

**A RESPONSE TO PAUL G. CROWLEY, S.J., “BOLD MERCY:  
GOD’S SUMMONS TO ECCLESIAL CONVERSION”**

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In my office at Boston College I have a table around which I meet with colleagues and students. On the wall above this table hangs a retablo, that is, a devotional image of a Catholic saint and a form of popular Catholicism. Santa Lucia (St. Lucy) graces this space; she is depicted carrying two eyeballs on a plate with one hand and holding a palm branch in the other. As we know, she is associated with light, the patron saint of eyesight and of writers (as well as a patroness of an island here in the Caribbean). Her palm branch symbolizes victory over evil. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante’s use of her suggests that she illuminates mercy for those confronting darkness.<sup>1</sup> To many of us she may appear an unconventional saint for theological work. Indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine are the official patron saints of theologians. However, Santa Lucia hangs on my wall because whenever I look at her, it is as if she asks me: Where is your gaze fixed? What are you looking at? What do you see? How do you see? And, why?

Professor Paul Crowley possesses a well-developed capacity to see. He has an uncanny and disarming way of guiding his readers to the heart of the matter at hand, transparently and lucidly. He contemplates the current ecclesial context by, in the words of Walter Burghardt S.J., “taking a long, loving look at the real.”<sup>2</sup>

Crowley’s address this morning, “Bold Mercy: God’s Call to Ecclesial Conversion,” echoes his earlier work *Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross, and Hope*<sup>3</sup> in that both extend an invitation to conversion, one that makes difficult demands of our hearts, souls, minds, and lives. If we follow Crowley, I dare say we will find ourselves taking a walk down the proverbial road less traveled. He poses a simple yet agitating question: “What would it mean if the church herself [all of us] were the recipient of such a bold mercy?” Mercy is the boldness of God’s love, “a boldness shown, not as a force, but in and through the disarming subversion of fear—as a perfect love that casts out fear (1 John 4:18), with power to disturb and disrupt the ways of life, and of religion, that we take for granted. . .” Fear poses the greatest threat to our reception of God’s bold mercy. Fear lodges itself within us, bodily, perhaps as a racing heartbeat, a dull pain, or an un-settling irritant, all reminders that deny an easy journey. Bold mercy and ecclesial conversion are not for the faint of heart. Maybe even more so at this time, as the United States finds itself in the midst of a colorful political election drama in which “fear” plays an unrelenting supporting role. (Some may wish to claim more than just a supporting role.) Bold mercy, as Crowley shows, invites an unpretentious ecclesial self-understanding, one that takes careful account of the contingencies prompted by the Holy Spirit. His proposal urges an exceptional form of ecclesial imagination, beckoning us beyond the well-worn

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. David H. Higgins, trans. C.H. Sisson (New York: Oxford University Press), 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Burghardt S.J., “Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real,” *Church* (Winter, 1989): 14–18.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Crowley, S.J., *Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross, and Hope* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005).

paths the church has often traveled. In this Year of Mercy, he reminds us of Pope Francis' invitation to "consider the degree to which the church itself is in need of God's mercy, of the grace of conversion, and of the ways in which we, as a church, do not see the offer of this grace of conversion." The opaque structures of sin have hold of us, keeping us so convinced of the claims that we make, that our own judgments, human judgments, and divine judgments, appear as if one and the same. Confusion reigns, "even in some precincts of the church itself."

What Crowley proposes is that it is the absence of mercy—mercilessness, a force wherein we lose ourselves in sin—that cries out to God. God resists the mercilessness of this world in the struggle for the Reign of God, particularly in "the revelation of the God in Jesus Christ, [who is] mercy itself poured out onto the world." Without Jesus Christ's "NO" to anti-mercy, the world, caught in the mire of sin, devolves into a never-ending chaotic breakdown. Only the Resurrection, which overturns and upends the world of anti-mercy can circumscribe the reign of sin and in the fullness of time bring sin to an absolute end. Crowley asks us to consider: Are we, who are the church, willing to open ourselves to the need for mercy, "to the revolutionary power of the resurrection that brought about the birth of the church in the first place"?

The challenge that Crowley places before us is to look within and to open ourselves to an ecclesial conversion from within. He summons us to appreciate that "the church is itself the bearer of sin, not only through its members, but as a body." To take seriously the church as holy and sinful, and both at one and the same time, demands a mature faith. While it is never easy to wrestle with the social sin of the church, the damage this social sin has caused begs no less of us. History provides many examples of ecclesial social sin. Historical examples tend to be much easier to consider, for they remain at a distance. Crowley, however, has drawn back the curtain in more daring fashion by encouraging us to see the damage being done in our own time. I would like to raise two issues for ongoing reflection: women and the absence of mercy, and the role of symbols in social sin.

### ***Women and the Absence of Mercy***

The absence of mercy reduces human beings by minimizing their humanity, allowing sin and misery to gain a greater foothold. Mercilessness ultimately destroys the humanity of all involved. The perpetrators remain so caught by their own sinfulness that they cannot free themselves, and their human victims remain stripped of their subjectivity, reduced to mere instruments. All involved lose their *humanitas*. Everything is at stake when the suffering inflicted persists at an acute level. Simone Weil names this reality *affliction*, the most extreme form of suffering. It destroys the soul. In Spanish the term "*desalmada*" captures this condition. "Alma" means soul. Often inadequately translated as "heartless," *desalmada* literally means to be without soul or to de-soul, and can refer to a person or, more often, to a society.

Let me suggest a connection. The crucifixion of women as women along the U.S.-Mexican border takes on multiple forms: their systematic assassination (femicide), their victimization through sex trafficking, and their employment in factories benefiting globalized capitalism. This crucifixion of women, no doubt an example of anti-mercy, takes root in societies *desalmadas*. This crucifixion is obscured and made to appear natural and inevitable, thus justified, through the

dissemination of the myth of *mujeres desechables*, a myth in service of global capitalism. Melissa Wright helpfully writes:

The myth of the disposable third world woman revolves around the trials and tribulations of its central protagonist—a young woman from a third world locale—who, through the passage of time, comes to personify the meaning of human disposability: someone who eventually evolves into a living state of worthlessness. The myth explains that this waiting process occurs within the factories that employ her as she, within a relatively short period of time and at a young age, loses the physical and mental faculties for which she was initially employed, until she is worth no more than the cost of her dismissal and substitute. In other words, over time, this woman turns into a form of industrial waste, at which point she is discarded and replaced. The myth explains this unlucky fate as a factual outcome of natural and cultural processes that are immune to external tampering. In short, there is nothing, says the myth, that can be done to save its unfortunate protagonist from her sad destiny.<sup>4</sup>

This myth clouds political and economic relationships so as to preempt any discussion of politics. Crucified women, women who are subject to legal violence become seen as anomalous victims of horrific evil made to appear utterly distant from the global forces of power, perceived as essentially benign and necessary. Just days ago at the ACHTUS's colloquium, systematic theologian Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez, called our attention *necropolitics*, the intrinsic relationship between power and death,<sup>5</sup> in other words, crucifixion. How might the church speak a credible theological word that challenges the crucifixion of women and the forces benefitting from *mujeres desechables*?

### ***The Role of Theological Symbols in Social Sin***

If all of us who together make up the church are indeed sinners, then the church cannot but be influenced by the consequences of our sin. As Crowley notes, these consequences create a certain blindness or myopia that has an impact on ecclesial structures. This myopia, while in and of itself, is not evil, nonetheless “becomes the matrix within which people live and breathe and have their ecclesial being.” As a result of this myopia, we as church can cause harm to people, fail to perceive the harm we cause, and not imagine the church to be in need of reform. Yet isn't it precisely in the workings of this kind of myopia that the church stands most in need of the power of God's mercy?

This myopia, and the resulting damage caused, must be linked to the role of symbols in the church. As Elizabeth Johnson has notably argued, “the symbol of God functions;” indeed, all the church's theological symbols function.<sup>6</sup> If our church fails to symbolize God widely, richly, and abundantly in female terms, then doesn't such

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<sup>4</sup> Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez O.P., “Violence, bodies and redemption: The presence–absence of the Messiah in the broken history of humanity,” Unpublished paper presented to the *Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States*, June 7, 2016, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads, 1992).

symbolism reduce the church's capacity to offer a credible theological word to confront violence against women? Might we consider that an ecclesial blindness with respect to women's capacity to image Christ leads to the widely held perception that women are unable to "stand equally with men as human beings in the sight of God"? We need to ask, to what degree does the church need bold mercy to address the ways it has inadvertently participated in a symbolic disorder that fails to confront, in the strongest possible terms, the tragedy of violence against women? Are we as church guilty of a theological malpractice that limits our ability to unabashedly defy the evil of violence suffered by women?