

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: How are Justice and Mercy Related? Metaethical and practical Considerations
- Convener: Gerard Mannion, Georgetown University
- Moderator: Anna Floerke Scheid, Duquesne University
- Presenters: Robert Gascoigne, Australian Catholic University
Conor M. Kelly, Marquette University
Christian Henkel, University of Tübingen

This was a lively session with three rich and thought-provoking papers. Each paper was highly original in approach yet they blended together in a most complementary fashion to form an enthralling session. Each inspired questions and reflections from the audience that—had time permitted—could have developed into distinctive sessions of their own. Collectively, our three scholars helped us probe the profound depths of the interrelation of justice and mercy both at the metaethical level and at the gritty, realistic coalface of day-to-day life.

First was Robert Gascoigne’s paper, “Justice and Mercy: Recent Catholic Teaching and Martha Nussbaum’s *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*.” This paper delivered a critical comparison between Martha Nussbaum’s work and three major Catholic contributions: Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Cardinal Walter Kasper’s 2014 book *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, and Pope Francis’ April 2015 Bull of Indiction, *Misericordiae Vultus*.

The paper began with a comparison of mercy in Catholic teaching with the understanding of compassion in Nussbaum’s thought. Gascoigne reflected upon the actual effectiveness of those virtues shared by Catholic Social Thought and in wider social ethics. Moving from the sense of divine mercy as the ground of existence itself, which therefore must have implications for human action, the paper reflected on the role of mercy and justice in public life. Gascoigne argued that mercy was not something there simply to plug the gaps left by an absence of justice. The paper further considered love as a regulative idea and source of motivations in the socio-political sphere, the logic of unconditional gift and how mercy can help in restoring the existential balance away from self-interest, even facilitating subversion and dissent. The paper finally discussed mercy’s relationship with transcendence and drew parallels between Nussbaum and Rawls on justice—suggesting the former brings continental and existential animation to the Anglo-Saxon sense of justice in the latter.

Our second paper, from Conor M. Kelly (who unfortunately could not be present personally) was presented in an excellent fashion by Marquette University’s Kate Ward. Entitled “Integrating Catholic Social Thought into the Year of Mercy—Corporal Works of Justice,” Kelly also took the 2015 Bull of Indiction as his starting point, in particular Pope Francis’ emphasis on active mercy especially the sense of justice both as *miseri cordis* and as a (social) virtue aimed at restructuring society. Hence there followed a consideration of how the works of mercy can be developed into analogous corporal works of *justice*. The paper considered a range of concrete issues to illustrate this. These included food insecurity and accessibility (“feed the hungry”); water supply and global shortages (“give drink to the thirsty”); pursue

ethical consumption (“clothe the naked”); “Shelter to the homeless”—here related to the issues of enshrining hospitality in law, e.g. in relation to enforced migration and displacement; fourth was “care for the sick,” here understood in relation to acknowledging healthcare as a universal good; sixth, “visiting the imprisoned,” discussed in relation to the need for a Christian challenge to mass incarceration and related racial disparities in the US; Finally, “Bury the dead” was considered vis-a-vis disparities in the distribution of violence (especially gun violence and war). In conclusion the author argued that the foregoing considerations clearly demonstrate both that and how the corporal works of justice complement rather than replace works of mercy.

Our third and final paper was Christian Henkel’s lively presentation entitled “Experience Speaks Louder than Words: Initiating New Conversations about Justice in the Migration Discourse.” This took us full circle from metaethical reflections to gritty day-to-day realities. Thus Henkel opened by stating that he would be consciously avoiding the more theoretical aspects and rather taking an approach driven by realism and offering a consideration of the emotive implications of such issues in the field of advocacy for migrants. Identifying migrants as the nameless and faceless victims of globalization, the basis of this presentation was ethnographic empirical research from interviews carried out with Catholic advocacy professionals working for migration justice in both the US and German contexts. Henkel explored the precise ways in which these professionals actually talk about migration and how this feeds into advocacy: for example, how they tell stories about migration, how justice and mercy feature in those stories, and what lessons could be learned from the perspectives introduced by these concrete interactions. Through such a focus on real life experiences—transcending the idealism of the academy, the paper sought to identify some specific implications for practical theology.

In conclusion, Henkel suggested that if we tell stories that depict human life in all its complexities, this might lead to an inspiring and energizing realism in the practical sphere toward where justice can really be achieved, even if only partially so. Telling stories begins with listening and refraining from pigeon-holing judgments. In dealing with these social challenges, ethicists should begin with the concrete experiences of migrants, border agents, and advocates.

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