" Be Compassionate as Your Heavenly Father is Compassionate."

Luke 6: 36-38

The Society of Mary and Social Justice - Part 5

Everything written in the previous meditations is meant to lead us to the thoughts in this reflection and the two that will follow. I will begin by referencing Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount, which ends with Jesus saying, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt. 5:48) He uses a Greek word that is translated as perfect, which means having no flaws or imperfections. That is an impossible command because none of us can be perfect. What are we to do?

In Hebrew, the word translated as perfection in Greek is translated as compassion. Luke's Gospel uses the Hebrew word, "Be compassionate as your Heavenly Father is compassionate." (Luke 6: 36 -38) Yes, we can't be perfect, but we can be compassionate. Now there is hope. Keep that thought in mind.

There is much discussion today about the defining characteristics that make a Catholic. A similar question was asked in ancient Israel. They wanted to know what constituted the essence of religion or what does God want from us? The highly respected Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) scripture scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says there are three levels of religious development in the Old Testament in response to that question. All three are to be held simultaneously without easing the tension between them.

In the beginning, the essence of religion or being a good Israelite was proper belonging and proper moral practice. That meant being an Israelite, circumscribed, and obeying the Ten Commandments.

That answer had won the day until the prophets came along and said God doesn't care about that. They said that the quality of faith would be judged by how justice was practiced in the land. They had in mind how the three weakest groups in Israel were treated: widows, orphans, and strangers. According to the prophets, God will not judge you by your religious practice. God will judge you by the quality of justice you exercise on behalf of others, especially the most vulnerable.

Then, additional development is found in the psalms and the wisdom literature. In answer to the question, what is the essence of religion, the answer is no longer practice nor justice. It is compassion. In other words, God wants the essence of religion to form loving and compassionate hearts.

Jesus says all three are important. If you love me, you'll keep my commandments, which are even more demanding than the Ten Commandments. See the Beatitudes in Luke 6: 20-26. Then in the only description of the Last Judgment in the sacred Scriptures in Mt. 25: 31-46, Jesus says that we will be judged (held accountable), but notice the criteria. Surprisingly, there are no questions about correct belief, having gone to Church, or keeping the commandments. Does that mean they are not necessary? No, but if we do them well, we will naturally find ourselves feeding the hungry or giving drink to the thirsty. In other words, we can't help but give our neighbors their due (justice), especially the most vulnerable. So, Jesus affirms the first two developments.

But then Jesus says, "Here is what the Father really wants, a wise, compassionate heart." (Luke 6: 36 -38) Then, in Mt. 5: 45, Jesus gives the example of the sun shining on the just and the unjust, the righteous and the unrighteous, good people and bad people, pro-life people and pro-choice people, Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, gays and straights, atheists, agnostics, Christians, Muslims, and Jews, etc. I think you get the picture.

For Jesus, compassion is to love as God does, and God loves everybody the same way "the sun rises on the bad and the good and causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." (Mt. 5:44-45) That is an expression of God's mercy. Ultimately, God desires for people to love Him, who makes the sun shine on them, and then, to love others in the same manner. To love as God does is to want the good of the other, including our enemies, whom we are tempted to push to the margins. To love them should include knowing them by name and finding where we can stand together on common ground and go from there.

Notice the emphasis that Marist places on developing empathy in our students. That is a contemporary way of saying compassion. Compassion is suffering with others, but it is more than that. It allows their pain to move us to action by bringing them relief and confronting unjust laws, policies, attitudes, and behaviors that are an affront to God.

As long as we are in this fallen world, loving as God does will take the form of the cross. It will be sacrificial. Still, the Risen Christ has called us "to love one another as I have loved you." (Jn. 13:34) That call or vocation comes to us through baptism, where we are united with Christ's death and resurrection and called to conform our lives to his. To love like God will require us to renounce racism, sexism, and indifference, including pointing out where they hold sway. As we know from recent experience, such a message will not always be welcomed.

If you find this offensive, if this gets "under your skin," I suggest you wrestle with Jesus over it because this is his teaching.

When you get down to it, Jesus insists that to love him is to keep his commandments, practice justice, and be compassionate as his heavenly Father is compassionate. The Church's teachings on social justice rest upon that foundation. It is up to the laity to use their expertise, wisdom, and knowledge about the ways of the world and do the arduous task of translating this vision of justice and compassion into laws, policies, behaviors, and attitudes the best they can wherever they live and work. They are to do the work of justice with people of goodwill who may not believe as they do or are agnostic or atheists.

This is how the Risen Lord continues his work to save the world, meaning this world at this particular time and place in history. He has already saved the world by dethroning the powers of sin and death that injustice serves. That war has been won. The Church's task is to serve the eviction notice to those powers wherever they hold sway.

The Risen Christ depends on his Church to engage in "mop up" operations. This task falls especially to the laity. They are to announce this good news to the poor, marginalized, and those individuals or systems that oppress them. Failure of the Church and, especially, the laity to live out their mission given to them in baptism, to sanctify the world (social justice), adds to the ranks of atheists and agnostics. They look at the evil (injustice) in the world and ask, "Where is God?" The laity answer that question through their work of sanctifying the world by recreating it into a world marked by justice and compassion.

That is why the Church cannot stay out of politics and concern herself only with religious matters. The Church, through the laity, must be concerned with politics, business, the arts, athletics, etc., because those are the altars upon which the world is to be sanctified.

Therefore, a Marist education stresses the importance of social justice in its *Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education:* **"[216] A Marist education should aim to help the students confront social injustices such as racism, sexism, and intolerance. A Marist student should learn to collaborate with other men and women of goodwill no matter their creed, race, or social standing to help build communities where the dignity of the person is manifested."**

That is another way of fulfilling Fr. Colin's vision of a Marist education that includes forming students to be good and useful citizens. Not teaching our students (laity) about the importance of justice is a disservice to them, our nation, and the Church.

That is the mission entrusted to the laity in baptism when Christ anoints the baptized to share in his ministry as priest and sanctify the world by conforming it to the values of the reign of God embodied in his very person and revealed through his teachings, miracles, life, death, and resurrection. That is the Good News (Gospel) the laity is to preach by working for justice with wise and compassionate hearts.

They are to do this in the spirit of Mary, the model of discipleship, whose last words are recorded in the New Testament: "Do whatever he tells you."

In the next meditation, I want to look at the reign of God more closely.