

Mercy and Pardon

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1. Mercy in the writings of Dehon

“Miséricorde” is a frequently used word in the writings of Léon Dehon.¹ Although Dehon uses the word often in a social or political context – mercy for France – or as attached to the name of God (God of mercy), the Sacred Heart (the abyss or symbol of mercy), or Mary (mother of mercy), he has three meanings for mercy that are significant for our topic.

The first is the use of the word in conjunction with forgiveness or pardon for sin. It is probably the most frequent connotation. Mercy is what annihilates sin, overcomes sin. Understood is here the power of God’s mercy to change the condition of the sinner from being “lost”, “condemned” or “excluded” to being “saved.” In other words, mercy changes a person from being a sinner to being “in grace.” Dehon gives no reflection on how mercy accomplishes this, nor does he indicate what it means ontologically for the person to be the recipient of mercy. It is mostly found within the discourse of meditation.

Secondly, Dehon calls mercy the “attribut divin le plus glorifié dans la sainte Écriture. » (RSC,72) In this context, mercy is frequently accompanied by words that speak of “excess.” It is said to be “inexhaustible,” “inexplicable.” Mercy connotes the excess in God, the surplus beyond justice. It is the ultimate face of God in whom Dehon trusts. Mercy is the overriding attribute which refigures the other attributes such as God’s justice. God’s justice is a merciful justice. But it is clear that Dehon is not writing as a theologian. He remains a spiritual writer. In some texts he presents “mercy” not as an attribute, that is, God in his being, but as an exercise. God “chooses” mercy. How? By humiliating self, making sacrifices, by suffering. Through self-denial God chooses to suffer to show mercy. (see RSC 75) Mercy as superabundant and excessive is not God’s selfhood. It remains a choice, made visible in the incarnation and the passion. And so it seems at times that God’s mercy is in fact subject to the law of justice that demands that sin can only be overcome by sacrifice and suffering, due to sin, not by the self-gift of *agape*. The *anéantisme* of the French School remained overriding. It is dominated by the incarnation and passion, not by creation and resurrection.

A third use of the word mercy touches on the effect that mercy has upon those who receive it. It makes possible the distribution of God’s mercy to others – “je veux aider votre miséricorde” (RSC 315). The effusion of God’s mercy allows us to show mercy to others – “taking on all the sufferings

¹ DehonDocs indicates 731 uses of the word *miséricorde* (plus 65 times the Latin, *misericordia*) in the writings of Dehon. It compares with *charité* (1563), *amour* (3627) and *réparation* (1063). The main texts in which Dehon speaks of mercy are *Couronnes d’Amour*, *Rétraite du Sacré-Cœur*, *Mois du Sacré-Cœur*, *Directoire spirituel*, and *Études sur le Sacré-Cœur de Jésus*.

of our brothers.” (Ext 8035185, 3) It is the foundation for our “compassion for the infirmities of our brothers.” (CAM 253) In line with the theme of the chapter, it makes us merciful to others.

2. Mercy as God’s selfhood or energy

Most frequently, as with Léon Dehon, mercy is understood within an Aristotelian substantialist or essentialist framework. Mercy is then the highest attribute, property or capacity in God. It “belongs” to God. It is not Godself: God is not mercy, love, but has mercy, has love. In part, this is due because in the West, we think God from the oneness of God and only secondarily from the trinity. God’s mercy can only be approached from a trinitarian perspective.² God’s selfhood is fully relational: fully a self in the other. More accurately, in the Father/Son/Spirit Selfhood is the other. The other is the very self. It is in this sense that Father/Son/Spirit is love and mercy. The *energeia*, *dunameis* of God’s self is in the other. God is a self-emptying (*kenosis*) in the other. God’s mercy is therefore an infinite desire for the other, infinite self-gift to the other. It defines God’s Selfhood.

For Dehon mercy is not the internal expulsion within God but is enacted in the incarnation and especially in the death of Jesus. It is a response to sin, not a dynamis in God’s self. In this context one only needs to read the following quote from Dehon: « Il ne pouvait nous donner son Fils comme frère et comme roi, à moins de nous le donner d’abord comme rançon, comme victime d’expiation et de réparation. Il fallait pour cela l’envoyer pour souffrir. Il a voulu le faire... Il l’a donné en le sacrifiant pour nous, en l’immolant à sa justice à notre place, en déchargeant toute sa vengeance sur ce Fils bien-aimé afin de nous faire miséricorde à nous ses ennemis ! » (CAM 37) But if God’s selfhood is mercy, its first manifestation is not the incarnation and death but creation and in the recreation of the resurrection. Lévinas described creation as the first self-emptying of God: the creation of a space for the other, the creature. In that context, the incarnation, the life of Jesus and his death are not a ransom, expiation or immolation but a revelation of the inexhaustible riches of Godself. In creation – and in the resurrection as re-creation – we are witnesses therefore of the power unleashed by the self-giving force of God in history.

What is the (re)creational force of Father/Son/Spirit as mercy and of love upon the human self? What is the power of resurrection upon all the vicissitudes of history, the human desire for the other: in sexuality, friendship, the generosity of love, the desire for offspring, human growth, the failure of relationships, sickness, breakdown, sin, death? If creation, as Levinas suggests, is the upsurge not of the same but fecundity that makes emerge the other, the encounter in history of the force of mercy – God’s mercy – must first of all be understood as a coming-to-be of possibility, a release of a new capacity, an empowering of relationships, especially pardon. In this context, mercy is to be understood as a breaking through, a superseding of a past that was blocking life of possibilities, the release of hope, the recharging of the power to love, the unblocking of our capacities. There is operative in creation, therefore, an excess, a superabundance, a surplus that urges creation to move beyond a static sameness to what is different, or new. It is urged by mercy, the creative force of God; it is the selfhood of God moving creation to a completion.

3. Mercy and pardon

² Walter Kasper, *Misericordia: Concetto fondamentale del Vangelo – Chiave della vita cristiana* (Queriniana edizione, 2014) p. 135.

What then does this mercy mean in relationship to pardon? Here the perceptive reflection of P. Ricoeur on this pardon in the epilogue of *Memory, History, Forgetting* is helpful.³ Pardon, according to Ricoeur, has a twofold enigma: on the one hand, the fault which paralyzes the power to act of the “capable being” and, on the other hand, the lifting of this existential incapacity through forgiveness. (457) What is operative between them, Ricoeur says, is a vertical asymmetry. (459) Between the fault and forgiveness there is a disproportion: the depth of the fault and the height of pardon, between the fault that must be avowed and the hymn of joy in the reception of forgiveness. He asks, how can what we have done and has shaped our character and for which we have experienced the unpardonable moral accusation be forgiven? What then does it mean “to forgive?” How can forgiveness unbind an agent from what he or she has done?

There is no immediate logic linking fault⁴ and pardon. The fault is not undone: the act cannot be removed from the agent, the self. And yet the act’s force in shaping one’s character can be lessened. Ricoeur thinks that only theology with its myths of redemption provide a way to break the indissoluble link between the fault and the self. In the Abrahamic religions, Ricoeur says, there is a promise of forgiveness: “there is forgiveness,” “there is mercy.” Its realm is eschatological. Its principal language is that of the hymn (467). It is heard in the psalms: “A discourse of praise and celebration. It says: *il y a, es gibt*, there is ... forgiveness... There is forgiveness as there is joy, as there is wisdom, extravagance, love. Love, precisely. Forgiveness belongs to the same family.” (467)

In the scriptures this eschatological promise is revealed especially in the hymn of the Servant of YHWH, the Son of Man, and the Christological hymns found in Paul’s letters. We find it also in the life and works of Jesus of Nazareth, who as Dehon says, is the incarnation of mercy. (CAM 3/189) In his miracles of healing, the superabundance of wine at Cana, and the twelve baskets of leftovers of bread in the multiplication, the offers of forgiveness, and the raising of the dead. It is equally found in the extravagance and constant surprises of the parables. In the paradoxes and hyperbole of the parables and aphorisms of the Gospel, the eschatological version of a new world is revealed and realized. The symbol of this is the resurrection of Jesus as the final outpouring of God’s Spirit and the recreation of the world. The scandal of the healing of the paralytic where the Pharisees rightly saw the work of God in the pardon, the amazement and the glorification of God by the bystanders is the opening of the final times and its recreation of the world. It is this surplus in generosity, the experience of possibility beyond sickness and guilt and the promise of pardon beyond the fault that is the realm of mercy, the realm of *agape*.

In his hymn of love, Paul goes to the very core of this experience of love. It sings how love can break through to a new realm. Ricoeur suggests: “If love keeps no score of wrongs – as the hymn insists – this is because it descends to the place of accusation, imputability, where one’s scores, one’s accounts, are kept.” (467) Love takes us outside the logic of “things as usual”: it endures. As Ricoeur says, “it is Height itself.” (468) It includes everything even the unforgivable, even the enemy. In love and mercy the disproportion between fault and pardon is most acute. There is clearly no equivalency. As Jesus said: You must not forgive once. You must forgive seventy-seven

³ Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) p. 457-506.

⁴ Ricoeur connects fault with feeling: it is “the feeling of loss of its own wholeness.” (462) or “an inadequation of the ego to its deepest desire.” (462). It is part of what Ricoeur has called the “ontological vehemence of discourse about the self.”

times. (Mt 18.22) There is no upper limit; the exigency is infinite, as God is infinite. No fault too great, but it is open to pardon.⁵ Yet, we must ask, is love capable of undoing the act of the fault? Can a person regain his capacity to act for good despite the fault. Within Christianity this is implied in repentance and conversion.

It means that mercy does not undo justice and the issue of punishment or repentance for acts committed. Mercy without justice mocks the seriousness of fault or sin. Mercy must be accompanied by repentance and the bearing of the guilt. This is implied in the beautiful scriptural hymns of the Servant of YHWH, the Son of Man, and the Christological hymns, in which the figure of Jesus whose love takes on the guilt and burden of the other's fault. In these images there is a presentation of an inexhaustive love – symbolized for us in the pierced side – that can affect a person into regaining his or her capacity to act beyond the fault. However, it requires repentance.

4. The gift in return

The final question is whether mercy implies a reciprocity or an exchange from the recipient?⁶

It is not enough to contrast the penitent's admission of the fault with the extravagance of the gift of forgiveness. As we stated earlier, there is a disproportion between the fault and forgiveness. In forgiveness the excess of mercy overwhelms the lowly confession of guilt. It allows the one making the confession to regain the capacity to act. However, the extravagance of forgiveness is so disproportionate to the request for forgiveness that the recipient of forgiveness must in some way deal with the excess of the gift. Hence the unlimited mercy, while absolutely gratis, creates a sort of obligation for a return. (480) But such a gift in return, says Ricoeur, cannot equal the excess of the gift. It is best expressed in Jesus' "radical commandment to love one's enemies unconditionally." (481) Dehon and the tradition of the spirituality of the Heart of Christ has called it "redamatio," a loving in return, even a loving on behalf of those who refuse to love. This love of the enemy is a beautiful image of the height of forgiveness because only from the enemy one expects no return. Mercy asks one to live in an economy of the gift.

Mercy, in other words, can only be answered with extravagance, with unlimited generosity or abundance... or with thanksgiving. Hence, the Eucharist where one joins the extreme generosity of the self-gift of Jesus through an act of thanksgiving of the community and in the eating of the bread.

⁵ It includes even the shoa. Both Ricoeur and Derrida warn against the banalization of forgiveness: "Forgiveness is not, and it should not be, either normal, or normative, or normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, standing the test of the impossible; as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality." (469-470)

⁶ See the beautiful pages on reciprocity operative in agape in Paul Ricoeur, *The Courses of Recognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) p. 220 – 246.