



MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE

Theological Inspiration: Mercy and the Degradation of Earth

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Q. Why is care for the environment to be understood as a work of mercy?

God's fundamental orientation to what he has made is mercy

Francis says – in the title of his first book – ‘the name of God is mercy’. Francis says mercy is God’s ‘name’, and a ‘name’ is a relational term: it is not a concept or attribute, but the way in which someone is known to us, the way in which someone offers themselves to us, indicates that they want to enter into relationship with us. Mercy is the character of God’s relationship with what God has made.

Care for the Environment is a work of mercy

Pope Francis has proposed that care for the environment is one of the ‘works of mercy’. There is one very obvious reason why this is. The way we treat the environment is really just an extension of the way we treat others, because all people depend on the environment. The way we treat the environment is the way we treat other people. These aren’t two self-contained compartments of ethical action: they are the same sphere. God gave the earth to all people equally. Restoring that original justice is a work of mercy.

But we don’t *only* lament ecological devastation because of its terrible impact on the poorest people. There’s something else going on.

Matthew 25 and God's self-identification with the earth

Pope Francis indicates that key Biblical inspiration for the Church’s conception of ‘works of mercy’ is St Matthew’s Gospel Ch. 25, where Jesus tells people that how they treat their neighbour – the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned - is how they treat him. This is one reason we might historically have restricted the idea of ‘works of mercy’ to human beings.

But Pope Francis indicates that works of mercy should be understood to be directed towards the nonhuman world in itself. He proposes that the earth and its creatures are proper objects of mercy *in themselves*, in their own right.

How can we make sense of this?

Quite simply: Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si'* that in the Incarnation ‘God has united himself definitively to our earth’. God identifies God’s own self with the earth. We’re used to the idea that Christ identifies himself with the human marginalised. But we’re less used to the idea of God’s solidarity with the earth, beyond the bounds of human community.

We might think this is a new idea, but actually it’s an old idea. In the Incarnation God not only sanctifies humanity, he sanctifies creation altogether. The Bible routinely pictures God using *earth metaphors*: it images God using natural objects. ‘God is my rock’, for example, or ‘God is my lofty refuge/mountain stronghold’. The imagery of the earth representing God to us is very ancient.

This is an invitation to understand that the way I relate to the earth is not outside of my relationship with God. In other words, it is not only other human beings who are a test of the way we are relating to God. God has united himself definitively with the earth. How we relate to the earth is a test of the way we are with God, just as with the way we treat other human beings.

Q. What does that mean for us as Church?

It's quite challenging, I think. The opening paragraph of *Laudato Si'* boldly declares that the earth herself is one of the poor – she cries out, pleading that we take another course. Seeing the earth as in need of our mercy calls us to a new exercise of imagination. This imagery is a direct challenge to the Church's activity. For the Church has always been sent to the poor, is called to be in solidarity with the poor.

This is a totally concrete, unambiguous indication that the mission of the Church can no longer be separated from addressing ecological devastation; it is a challenge to really be wounded by ecological devastation. If the defacement of the poor is a defacement of God, in the same way a defacement of the earth is a defacement of God.

The message here is that the scope of Christian concern is unlimited. The Gospel of Mark demands that we preach the Gospel 'to every creature'. The gospel is not just meant for a human community. God demands from us an unrestricted attention to everything God has made. The earth is, after all, 'our common home'.

Hagiographies are littered with stories of the saints' care for nonhuman creatures. One of my lesser-known favourites is St. Gerasimos, a fifth-century saint in Jordan, who gained the lifelong devotion of a lion after he extracted a splinter from its paw. Mercy is not just for humans, but also for nonhumans.

God's orientation to everything is mercy. Not just to a narrowly conceived anthropocentric realm, but to the whole creation, and we are called to practice that mercy, to mirror that, to participate in that mission of mercy.

Q. And if that's the lesson for the Church, what's the lesson for the world at large?

There's a tendency in the discourse around the environmental crisis to sacralise nature, to make nature the object or location of salvific meaning. That is part of the tradition I've been trying to retrieve in this conversation, that the earth is sacralised in the Bible, is a mediator of the divine presence to us. But there's another side to it.

Seeing care for the environment as a work of mercy helps us to see that the earth is not the giver of mercy, but the receiver of mercy. We don't go to nature to be saved. God is the saviour and lover of all creation. Together we are all creatures on a journey to the Father. We do not expect salvation from nature, but from God, who is the lover and saviour of all he has made.

This is a bit of a challenge to some of the green thinking today. As the environmental crisis is unfolding, there is a sense abroad that somehow nature is 'enough'. But the earth is one of God's creatures; the saviour is God. As Orthodox theologian Olivier Clement said, "The beauty of the world does not console us. It needs to be consoled."

When we look at nature, we don't see something that is self-sufficient unto itself. We see something that just like us is crying out for mercy, for care, for the divine love. And that's an important addition to the environmental movement's language about restoring nature, going back to nature. Nature is not *by itself* the solution for our problems.

Caring for the environment is one of the works of mercy. It is not an optional extra, not just a luxury. From now on it has to be understood as being at the core of what mercy is, of what mercy asks us to do.