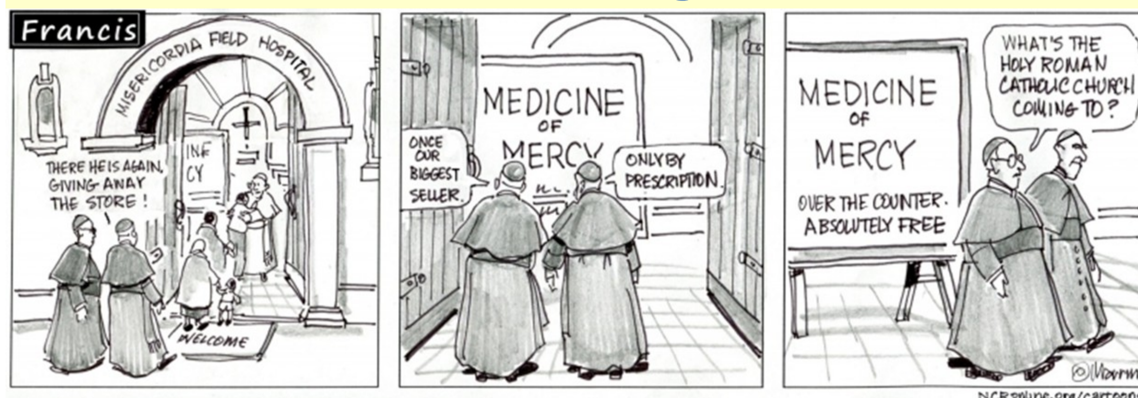
Gillian Paterson PhD, 16 April 2016

IN THE FACE OF 'THE GLOBALISATION OF INDIFFERENCE', IS THERE STILL A PLACE FOR MERCY?

1. Dialogue



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Fortress Europe and 'the globalisation of indifference'

'In the face of the globalisation of indifference, is there still a place for mercy?' The question is central to the narrative of the present papacy, and offers guidance towards understanding the vision behind that narrative. But first, if we are to work with that question, it is worth taking some time to explore the concepts within which it is framed.

First, 'the globalisation of indifference'.

This phrase surfaced in the earliest days of Pope Francis' papacy. Soon after his consecration, on his first papal visit outside Rome, Francis was talking with migrants recently arrived on the island of Lampedusa. Here he made media headlines by attacking the rich world for its lack of concern for the suffering of refugees and asylum seekers. Blaming its continuance on a 'globalisation of indifference' in the world at large, he stated bitterly: "We have become used to the suffering of others. It doesn't affect us. It doesn't interest us. It's not our business."

It's now more than three years since the Lampedusa sermon, and in those years, the flood of migrants has become a tsunami. Our response (as Europeans) has fluctuated. Faced by images on TV that we view at our own firesides, we feel horrified compassion as we witness the deaths of children, the starving families huddled behind razor wire fences and the bulldozing of ad hoc camps which provided a minimal (if temporary) level of security. But then come those other images, this time of angry youths throwing stones, storming closed borders or attacking young women in 'our' cities. And we think, "Careful, now." And so we are paralysed: torn between pity and caution, and shamed by our continent's paralysis in developing an acceptable, compassionate and workable response. Indifference? Well, maybe: but also guilt, fear and above all, sheer helplessness. The truth is that we don't know what to do.

I'm focusing on these apocalyptic images of migration because it's the most challenging issue that Europe has faced in my adult life, and also because that's the scenario we're struggling with at Notre Dame Refugee Centre, in London, of which I am proud to be a trustee. However, the refugees coming

from East and South are only one strand in the apocalypse facing this continent. Consider these 'signs of the times'.

- We are paralysed as we take in the possible implications of the conflicts in the Middle East.
- Economists and politicians are privately dreading economic collapse, because they know that our governments have never resolved the problems which led to the financial crash of 2008.
- The media speak of the cumulative effects of climate change, but we are divided about how to respond.
- All over Europe, it has become hard for young people to find stable employment or secure housing.
- In recent years, terrorist acts have become a fact of life in our cities and are likely to become more frequent.
- Right wing political views are gaining ground all over Europe. It's not that the left has all the answers, but the polarisation of political narratives (reinforced by media) has meant that less and less space is left for honest dialogue.

Which brings me to *Laudato Si' (LS)*, published in 2015. *LS* is not just soggy environmentalism. What Pope Francis is proposing here is another way of looking at our lives together in what he calls 'our common home': namely a transformed anthropology that locates human relationships (with each other and with our world) at the centre of our attention. Accordingly, its subject matter is the whole political, ethical, human and economic context of our lives together on this planet. The issue of migration is viscerally connected to other issues: a movement of peoples, tectonic in implications, that's on a par with global warming or the rising levels of our seas. Flood barriers and sea-walls won't stop the one; iron bars and razor wire won't stop the other.

In addressing these issues, says Francis, we should discern the workings of what he calls a 'technocratic paradigm', which clouds our understanding by gradually colonising our minds and framing our existence. This paradigm hangs on the idea of a subject (which means you or me, or our institutions and governments) who, via logical and rational procedures, progressively assumes ownership and then gains control over his or her environment. Our surroundings then become quantifiable resources to be commodified, controlled and used. Thinking outside the box becomes impossible: despite its promises of liberation, the box has become a prison.

Making sense of these phenomena involves treading a perilous road between two extremes. On the one hand there are those who cling doggedly to the idea of progress, saying that what's needed is more technology. At the other extreme we find the ascetics who view men and women's aspirations as a threat, per se, to the global ecosystem, and believe that all forms of technological progress should be avoided. (LS 60)

Of course men and women have always used and intervened in nature. The world, in Genesis, was God's gift to the people God created. But for a long time this meant being in tune with it and respecting the possibilities it offered. The disciplines through which we understood the world (that is, science, religion, literature etc.) were all marshalled in support of this exercise. Now, Francis suggests, it is we who are the ones to lay our hands on things and other people, extracting from them everything we can, and too often ignoring or forgetting that these are not commodities but fellow human beings. The very language we use comes out of this paradigm. My colleagues are

described as ‘human resources’; sex is something to get, have or to buy. (*LS* 106) This ‘technocratic paradigm’, says Francis, is at the heart of a mindset that’s sub-consciously undermining our ability to think ethically, and is (at least in part) responsible for the sense of helplessness which, in the Lampedusa homily, he describes as ‘the globalisation of indifference’.

Mercy: God’s ‘identity card’

And now mercy. The story goes that the German theologian Walter Kaspar met the then-Archbishop of Buenos Aires in the corridor of the Domus Santa Marta on the first night of the conclave where he was elected pope. Kasper gave him a copy of the newly published Spanish edition of his study of mercy, *Barmherzigkeit*. “Ah, mercy,” said the future pope when he saw the title, “La Misericordia. This is the name of our God.” Having read it from cover to cover during the conclave, Pope Francis told the world at his first Angelus that this book “did me such good ... Cardinal Kasper said that hearing the word mercy changes everything ... It changes the world.” Since then he has spoken repeatedly about the centrality of mercy to the Christian life.

The word ‘mercy’ derives from Misericordia, which means, literally, having a heart (*cor*) which is open to pity or wretchedness (*miserere*). In *The Name of God is Mercy (NGM),* the little book written in collaboration with Vatican journalist Andrea Tournielli, the pope says: ‘Mercy is the divine attribute which embraces, it is God’s giving himself to us and bowing to forgive. … mercy’ (he says) ‘is God’s identity card.’ (*NGM* p6)

Why, he asks, is humanity so in need of mercy? (*NGM* p13). Because humanity is wounded. Either it thinks it doesn’t know how to cure these wounds, or it believes they are incurable. And that leads to the ‘indifference’ we speak of in our title, whose flip side is the helplessness or sense of inevitability that goes along with the technocratic paradigm. And this sense of helpless confusion, Francis suggests, is what increasingly frames the value-set we bring to the table.

He quotes Benedict XVI. ‘Mercy,’ says Benedict, ‘is in reality the core of the Gospel message; it is the name of God himself, the face with which he revealed himself in the Old Testament, and then fully in Jesus Christ, incarnation of Creative and Redemptive Love.’ (B16 quoted in *NGM* p5) This we act on, says Francis, ‘by thinking of the Church as a field hospital, where treatment is given above all to those who are most wounded.’ (*NGM* p6 – and see the cartoon at the beginning of this paper.)

When Francis talks of mercy, though, we should be careful not to allow what he says to become a vehicle for our own favoured agendas. For example, the appeal to mercy has been interpreted by some as support for a liberalism which would love to find an excuse for watering down doctrines that mark off the Church from secular cultures. It is important to point out the wrong-headedness of this interpretation. The pope’s call to ‘mercy’ is no soft option. He has made it clear that he is not in the business of changing doctrine; and he deplores the facile optimism that offers salvation on the cheap, without repentance and a commitment to personal or institutional ‘metanoia’ or change. Seeking to understand why rules are sometimes broken does not mean chucking the rule-book in the bin.

For example, in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), Francis speaks uncompromisingly about the issue of abortion.

> 'The Church cannot be expected to change her position on this question. … This is not something subject to alleged reforms or 'modernisations'. It is not 'progressive' to try and resolve problems by eliminating human life.' (*EG* 214)

Immediately, though, he enters a different discourse: the world of human praxis, from which he has stressed, again and again, that doctrinal and moral certainties must never be divorced.

> "On the other hand, it is also true that we have done very little to adequately accompany women in very difficult situations, where abortion appears a quick solution to their profound anguish, especially when the life developing within them is the result of rape or a situation of extreme poverty. Who can remain unmoved before such a painful situation?" (*EG* 214)

'*On the other hand*,' he says. Four times, in *EG*, he uses this phrase. Because Francis is trying to balance two kinds of moral discourses: one that (rightly) takes an absolute view on the principle of the value of human life, and another that (rightly) exhibits a compassionate appreciation for vulnerable people in the context of their lived human realities. What that means, he says, is that there can be no 'monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance'. (*EG* 40)

He develops this argument further in the *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), where he warns, yet again, against making moral judgements that fail to take into account the realities of context. A key pastoral role of the Church is not to impose moral decisions or make them for us but to support the faithful and educate young people in the habit of moral discernment and in the development of conscience. Self-righteousness and judgementalism have no place in this process. Furthermore, *AL* makes clear that Pope Francis not doctrinal reformer. He believes in marriage. He believes in family. He believes in life. He believes in the continuity of the teaching authority of the Church. It's just that doctrine is not the primary lens through which he views those teachings: that primary lens is, instead, the spreading of the gospel.

Critics (there are many, and they include members of my own family) have suggested that 'opening doors to mercy' is little more than a crowd-pleasing exercise in facile pity or cheap forgiveness. No. Mercy is what illuminates honest dialogue between people of good faith. In such a dialogue, that which is 'on the other hand' is heard, the violence of separation acknowledged, and we help each other to come to an understanding of just how painfully unfitted we human beings are to the task of sitting in judgement. The prize is to see bridges replacing fences, evidenced by the kinds of healed, joined up dialogue our world so desperately needs if we are to stand a chance of discerning the path ahead. *(See LS5 for useful references; also AL Chapter 8)*

At this point it might be helpful to recap what has already been said. We started with Francis' sermon at Lampedusa, and the influence of Walter Kaspar's *Mercy*, then turned to his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. Here he urges us to prioritise compassion and forgiveness, repeatedly using the phrase 'on the other hand', and concluding that 'there can be no monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance'. (*EG* 40) In *The Name of God is Mercy*, he urges us to look on the Church as a field hospital, not just for individuals but for the human race. In *Laudato Si'* he responds to 'the globalisation of indifference' with a plea for a transformed anthropology of what it means to be human in the context of 'our common home'. In this, we are up against a toxic discourse which Francis describes as 'the technocratic paradigm'. Without our being aware of it, this

paradigm risks undermining our humanity and shaping people's decisions at all levels. *Amoris Laetitia* further develops that thought. Moral discernment is accomplished through a dialogue between pastoral realities and the long-standing moral teaching of the Church: a dialogue which demands the mature and morally educated participation of the faithful. The door through which we enter that dialogue is the door of mercy.

PART TWO: DIALOGUE AND DISCOURSE

FOCCISA-Nordic: a case study

For the last twenty years, much of my work has been in the field of HIV and AIDS. Accordingly, some years ago, I was invited by the Norwegian Council of Churches to be an external consultant to a process of reflection being conducted by FOCCISA-Nordic – a title given to an ongoing partnership between the councils of churches of eleven Southern African and five Nordic countries. The task was to accompany and document a process of theological reflection on the theme of AIDS-related stigma. Outcomes would include a publication (*One Body*), exchange placements, clearer policies on grant funding and a series of international conferences and workshops. So the first challenge was to set up a working dialogue between the two groups, to which end we had an initial meeting in Johannesburg where everyone was very polite to everyone else and we went home quite pleased with ourselves.

Now it goes without saying that the moral context of HIV is very different in these two regions. For example, in Southern Africa the idea of sin is ever-present, especially in relation to sex. In Nordic countries, though, the prevailing liberal morality can result in a denial of the very existence of sin, again especially in relation to sex.

In Jo'burg, we didn't even scratch the surface of this divergence of moral orientations. It was at the second meeting, in Sweden, that things started to fall apart. I'd arrived a day late because I'd been at a funeral. I walked in and went straight to the room we'd been allocated which, to my surprise, was empty. There were papers on tables, an introductory PowerPoint still on the screen, but no people. Where were they? I texted the organizer, whom I found stumping around gloomily in the garden.

What had happened was this. In evaluating the Jo'burg meeting, it had been observed that none of the Nordic participants were themselves actually living with HIV or AIDS, and it was agreed (properly) that this should be rectified in future. Consequently, at the second meeting, in Stockholm, the leader of the Southern African group found himself sitting down between two men, one from Denmark and one from Sweden, both living openly in homosexual relationships. Distraught, he rose to his feet and called on his whole contingent to walk out. If the two gay men didn't withdraw from the group, the African contingent would go back to Africa. The book was off: any mention of the words 'gay' or 'homosexual' have it fatally contaminated it in the eyes of its church audience.

But in the Nordic countries, the history and epidemiological profile of HIV are inextricably bound up with the stories of men who are in sexual relationships with other men. Although many women and children are also infected, you cannot talk about 'AIDS related stigma' without also talking about the stigmatization of homosexuality. The problem is that in most Southern African countries homosexuality is not just culturally taboo but also treated as a criminal offence. Stalemate, it seemed.

Now this is a much-shortened version of a fascinating and important story. The FOCCISA-Nordic process involved bitter disagreements, in which participants struggled to understand the (apparently irrational) values, assumptions or beliefs of others. In the event, though, these disagreements turned out to be some of the most valuable moments in the entire process of dialogue. The experience of watching people from another culture struggling painfully with their own taboos gives a profound insight into the human condition, and into the shared yet infinitely diverse character of human culture. The greatest value of dialogue may not be what it teaches us about others, so much as its potential for propelling us into a deeper understanding of ourselves.

In the end, FOCCISA-Nordic has turned out to be an excellent and productive venture, and I'm proud to have been involved. Some years later, I met the leader of the African group, who has now risen to be a leader his own African Church. "Do you remember that day?" he asked. "I have never been so shocked in my life. But now, you know, I look around me here, and I realise that we are blind to a lot of things in our own culture. That was the most important thing I learned from FOCCISA-Nordic."

And what finally brought the group together and ensured it survival? Well, dinner I suppose. There was only one dining room, one big table. Either we sat round it together or we starved.

A note about discourse theory

Now in recent years I've been trying to coordinate a group we call 'the Catholic Network on Population and Development'. This frequently results in the kinds of confrontation I have described above: the sense of two incompatible worldviews meeting, clashing and failing to dialogue. In organizing our discussions, we have been very much influenced by Paul Ricoeur's work on discourse.

For example.

My husband is a doctor – a specialist in public health and infectious disease, so you'd think we would have really useful conversations about our work. But in the early days we just had these terrible rows. He approached the epidemic through a bio-medical frame: which implies treatment for individuals, lots of doctors and nurses, compulsory testing of those at risk, disclosure of HIV status, and the notification of contacts. But I 'saw' it through a development frame: implying community mobilisation, empowerment of women, sociological and economic analysis of the causes of vulnerability, the training of local health workers and so on. Each of us was running on our separate set of tramlines: the discourse of bio-medicine and the discourse of development. And of course, in projecting a particular way of knowing, each of these frameworks does, in its own way, have much to contribute.

Opposing discourses can also exist in the same person. In Kenya, while researching churches' approaches to HIV and AIDS, I met a young priest who also worked part-time as a hospital chaplain. 'I don't really know what I think about AIDS,' he said. 'When I'm in Church I think it's a sin' (the idea of sin being a central concept in Christian discourse). 'When I'm in the hospital I think it's a virus' (a concept taken from bio-medical discourse). 'But when I'm back in my village, I think it's a punishment from the ancestors for selling out our culture to Western values.' (And that is a conservative traditional discourse, totally opposed to the bio-medical one, and not as uncommon as one might imagine).

So what are the implications of us, here, today?

First, there's the question of who is at the table. Our population and development network aims to bring together academics, practitioners, and also policy makers from development agencies and government departments. If only a single discourse were available, we might end up with a warm sense of agreement, but we would have learned little, and (in terms of the network's obejctives) there would be little point in the encounter.

Second, we should be vigilant in spotting where one dominant, powerful discourse threatens to overtake and colonise – as Pope Francis implies in relation to the 'technocratic paradigm', which he suggests has colonised minds, shaped discourses and dictated what it's possible to think and say.

Third, discourses are not free-floating. They serve systems of power. Just who, for example, benefits from a world-order driven by technology and the consumption of resources? Next time you hear somebody imposing a view that others don't necessarily share, just ask yourself whose interests are being served.

Fourth, we should be cautious about scoring points, winning arguments, or 'having the last word'. Rowan Williams spends the whole of the first chapter of *On Christian Theology* talking about theological integrity. A statement that's not open to response, he says, does not have theological integrity. He reminds us of the words of Augustine of Hippo:

> "Whoever thinks that in this mortal life one may [...] possess the unclouded light of changeless truth, understands neither what he seeks, nor who he is who seeks it" (de cons. evang. IV, x, 20)

Mercy: human and divine

So, that brings us back to our question: in the face of the globalisation of indifference, is there still a place for mercy?

I was reflecting on this the other morning, my eyes resting on the Vladimir icon, which I love. The mother and child embody wholeness and love, mutuality and peace. Mercy, even. But wait a bit. A young girl gets pregnant in a morally conservative culture, under a nervous and violent regime that's surviving uneasily under military occupation. From the beginning, the child is seen as – to say the least – strange. Mary's story involves migration and marginalisation, cruelty and political intrigue, culminating in her son's hideous death, and her own uncertain future in a culture where widows are outcasts, non-people. She doesn't speak much. But we hear her conversation with the angel, at the Annunciation. We hear her in dialogue with her cousin, Elizabeth (though, in those pre-Facebook days it's a mystery who leaked its details, especially the text of the Magnificat!). We hear her telling off the boy Jesus for staying behind in Jerusalem (a response strikes a chord with any parent whose child has been temporarily lost); and we hear the enigmatic exchange about wine, at the wedding feast in Cana.

I'm not a mariologist, as many of you are. But I find the idea of the Mother of God as an icon of mercy to be a powerful one. I would want to resist popular images of Mary which have been watered down, spiritualised, deprived of their radical power: just as I would argue against popular understandings of mercy. Because Mary is tough: she has to be. Mary is a survivor. She is the theotokos, the one who carried God. In dialogue within the person of Mary are the two most

powerful discourses in creation: the divine and the human. In her, divine mercy becomes human, and human mercy (complex and multi-faceted as it is) becomes divine.

But the call to mercy is not a cosy option, as Mary found. Mercy isn't something that just comes plopping down out of the sky and making all things well. As aged Simeon predicted, 'to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed, a sword will pierce even your own soul.' (Lk 2:35)

So saying 'no' to the globalisation of indifference means saying 'no' to simple solutions, 'no' to facile optimism, 'no' to mythologies designed to conceal the truth, 'no' to easy answers, and 'no' to the lies that tell us all is well when all is patently NOT well. It means identifying friends and honouring their truth. It means creating safe spaces for honest dialogue, and not being afraid of 'the other'. And if I were at home in discourses of popular piety, I would say that Mary must have a special place in her heart for those who have the courage to enter those troubled waters.