



**MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE**

Reflection for Segment Three, Theme One: Presence of God and to God

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As we begin the third segment in our four-segment journey through Mercy Global Presence, let us pause for a moment. Let us go gently through our first two segments centered on “global” and “mercy.” We have been enlightened by our exploration of “global” through the lenses of *Cosmos*, *Earth and Integral Ecology*, *People and Deep Social Change*, and *God Incarnate in Cosmos and Jesus*. We have been energized by our reflection on “mercy” which was centred on *Mercy and Faith Traditions*, *Mercy and Degradation of Earth*, *Mercy and Displacement of Persons*, and *New Foundations in Mercy*.

Now we turn our hearts and our spirits to our third segment, “presence.” Over these coming four months, we will contemplate presence of and to God, presence to Earth, presence in ministry and community, and presence to self and others. It is one of life’s ironies that we are beginning this contemplation six months into a global pandemic. In this time, presence is marked by face masks and social distancing which are poignant signs of our respect and compassion for each other!

Once again, diverse, and distinct voices will comfort us, amaze us, and dare us as we deepen our awareness of “presence,” beginning this month with presence of, to and with God. To help us prepare to enter this reflection, let us explore the presence of God grounded in three rich traditions: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the words of Catherine McAuley.

Presence of God in the Old Testament

The wonder of God’s presence in the Old Testament flows through the two distinct images of God threaded throughout the biblical books, God as transcendent and God as intimate. The book of Genesis begins with two creation stories. In the first story (Gen 1:1–2:4), God is transcendent, creating the Cosmos with a word, “mercifying the universe into being” as the Muslim spiritual master, Ibn Arabi, tells us. In the second creation story (Gen 2:4–3:24), God is intimately present, perplexed about how to find someone to till the soil. In that story, we find a moving picture of presence, “They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8).

Two Hebrew “mercy” words intensify these two images of presence. In Genesis 9, the transcendent God shows steadfast love (*hesed*) as the first covenant, the covenant between God and all Earth, is established by God’s word, “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and Earth” (Gen 9:13). But in the same account, we see the intimate God who, like us, forgets and, therefore, needs to be reminded, “God said, ‘When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on Earth’” (Gen 9:16). When Moses persists in knowing God’s real name, God answers, “‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’” (Ex 34:6-7). Here we see both the transcendent God keeping steadfast love (*hesed*) in the covenant relationship and the merciful God showing “womb love” (*rahamim*) for the people for all time.

The calls of the prophets reflect the diverse images of God's presence. Isaiah remembers the image of the transcendent God who calls him in this way, "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple" (Is 6:1) while Jeremiah's memory of the intimate God who calls him is very different, "The LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth'" (Jer 1:9).

Whether the image of presence is one of transcendence or intimacy, the sense that God is on Earth and with the people permeates the Old Testament. One of the most touching and intimate names for God in the Jewish tradition is not used in the Scriptures but is given by the early Rabbis. God is Shekinah, "the indwelling of God."

Presence of God in the New Testament

While images of God as transcendent and intimate and living among us will also appear throughout the New Testament, it is the intimate God who is most visible and most present. Jesus addresses God as Father. The first time God speaks in the New Testament is to announce, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). Jesus expands that intimate relationship in Jn 14:23, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." During his agony in the garden, Jesus makes a poignant plea to Abba or Daddy, the intimate Aramaic name for Father, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mk 14:36). Paul extends that same sense of intimate relationship with God to the followers of Jesus. "Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of the Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6).

One of the most startling names for God who is intimately present to us is found in 1 John 4:7-8, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for *God is love.*"

The Old Testament promise of the indwelling God is reflected in the way in which we first come to know Jesus' presence on Earth. When the angel announces the birth of Jesus, we are told. "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him 'Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us'" (Matt 1:23). Matthew's Gospel ends with the same sense of the God-with-us as Jesus promises, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes his own presence by using the Old Testament translation of God's name "I am": I am the Bread of Life (6:35, 41, 48, 51), the Light of the World (8:12, 9:5), the Door (10:7, 9), the Good Shepherd (10:11, 14), the Resurrection and the Life (11:25); the Way, the Truth and the Life (14:6); and the Vine (15:1, 5). Perhaps the most startling manner in which Jesus describes himself and calls us to respond is in the parable of Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (25:35-36). Pope Francis adds a seventh statement: "I was Earth broken and abused, and you showed me mercy."

The presence of God's Spirit, in the Old Testament in the book of Joel and in the New Testament in the book of Acts, is marked by inclusion for all, "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young ones shall see visions, and your old ones shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17-18). The fruits of the Spirit are described by Paul in Galatians 3:22-23: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

The sense of God present as Trinity, which becomes explicit in the later tradition, is implicit at the end of Matthew's Gospel, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). This is echoed in the blessing in 2 Cor 13:14, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Both references show the sense of community and relationship at the heart of God's presence.

Presence of God in Catherine's Words

Catherine McAuley knew the presence of God in her life. She reminded us about centering ourselves in the presence of God, "The practice of the presence of God is one-half of holiness" (*Familiar Instructions*, 36). She gave us hope in her words, "We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back" (Letter to de Sales White, 20 December 1840). And she gave us confidence that God is always present with us, "How quietly the great God does all those mighty works! Darkness is spread over us, and light breaks in again, and there is no noise of drawing curtains or closing shutters" (*Limerick Manuscript*).

Catherine frequently blesses in God's name, "May God in mercy bless and protect you all" (Letter to Teresa White November 1, 1838). In one of her blessings, she uses a Trinitarian image in speaking to God's presence within us so that we may respond in love and ministry, "May God bless and animate you with God's own divine spirit, that you may prove it is Jesus Christ you love and serve with your whole heart" (Letter to Frances Warde October 23, 1837).

Catherine's theology of suffering speaks to the presence of God and of Jesus, "Some joyful circumstance will soon prove that God is watching over your concerns, which are all God's own, but without the Cross the real Crown cannot come. Some great things which God designs to accomplish would have been too much without a little bitter in the cup" (Letter to Elizabeth Moore March 21, 1840). As we in this twenty-first century come to understand the continued suffering of the cosmic Christ in communion with all creation, let us find new meaning in Catherine's words, "Let us fly often to the foot of the cross and repose in the wounds of Jesus. He has written us in His hands. Shall we not write His wounds in our minds and hearts?" (*Familiar Instructions*, 72-73)

And always the presence of God leads to the shaping of the person who follows, "God does not look at the action but at the spirit motivating it, and God will judge and reward us accordingly" (*Retreat Instructions*, 82), and "It is not sufficient that Jesus Christ be formed in us – he must be recognized in our conduct" (*Retreat Instructions*, 72).

For Catherine, God is love is a constant theme: "Let charity be our badge of honor...so that it may truly be said, there is in us but one heart and one soul in God" (*Familiar Instructions*, 107), and "Our charity must be in our hearts and from our hearts, and a charity such as Jesus Christ practiced while on earth" (*Retreat Instructions*, 148).

So, too, Catherine frames the works and the way of Mercy in the presence of God and Christ, “Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our divine Master” (*Original Rule*, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, 297), and “The corporal and spiritual works of mercy which draw religious from a life of contemplation, so far from separating them from the love of God, unite them much more closely to God and render them more valuable in God’s holy service” (*The Spirit of the Institute*).

That trust in the presence of God in the works and the way of Mercy goes even further in Catherine’s trusting that God’s presence permeates the whole life and spirit of the congregation: “The Order is God’s work – not mine. It will do just as well without me” (*Familiar Instructions*, 136).

Catherine’s beautiful reflection on the intimacy of God with us is marked by joy. She says, “How acceptable it must be to God when we make God this return, showing to all, by a cheerful, happy countenance, the gratitude with which our hearts overflow towards God for God’s many favors in this life, and God’s great promises for the life to come” (*Familiar Instructions*, 149).

Our Journey Continues

Enriched by these three great traditions, let each one of us ponder these questions:

- ✓ When do I experience God as transcendent, far above me?
- ✓ When do I experience God as intimate, quite close to me?
- ✓ Where have I seen God dwelling among us?
- ✓ How have I seen God’s Spirit poured out on me, on us, on Earth?
- ✓ How do I image God with the eyes of my heart?

The participants presenting the nourishment for this month’s contemplation, the reflective prayer and the articles in *Good Reading* will bring us more deeply into a sense of the presence of God in our hearts, in our communities and on Earth. Each one who shares this journey will deepen that contemplation as together we rejoice in the God who creates and cares, in the God who dwells among us, in the God who calls us into relationship, in the God who is with us, in the God who suffers with us, in the God who is love, in the God who walks with us now and forever.