

Dear People Whom God Loves,

These reflections are thoughts that came to me after reading some portions of the book *The Church of Mercy* by Pope Francis. The quotes and their page numbers are listed. Don't put my reflection into the mouth of Pope Francis. They are my thoughts.

The final reflection did not come from reading Pope Francis' book.

#1 THE CHURCH OF MERCY

BY POPE FRANCIS

Pg. 3 "What a beautiful truth of faith this is for our lives: the mercy of God! God's love for us is so great, so deep; it is an unfailing love, a love that always takes us by the hand and supports us, lifts us up, and leads us on."

Pg. 5 "How many times in my pastoral ministry have I heard it said, 'Father, I have many sins'? And I have always pleaded. 'Don't be afraid, go to him, he is waiting for you, he will take care of everything.' We hear many offers from the world around us, but let us take up God's offer instead: his is a caress of love."

My Reflection

I believe that unless we are aware of the infinite love and mercy that God is, and we as a church live that awareness, we will not deeply understand our mission and what our doctrines are all about.

This can be hard for us when we are in a frightening and desperate situation. We pray and pray and nothing seems to get better. We ask, "Where is God? I don't know if I can believe any more. Why doesn't God help?"

It is helpful to me when I realize that God is always working in us and in our world, but that God's working is not like the way that humans work, the way human institutions work, or indeed like the way any creatures work.

In Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (sometimes called the merciful father) the father was not able to fix the terrible situation his son was in. At the same time that the father couldn't fix his son's life, his son was always in the father's heart. His love was always going out to his son. His love never stopped.

And when the situation changed for the son, the father ran out to his son, hugged him and kissed him, and welcomed him back into the family. The son then realized that his father's love was always there for him.

Isn't it true that for a human mother or father, when a lost daughter or son is safely home, all that is in their heart is that my child is safe? Nothing else matters.

It is my belief that the love that God is, is always working in us and around us. This love is mysterious, is not controllable, is not on our timeline and we are usually in the dark about it.

This love does not suspend the laws of nature, but works in and around them. God is not causing things in the way that creatures cause things. Even the way that our human love works is rather mysterious. Should we be surprised that the way Infinite Love works is even more mysterious?

It helps me to make this distinction: God in God's own self is perfect. The working of God in and through creatures including humans is not perfect because creatures are imperfect.

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love." I Jn 4, 7-8.

I believe that when we surrender to God in prayer there are three things that can happen: our troubles may lessen, they may be taken away, or we may become gradually more aware that God is loving us and holding us, no matter what happens.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay

#2 THE CHURCH OF MERCY

BY POPE FRANCIS

Pg. 8 "But if truth is a truth of love, if it is a truth disclosed in a personal encounter with the Other and with others, then it can be set free from its enclosure in individuals and become part of the common good. As a truth of love, it is not one that can be imposed by force; it is not a truth that stifles the individual....One who believes may not be presumptuous; on the contrary, truth leads to humility, because believers know that, rather than ourselves possessing truth, it is truth that embraces and possesses us. Far from making in inflexible, the security of faith sets us on a journey; it enables witness and dialogue with all."

My Reflection

I wonder if truth and love are really the same thing looked at from different perspectives? God is ultimate love and ultimate truth. When we say that God is ultimate truth we are saying that

God is what is ultimately real. When we say that God is ultimate love we are saying that what is ultimately real embraces and cherishes everyone and everything.

I wonder if when our ego is in charge, we are able to get even close to what is true. When we are egocentric we don't see reality. Rather we distort what is real into what enhances our ego. Then, of course, we are not able to love. In this human situation, I see seeking reality and growing in love as being the same journey.

I have a practice which is helpful to me in becoming a little less egocentric. I have found that this is a slow and life-long process, a process that gradually shatters the false image I have of myself; and a process that is painful, embarrassing, and pushes me into humility that I do not choose. This never ends because, just when I feel I have made some progress, I realize I am feeling proud of my humility.

The process is this: It helps when I am able to realize that I am loved just as I am.

I am just quiet and allow myself to be aware of what is going on inside of me. (This grows with continual practice.)

It is essential that I do not judge as good or bad anything that arises in my awareness. Instead it is important to just accept that this is in me.

What things arise? These are examples:

My pride, my anger, my lust, my greed, my gluttony, my envy, my sloth, my fear, my self-preservation, my selfishness, my lack of compassion for people. All of these drives are part of being human and can easily take over the way we live.

I don't dwell on what arises but just acknowledge that these are in me, and I don't judge them as good or bad. Then I say "God (Abba) I need your help." Then let it go until the next time.

This practice is helpful to me. Perhaps some of you will also find it helpful.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay

#3 THE CHURCH OF MERCY

BY POPE FRANCIS

Pg. 9 "Doesn't the same thing happen to us when something completely new occurs in our everyday life? We stop short, we don't understand, we don't know what to do. Newness often makes us fearful, including the newness God asks of us."

Pg. 10 "Brothers and sisters, let us not be closed to the newness that God wants to bring into our lives! Are we often weary, disheartened and sad? Do we feel weighed down by our sins? Do we think that we won't be able to cope? Let us not close our hearts, let us not lose confidence, let us never give up. There are no situations that God cannot change; there is no sin that he cannot forgive if only we open ourselves to him."

My Reflection

To start, let us take a first situation. We are afraid of closeness to God because of our sins and sense of guilt and unworthiness. Strangely, a sense of unworthiness is much more helpful than a sense of worthiness unless we let our sense of unworthiness paralyze us and keep us from doing something.

The reason we need not fear to approach God with our guilt is the Love that God is, is continually holding us in existence. This is a free gift that is not earned and cannot be earned. Our sense of unworthiness makes it easier to realize that the Love that God is, is mercy and healing. We are loved and healed. That is who God is.

Even when we humans love deeply, we help and hold one another. We do it just because we want to. We do it without thinking about the other's worthiness or thinking about what we might receive in return. We can't even begin to imagine the total unselfishness that Infinite Love is.

When we are in sin, our only job is to allow Love to heal us and wash us clean. When we are grateful for the merciful gift, we will sometimes quickly, but usually more slowly, find our lives going down a new path. As this happens we will want to extend that mercy and compassion to others. We will also want to undo the harm that we have done and make amends when it is possible and appropriate.

A second situation is different. It is when we think that we are worthy. (Every human person is worth love. I am writing here about the inner sense of worthiness we have that carries with it a feeling of superiority with respect to other people.)

Our path then is to be willing to let God help us to discover what is inside us. When we have this sense of superiority it means that we are blind to much of what is in us. We don't know, really know, ourselves. We have a false image of ourselves and have no or little self-knowledge.

This is just another way of sinning. And the Love we name God holds us, embraces us, and only wants us to be healed and washed clean.

We are always precious to Love no matter what kind of sinner we are.

A third situation is present when our life is difficult because of hardships we are going through that may have nothing to do with sin.

These hardships might include emotional, mental, or physical problems. We might be experiencing abandonment, grief, loss of job, not knowing where our next meal is coming from or whether we will have a place to sleep tonight, or other troubles that seem to bear down on us.

In this situation we might wonder whether we can count on God. We may pray for God to fix things, but nothing seems to get any better. We might wonder whether belief in God is of any value. God doesn't seem to be of any help. We might say to ourselves, "Why pray – God doesn't fix anything."

To the best of my knowledge, we have this problem (and understandably so) because we assume that God works in our world in the same way humans work and nature works.

It helps me when I realize that the way that the Creator works and the way creatures work are quite different.

Creatures cause things by using things to cause something else. We use a hammer to pound in a nail. We use our fist to give someone a bloody nose. With careless driving we use our car to smash another car. A storm uses heat to become deadly destructive. An atom changes direction because another atom bumps into it.

Science has found some very weird things that happen in the sub-atomic world, but as far as I know, while a cause maybe difficult to find, we can't say that there is no cause.

The point I want to make is that creation is very different from causing. The Creator does not work like creatures work. It is customary to speak of creation as making something from nothing.

There were no creatures, there were no beings until the Big Bang. Our words are so inadequate here. There is only God, no beings. I prefer to not think of God as a Supreme Being because that can incline us to think of God as a being; a much more powerful being, but still a being. Then we easily think that God works like us and other creatures but in a more powerful way.

There is only God. God is spirit, not a being. God is love. Our human loves are good hints and pointers to who God is. Though God who is love is something like what our human love is, at the same time, God who is love is not like our human love. God is so much better and beyond what our love is that it is beyond our comprehension.

To be God means to exist, to be a love that is, but a love whose "is-ness" or existence is not dependent on anyone or anything. To be God means to be. That is why in theology we use the word Creator only for God.

The Big Bang and eventually the universe we know today flows from the Creator. This seems to me to be very different from what we call causing.

Creation exists, but its existence is dependent on the Creator. Creation is not something that happened 13.7 billion years ago. Creation is the continuous dependence of creatures on the Creator. To me this means that God is continually working in and through the universe and us humans. We can say that creation is happening right now.

Because this working is different than causing, reason and science don't give us a way of understanding or expressing what the working of God is like. But that doesn't mean that it is not real. It must be left to faith. We call it faith, because it is a different way of knowing. To use a human example. Reason and loving are different ways of knowing someone. Both are valuable. I think that is why the scriptures remind us that only through love can we know God.

That brings us finally to the point of our wondering whether prayer is valuable.

As long as we believe that if we pray hard enough, God will fix things to become what we want, we are opening ourselves up to serious disappointment. Remember that God doesn't cause things like we do.

When we pray with a willingness to allow God to work in and through us, and we surrender our will to, and in accordance with God's will, more goodness will follow. That, however, doesn't mean that the result will be what we want. It will be what is good, but there may be a lot of pain and confusion along the way. Sometimes we will be able to look back on our lives and we will notice that the trials we didn't want were actually blessings.

Regardless, even though it doesn't take all the pain away, we will gradually realize that we are held and loved by God and we are not alone. I see that at the core of Jesus' prayer "thy will be done."

Another way of putting it. When we pray to God when we are in trouble, we may find the trouble lessened, we may find the trouble gone, we may find a new way of looking at the situation, we may find (usually very slowly) that we feel loved and safe no matter what the situation is.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay

#4 THE CHURCH OF MERCY

BY POPE FRANCIS

Pg. 13-14 "To become holy we do not need to turn our eyes away and look somewhere else, or to have as it were the face on a holy card! No, no, that is not necessary. To become a saint only one thing is necessary: to accept the grace that the Father gives us in Jesus Christ. There, this grace changes our heart. We continue to be sinners for we are weak, but with this grace which makes us feel that the Lord is good, that the Lord is merciful, that the Lord waits for us, that the Lord pardons us – this immense grace that changes our heart."

My Reflection

When I was younger I thought of grace as something very special that God gave us. When we did various good things we got more grace. I see two problems with this thinking. One is that it means that grace is an entity. The other is that in some way we at times earn grace.

What I see now is that grace is a word for the healing love that God is that flows around and in us. Love is spirit not an entity. It is the Infinite Love that desperately wants to heal us and transform us. And because LOVE (GOD) is love (and love does not use force) God needs at least a little willingness on our part to allow LOVE to heal us, especially of the spiritual wound of sin. There is no sin that is so great that it cannot be healed by LOVE.

The word grace reminds us that LOVE cannot be earned. It doesn't need to be earned because it is freely given. Love just loves because that is what love is and does. When we experience this we are grateful. Nothing else. Just thank you, thank you, thank you.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay

#5 THE CHURCH OF MERCY

BY POPE FRANCIS

Pg. 15 "First of all, to start anew from Christ means being close to him, being close to Jesus.... The first thing for a disciple is to be with the master, to listen to him and learn from him....."

Pg. 16 "Do you allow yourself to be gazed upon by the Lord?A fairly young man came up to me and said, 'Father it is nice to meet you, but I don't believe in anything: I don't have the gift of faith!' He understood that faith is a gift. 'I don't have the gift of faith: What do you have to say to me?'.... I said, 'God loves you. Let yourself be gazed upon by him: Nothing else.'"

Pg. 16-17 "The second element is this: starting anew with Christ means imitating him by leaving ourselves behind and going out to encounter others....

The more that you unite yourself to Christ and he becomes the center of your life, the more he leads you out of yourself, from making yourself the center and opens you to others."

Pg. 18-19 "The third element is along these lines: starting anew with Christ means not being afraid to go with him to the outskirts....

God is always pushing, pressing forward....If you go to the outskirts, you will find him there....And why must I change? So that I can adapt to the situations in which I must proclaim the Gospel....

But careful! Jesus does not say. Go off and do things on your own. No! That is not what he is saying. Jesus says Go for I am with you....Jesus is waiting for us in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded bodies, in those hardships, in their lack of faith."

My Reflection

In the course of my life I have gradually found myself praying (surrendering) to God. When talking to other people, I found that they prayed to Jesus. I knew that it was good either way but at the same time it seemed to me to be different.

I think my problem came from our belief as Christians that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. It seemed to me that at times, people prayed to Jesus as God in a way that did not accept that Jesus was fully human. I don't know if that was what they believed, but it presented a problem for me. It was a problem for me because I believed that Jesus was God and that Jesus was a human being. I know that this is a mysterious belief that I am not able to understand too well and no matter how long I live it will always be mysterious. But I do believe that Jesus is fully human and fully divine.

At the same time we need some hints that point to mysteries that are beyond our understanding. For example we believe with the scriptures that God is love. These words "God is love" are extremely valuable and helpful but we can't know fully what they mean. God is like our human love, but God is not like our human love. God is way beyond what our human love is. We get the hint of what God is, which can draw us in, but at the same time we are still in the dark.

It is this LOVE that has been holding all creation in existence since the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago. This LOVE not only holds us in existence but also is within us. When we hold the belief that the "word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," we are speaking of a God presence that is much deeper than the God presence in the rest of creatures. It is a God presence that is total and at the same time does not eliminate the humanness of Jesus. Our frail words try to express this by saying that Jesus is fully human and fully divine.

I find that it is much more fruitful to allow this mystery to transform me rather than to try to understand it. God loves us so much that she/he wanted to share in a human way our difficult and often painful human living and to bring healing not only for our personal sins but also for the suffering caused by centuries of human sin brought on by past societies, our society today, and I imagine by many societies to come.

Salvation means to be healed and made whole. That is why we can say that God is Savior and Jesus is Savior. Their saving love is always active. Our small but essential role is to allow that healing love to transform us.

Surrendering (praying) to God or Jesus seems to me to be all the same thing: we are always loved by infinite love. That is good enough for me. I don't need to (though I would like it) figure everything out.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay

#6 THE CHURCH OF MERCY

BY POPE FRANCIS

Pg. 23 "A mere glance at the scriptures is enough to make us see how our gracious Father wants to hear the cry of the poor: 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them....so I will send you.'" (Exod. 3:7-8,10)

Pg. 24 "This means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs we encounter.

I want a church that is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us....we need to let ourselves be evangelized by them."

Pg. 25 "We are called to find Christ in them, to lead our voice to their causes, but also to be their friend, to listen to them, to speak to them, and to embrace the mysterious wisdom that God wishes to share with us through them."

My Reflection

I have never been poor. I have never had to wonder when I would have my next meal, whether I would have a place to sleep at night, whether there was someone who would care about me, whether I would have a job. Hence, I have never had to put my trust in God when my survival itself was at risk. Having no experience with being really poor, I can have only a superficial understanding of what it means to be really poor. Hence, I have no grounds to judge those who are poor, much less to think that I am better than they are. If I do not I listen to those who are poor and learn from them, there will always be something missing in my soul and my decisions will always be somewhat defective. My judgements about the poor will be defective because they will be influenced by my living in a very different culture.

Since I am financially in the middle class, though there will be other matters that will lead me to make false judgements and decisions, I will be able to understand reasonably well what is going on in the lives of middle class people.

While what I have just written is true, it is inadequate. It is inadequate because I am a priest. Being a priest shields me from difficulties that many middle class people face. I don't have the challenges of providing for a family and dealing with various relationships and worries that are part of being a family.

This gets even worse when I believe that I am different from and indeed superior to lay people. Spiritual growth is then so easily hindered by the inflation of my ego. I can so easily see myself as doing all kinds of good when actually I am being a jerk.

There are spiritual challenges in ever life journey. Being a priest certainly has its share.

Finally, let's suppose that I am a very wealthy person. In this case, I would live in a culture that is very different from that of all but a very few people. My wealth would give me a lot of power. I could manage problems and difficulties in a way that would not be possible for other people. Because I live in a world that is cut off from most people, my judgements and decisions would likely be influenced by the world in which I live. It would be hard for me to see what is really going on outside my world.

This doesn't mean that if I am wealthy, I am bad, but wealth and power complicate growth in our spiritual journey and can stop it completely. Power and money are not bad in themselves but they are dangerous. I think that is why Jesus warned us about them. Money and power should serve not enslave.

I divided our financial situation into three classes. Obviously there are many variations within each class. I wrote this because I believe that we won't follow Jesus very well unless we listen to and learn from people whose cultures are different from our own.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay