God, and the person can journey towards a wholesome life.

We receive the holy teaching of God to treat other people with mercy. This mercy with which we deal with other people also includes ourselves. Shadows are aspects or parts of each person's life. The acceptance of one's own shadows and becoming an authentic person are fundamental themes in spirituality. Accepting our shadows means befriending them. It means repairing the parts that we project or shift onto others, in order to rebuild and integrate the wholeness of life. We can only be truly merciful to others when we have "experienced" such unconditional mercy ourselves. Therefore, true mercy begins with accepting totally our own shadows. It begins with being merciful to ourselves.