



**MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE**

Introduction: Presence to Self & Others

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We have come to the final month of the third segment of Mercy Global Presence – *Presence to Self and Others*. Before we begin our reflections on this theme, let us review the profound reflections on *Presence in Community and in Ministry* which were shared with us in the third month of this segment.

In my theological reflection on this theme, I quoted Leonardo Boff from his *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, linking presence in both community and ministry: “Human beings must feel that they are sons and daughters of the rainbow, those who translate this divine covenant with all the beings existing and living, with new relationships of kindness, compassion, cosmic solidarity, and deep reverence for the mystery that each one bears and reveals.” On a beautiful card, the artist Sister Michael G. Pacto rsm gathered images of the Sisters in the Philippines in community and in ministry, reflecting their presence to each other and to the young people with whom they share their ministry journey. Marie O’Dea rsm, centering her reflections on the sculpture of the *Homeless Christ* in the aftermath of Storm Ciara, reminded us, “This year the pandemic is affecting every person especially those living in poverty and sleeping on our streets. Believing that each of us is an image of God, we can say that Jesus continues to be homeless today in our towns and cities and we are faced with the question, ‘Can we pass them by and ignore their plight?’”

Cecilie Kerns focused as well on the pandemic time, showcasing the booklet developed by Mercy Global Action, *Hope in a Time of Pandemic*. Through this booklet, the Mercy World has “revealed a ‘pandemic of kindness,’ demonstrating the human capacity for transformation and calling forth great acts of resilience, kindness and creativity.” She went on to speak about the “culture of encounter,” encouraging us with the words, “In a world plagued by poverty, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of systemic marginalization, Mercy ministries exemplify a culture of encounter that emphasizes the dignity and rights of all people, and works to reduce social, economic and political inequalities.” Continuing the pandemic theme, Michelle Goh rsm, a frontline worker, challenged us, “In our lives of service and in our relationships with one another, we are agents of God’s merciful presence to one another. . . We pray for the grace of personal transformation through this crisis – may we use this time of lockdown and solitude to look at ourselves, review our attitudes and reassess our priorities. . . And trusting in God’s loving mercy, may we always be able to proclaim with confidence that our future is in God no matter what happens.”

Sister Marian Ladrera rsm gave us a profoundly moving prayer based on Ecclesiastes 3, which is quoted here in part:

A time to share the passion of Catherine to bring mercy to the needy;
A time to embrace in our hearts those neglected, displaced,
and experiencing uncertainty, anxiety and fears;
A time to welcome the homeless, hungry and lowly;
A time to hear the cry of the voiceless
and those aiming to end violence and racism;

A time to stand firm in the truth of the gospels, and a time to promote justice and peace;
A time to renew our hearts
A time to recognize and respect the sacredness of your creation
A time to celebrate your mercy and love.

And, as always, the *Good Reading* section provided diverse and interesting articles and videos to help deepen our appreciation for this theme. Among the articles were the following, giving a sense of the breadth of topics covered: *Transformative Communities: God's Co-creative Pioneers*; *'Before We Rush to Save the World, Don't step Over the People in Our Backyard'*; *'Re-imagined Church, life-giving and loving'*, *Serving Communities with Courage and Compassion*, *Welcoming Diversity: Creating Community for All*; *Hearing Healing Hope*; *The Reign of God as Community, Ministering is at the Heart of Christianity*; *Ministries in the Community*; and *Intercultural Life as a Sign of Prophetic Hope*.

Presence to Self and Others

The fourth theme in this section, *Presence to Self and Others*, begins with a prayer from John Philip Newell:

Light within all light, Soul behind all souls,
at the breaking of dawn, at the coming of the day,
we wait and watch.
Your Light within the morning light,
Your Soul within the human soul,
Your Presence beckoning to us from the heart of life.
In the dawning of this day,
let us know fresh shinings in our soul.
In the growing colours of new beginnings all around us,
let us know the first lights of our heart.
Great Star of the morning, Inner Flame of the universe,
let us be a colour in this new dawning.

These growing colours include the many others to whom we are invited to be present: family and loved ones and Sisters, persons among whom we minister, people of my place (community, province/state, country), people of the world, people whom I learn from but may not know, and loved ones who have died. While each of our relationships is unique and calls for a unique presence, there is one common thread well expressed by Douglas Steere, "To listen another's being into life, may almost be the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another."

The children's classic, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, by Margery Williams also speaks to the depths of presence in all our relationships as is illustrated in this excerpt: "Wasn't I Real before?" asked the little Rabbit. "You were Real to the Boy," the Fairy said, "because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to every one." "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

Presence to Each Other

In her letters and in the memory of the Sisters, Catherine McAuley frequently reflects on the quality of relationships which show true presence to each other. Three quotations exemplify her thinking:

- The blessing of unity still dwells amongst us and oh what a blessing, it should make all else pass into nothing. This is the spirit of the Order, indeed the true spirit of Mercy flowing on us.
- One thing is remarkable, that no breach of Charity ever occurred amongst us. The sun never, I believe, went down on our anger.
- Our charity is to be cordial. Now cordial signifies something that renews, invigorates, and warms. Such should be the effect of our love for each other.

In the twentieth century, the philosopher Martin Buber, in his treatise “I – Thou,” spoke eloquently about relationships and presence to one another: “Each individual “owns” their own “presence” and chooses to be in the moment, or not. . . Do you value the individual or individuals with whom you are present? Are they *important* enough to you to spend the energy – and exercise the discipline – to be present? . . . Real presence is an expression of one’s authentic being. . . In being present, we are ‘hallowing the everyday.’”

A metaphor for presence, used by Daryl Conner, compares our presence to music played on a radio station: “Believe enough in yourself and your unequivocal brand of music to stand on that as your foundation. . . There are no others who can convincingly replicate your unmistakable presence. . . Know who you are and what change-related music truly comes from your heart. . . Play that music with all the authenticity and passion you feel and broadcast your frequency as strongly as you can. . . Recognize that your ability to play the music as well as you do is a gift and strive to share it with people who resonate with its significance.”

Presence demands openness, vulnerability, responsiveness, confirmation of and respect for the other, celebration of otherness and diversity, and holistic sensitivity to the physical, aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs of the other.

Reflection on the Culture of Encounter

In these late Advent days, the image of Mary and Elizabeth meeting in a deeply prophetic moment is a moving expression of presence to one another in all its depths and richness. In the slide presentation, several paintings of the Visitation are shown to allow moments of contemplation.

Presence to Self

The opening scriptural text for this theme of *Presence to Self and Others* is taken from Matthew 22:39, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” These words of Jesus, quoting Leviticus 19:18, are repeated in many other New Testament texts (Matt 19:19, Mk 12:31, Rom 13:9, Gal 5:14 and Jas 2:8). Explicit in these words is love for your neighbour and for yourself.

There is a profound symbol for presence to self in the *inukshuk*, a collection of stones built by the Inuit peoples of northern Canada. The Inuit were nomadic peoples who lived in the barren lands of the north with limited ways of communicating. The piles of stones communicated messages from one group to another – usually directional messages. The stones could point to a lake where fish would be found, or show the direction the caribou had gone, or show where food had been buried, or point to the next *inukshuk* which would give the new direction the group had gone.

These stones are piled as high as a person. An Inuit teenager inadvertently illustrated how these stones, which are often used as a symbol for leadership, can also be a symbol for presence to self. When asked what the most important thing to know about building these directional stones, he replied, “You can only build an *inukshuk* with broken rocks.” The broken rocks are needed if you are to communicate with each other, if you are to share directions for what matters most in your life, or if you wish to be present to the others. We not only acknowledge our broken rocks; we need our broken rocks!

This symbol of “brokenness” as essential in presence is echoed by many faith traditions. In 2 Cor 12:9-10, Paul says, “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” In his apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis says, “Let us acknowledge our weakness, but allow Jesus to lay hold of it and send us, too, on mission. We are weak, yet we hold a treasure that can enlarge us and make those who receive it better and happier. Boldness and apostolic courage are an essential part of mission” (GE #131). The Oblate theologian, Ron Rolheiser says:

The only ritual that Christ asks us to repeat over and over again is the Eucharist. In it we remember him as broken, poured out, empty, heartbroken, frightened, humiliated, vulnerable, in anguish. . . It would perhaps do all of us good occasionally when we leave the Eucharist to go off as Jesus did after the first Eucharist, to a lonely place to have an agony in the garden and to sweat some blood as we ask for the strength to drink from the real chalice – the chalice of vulnerability. Occasionally when St. Augustine handed the Eucharist to a communicant, instead of saying, “the body of Christ,” he would say, “Receive what you are.”

And the Buddhist spiritual leader in our time, Pema Chödrön, echoes this thinking when she says, “Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It is a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.”

Conclusion

The Irish poet and spiritual writer, John O'Donohue, gives us this presence-centred blessing to conclude the introductory reflection on *Presence to Self and Others*:

May we awaken to the mystery of being here
and enter the quiet immensity of our own presence.
May we have joy and peace in the temple of our senses.
May we receive great encouragement when new frontiers beckon.
May we respond to the call of our gift and find the courage to follow its path.
May the flame of anger free us from falsity.
May warmth of heart keep our presence aflame and may anxiety never linger about us.
May our outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul.
May we take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention.
May we be consoled in the secret symmetry of our souls.
May we experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.