

God, Compassion and Law

Christ came to introduce a break with logic

That made all other outrage seem as child's play;

The Mercy on the Sin against the Sermon,

Strange no one ever thought of it before Him.

'Twas lovely and its origin was love. – Robert Frost

Since his election Pope Francis has been urging Catholics to remember that God should not be defined simply as the Divine Law-giver. The wider narrative is about God who is both personal and relational. It is a story of God who is related to humanity more intimately than anyone or anything else. Francis reminds his fellow Catholics that God is the very personification of limitless mercy and compassion and that Jesus incarnated, lived and preached the Mystery of it all.

Jesus was born at a time when his fellow Jews were struggling to believe that God truly was the infinitely generous and compassionate One. They were suffering acute stress as they struggled to remain faithful to the demands of the Covenant, especially to the Laws of ritual Purity and racial Separation. For decades occupying powers had attempted to force them to assimilate. This would have meant compromising their distinctive moral code and blurring their religious identity. Abandonment of the Covenant invited extinction. However, in real life, their habitual failure to meet the demands of the Law generated intense feelings of frustration, resentment and self-loathing. Fortunately, in the midst of this angst and moral ambiguity, confusion and inverted rage, the voice of sanity was heard.

The legendary religious teacher Hillel the Great, who died around 10 C.E., was that voice of wisdom. When asked a question on what constituted the essential teaching of the Torah, Hillel replied: “What you hate for yourself, do not do to another. This is the whole of the Law and the Prophets. The rest is commentary, now go and study it.”

A few years later, Jesus of Nazareth retrieved Hillel's wisdom in similar circumstances, stripped Torah to its bare essentials and echoed the Sage almost verbatim: “Whatever you wish that people do to you, do to them also; for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7: 12; 22: 34-40).

From his baptism and throughout his public ministry, Jesus identified with his fellow Jews in their sinfulness, brokenness and dysfunctional existence. He taught that the path to the re-establishment of a healthy bond between the people and their God could not be created through the rigid application of prescriptive law but through a relationship based on trust in the merciful, compassionate and restorative power of God.

Currently there is lively and sometimes heated debate in the Catholic Church over issues involved the Family often facing intractable moral and canonical challenges. Catholics especially are conscious of the tension between Pope Francis and those who have serious reservations about his pastoral vision. A number of these are members of the hierarchy who firmly believe that the Catholic Church stands or falls on the question of doctrinal integrity and papal authority. Francis believes that the integrity of the Gospel stands or falls on the

constant affirmation of the mystery of God's mercy and compassion which are boundless. On occasion Francis does not hold back the intense passion of his convictions:

"They scorn the others, they stay away from the community as a whole, they stay away from the people of God, they have privatized salvation: salvation is for me and my small group, but not for all the people of God. And this is a very serious mistake. It's what we see and call: 'the ecclesial elites.' When these small groups are created within the community of God's people, these people believe they are being good Christians and also are acting in good faith maybe, but they are small groups who have privatized salvation." - Homily, Jan 29, 2015.

A frequent argument of those critical of Francis' call for more pastoral largesse and less legalism is that the strict application of the Law is the best expression Christian 'tough love.' Jesus usually applied the 'tough love' principle to his opponents, the judgmental, interventionist, self-righteous hypocrites who entertain a rather perverse understanding of human liberation. (Mt 23: 4)

Francis is reminding the Catholic people that there is always a solution to challenges and impasses whatever they may be. He reminds everyone that nothing, not even the Church's own laws can contain, limit or domesticate the mystery of Christ and his Gospel. Francis powerfully reaffirms this conviction when he says:

"The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door. There are other doors that should not be closed either. Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason. This is especially true of the sacrament which is itself 'the door': baptism. The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. (51) These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems." - Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, "*Evangelii Gaudium*," No. 47.

Suggested related reading:

See the interview with Blaise Cupich, the new Archbishop of Chicago, Grant Gallicho, "A Listening Church," *Commonweal Magazine*, January 22, 2015. (Linked [here](#).)

The NYT article features a number of Catholic divorcees who respond in different ways to the Church laws governing their access or not to the Eucharist. See Michael Paulson, "As Vatican Revisits Divorce, Many Catholics long for Acceptance." *New York Times*, Jan 24, 2015. (Linked [here](#))

See Hannah Roberts, "Chief organiser hopes Vatican family synod will listen to 'irregular' families as it considers cohabitation and remarriage" *The Tablet*, 28 January, 2015. (Linked [here](#))

Pope Francis' homily at Mass in Santa Martha chapel, Thursday, January 29, 2015 (Linked [here](#))

David Timbs is an active member of Catholics for Renewal.