

God's divine mercy and compassion as *Incarnational*: A practical theology in the crisis of COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The mystery of *Incarnation* is the fundamental belief and the central aspect of the Christian faith. It is through the *Incarnation* that the infinite love and immeasurable compassion of God are most prominently revealed. The contents of this paper are divided into two main parts. The first part presents the basic concepts of God's divine mercy and compassion as *Incarnational* and lays down their biblical foundation. The second part is the theological application of God's divine mercy and compassion in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The image of the *Good Samaritan* is the key metaphor of God's compassion that illustrates and embodies the ideas in this paper. Although the manner of the research study is expository, the nature of this paper requires some analysis of the materials and the practical application of the kind of theology elaborated in the body of the paper. To a certain extent, the methodology of this paper is made up of critical and analytic elements which clarify and accentuate the injunction of "*Go and do likewise*"—a mandate fashioned as a theological response, which is *Incarnational*, to the current global crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: incarnation, scriptures, mercy and compassion, COVID-19 pandemic, practical theology

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1. Introduction

The concept of divine love of God is demonstrated in all spheres of human life. It covers all dimensions of human experience. It is said that the *primary characteristic* of divine love is concretely articulated and demonstrated through God's divine mercy and compassion. God's compassion is manifested in God's own experience of suffering with human beings through Jesus' *Incarnation*.

In his book *What is Systematic Theology?* Doran (2005) writes that "the mystery of the *Incarnation* is an inexhaustible" (p. 20). Therefore, any attempt to understand the wondrous mystery of the *Incarnation* at the intellectual level always falls short—owing to its boundless richness and depth. That is why it is always viable and profitable to use *conceptual devices* or *constructs* to articulate and explain Jesus' *Incarnation*. One such conceptual device is the divine attribute of mercy/compassion.

God's mercy is evidently discernible and pervasive in *The Old Testament* as exemplified, for instance, in Exodus 34:6: "*The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, is slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.*" And the fullest expression God's compassion is Jesus Christ's *Incarnation* in *The New Testament*: "*And the Word became flesh*" (Jn 1:14).

In other words, God is infinitely merciful and compassionate that He/She became a human being. The biblical and theological traditions consider mercy/compassion as one of God's divine attributes alongside others such as immortality, omnipotence, and omniscience. However, what becomes very clear from God's revelation of *Godself* is God's attribute of mercy and compassion (Kettler, 2016).

This salient biblical-theological affirmation is found in the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas who claims that "it is proper to God to exercise mercy, and He manifests His omnipotence particularly in this way" (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 30. a. 4). The theme of mercy has been central and prominent to Pope Francis's papacy. In his book "*The Name of God is Mercy*" (translated by Stransky, 2016), Pope Francis writes, "Mercy 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 fully in Jesus Christ, incarnation of Creative and Redemptive Love. This love of mercy also illuminates the face of the Church, and is manifested through the Sacraments, in particular that of the Reconciliation, as well as in works of charity, both of community and individuals. Everything that the Church says and does shows that God has mercy for man" (p. 7). This reality—i.e., God's divine mercy/compassion as shown in human experience—concretizes itself in what is happening to humanity with respect to the crisis of COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, the divine attribute of mercy/compassion will serve both as a *practical image* and *theological concept* in responding to the crisis in contemporary times.

2. Methodology

The main methodology used in this paper is exposition based on library research. The contents of this paper are divided into two main parts. The first part presents the basic concepts of God's divine mercy and compassion as *Incarnational* and lays down their biblical foundation. The second part is the theological application of God's divine mercy and compassion in concrete situations of human life, specifically in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Although the manner of the research study is expository, the nature of this paper requires some in-depth analysis of the materials and the practical application of the theology elaborated in the body of the paper. To a certain extent, the methodology of this paper is made up of critical and analytic elements which underscore the *Incarnational* aspect of the virtue of *mercy and compassion* against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak

in the world.

3. Body

3.1 *God's Compassion for the Vulnerable and Lowly People in the Scriptures*

The nature of God is not only associated with the divine holiness but also with the divine *heart*, which is synonymous with mercy and compassion. In the *Incarnation*, Jesus Christ perfectly manifests God's nature and character. He also shows that compassion is God's natural attitude or disposition towards humanity. The ultimate source of our understanding of God's mercy is the Holy Scripture.

In the *Old Testament*, God's compassion is very prominent, often associated with divine grace. The God of compassion is likewise identified as a great comforter who is a loving, tender and gentle shepherd (Isa 40:11). The touching metaphor of the shepherd who shelters and keeps his little lambs from harm reflects the authenticity of the image of God's care and compassion (Isa. 49:13). God's mercy is compared to a woman who nurses and cares for her child. Despite Israel's feeling of being forsaken and forgotten (Isa 49:14), God never forgets them, even if a "mother forgets the baby at her breast" or lacks compassion for the child in her womb (Isa. 49:15). God's mercy and compassion are, therefore, depicted in *The Old Testament* with the most brilliant descriptions of personal affection ever known to humanity.

In *The New Testament*, there are several narratives that point to the reality of a compassionate God personified in the person of Jesus Christ. One of the most touching examples of compassion is when Jesus showed the depth of His humanity at the grave of Lazarus. He was deeply moved—weeping with Lazarus' friends (Jn 11:33-35). The biblical notion of divine mercy is especially represented through the remarkable image of a father's compassion for his prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). St. Luke skillfully illustrates the character of a compassionate father who concretely shows his love for his son. The father profoundly longs to see his prodigal son on his way back home. St. Luke writes, "The son was still a long way off . . . when the father *felt* compassion for him, *ran, embraced, and kissed him*" (Lk 15:20) (Bock, 1996). The depth of divine emotion of compassion expressed in the passage is astounding. The expression leads the reader towards the end of the story where we hear the father's famous proclamation of his son's "*new life*:" "My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Lk 15: 24).

Indeed, the amazing endurance of the father's compassion in Luke's narrative is on full display. God's immeasurable love *and* limitless compassion surpass all our expectations. Put another way, over and over again, God shows His/Her selfless and unfathomable compassion towards humanity more than we can ever imagine. This is because "*The Name of God is Mercy*;" and mercy "*is the first attribute of God*," as affirmed by Pope Francis (Stransky, 2016, p. 62).

It is, therefore, through the mystery of the *Incarnation* that the great mercy of God towards humanity is most evidently manifested and confirmed. There is no gift that could show the endless and inexhaustible compassion of the Father than the gift of His dearest Son. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son*" (Jn 3:16). Although the main motivation of God's *Incarnation* is His/Her mercy and compassion, the reception of this grace is actually dependent on our response. The question is, "How do we turn our love for God into real actions—fashioned as a theological response—in the current global crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic?"

3.2 *Compassion: A Theological Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*

At this point, this paper now introduces to the discussion the parable of *The Good Samaritan* (Lk 10: 25-37). An injured traveler, waylaid by bandits, lies on the roadside. Travelers pass him by without giving help—some perhaps concerned about their own safety and well-being; others driven by religious mandates relating to cleanliness and purity. Fortunately, a man *stops* and comes to his aid *compassionately*. This well-known parable

underlines beautifully the significance of *compassion* which motivates and moves us to concrete actions.

This is the very essence of the parable. The moving story of compassion perfectly illustrates *compassion in action*. It therefore bears a profound and lasting impact on the consideration of ethical principles and practices. In the parable, we see an attempt to break down the walls of race and ethnicity built up by social categories and stereotypes. The parable is challenging us to shatter the hard glass of indifference, mindlessness, and discrimination—the scourge of humanity. In this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, *what* constitutes being a *Good Samaritan*?

By telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is asking us to examine the fascinating character of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan is not hindered by the fact that he is of different race or religion or rank in relation to the injured, bleeding man. What matters most is that he has a *big heart* for the wounded person. And his *big heart* (i.e., compassion) is what made all the difference.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left people all over the world in isolation and brought humanity down to its knees. The current crisis reminds us of the virtue of compassion towards our fellow humans regardless of the “*differences*.” In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI (2007) writes that “He (the Samaritan) does not ask how far his obligations of solidarity extend. Nor does he ask about the merits required for eternal life” (p. 197). He came to the aid of his neighbor in need because “his heart did not only melt for the blood-soaked man; his entire being and gut went out for the injured man” (Festin, 2012, p. 340).

Under the dreadful ravages of COVID-19, we have become so vulnerable and discouraged. We tend to give up trying when things grow worse—or turn for the worst. There is an urgent need for us to revisit the parable of the Good Samaritan. What is striking in the story is that the Samaritan resists cultural discrimination. Instead of disregarding the *other* in need, he *draws near* to the bleeding, hurting man. The moral of the parable is that *anyone* is capable of showing neighborly love to the *other* regardless of ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Under the light of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, we are called to “*incarnate*” ourselves, *through the acts of mercy and compassion*, in the concrete situation of our needy neighbor—the stranger, the unwanted, the unloved, and the hated in society (Festin, 2012). Let us hold on to the example of the Good Samaritan which inspires and pushes us to greater mercy and deeper compassion towards our brothers and sisters. As Jesus said, “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*” (Luke 6:36). In other words, the more we become compassionate, the more we become like the *Incarnated Word*.

Theologically speaking, the parable goes beyond personal preoccupations, private interests, and cultural prejudices. Its core—and content—is the greatest message for the world today, especially in the midst of the global crisis of COVID-19 pandemic. The whole world now is in dire need; and, therefore, *everyone* or *anyone* is a potential neighbor (Chamburuka & Gusha, 2020). Pope Francis (2020) also touched this point when he said that “Jesus does not ask us to decide who is close enough to be our neighbour, but rather that we ourselves become neighbours to all” (no. 80). Indeed, the Samaritan in the parable becomes an agent of God’s compassion as *incarnational*. Thus, every time we extend our compassionate hand to our brothers/sisters, we are actually following the movement/logic of the *Incarnation*—of God becoming a human being. In the broader sense, we are called to be compassionate in the time of the COVID-19 crisis. This is actually both a biblical mandate and a theological application.

3.3 A Call to be Compassionate amidst the COVID-19 Crisis: A Theological Application

The emphasis on the Samaritan’s heroic compassion in biblical interpretations demonstrates the centrality of the virtue of *compassion* in the Church’s tradition. The question is, “What message does the theological virtue of mercy/compassion as a divine attribute tell us in our present circumstances and conditions?” How do we become *compassionate* neighbors to others amidst the COVID-19 crisis? Perhaps, the reality of divine mercy and compassion becomes all the more an urgent call and challenge to us—compelling us to live and act *compassionately* in this time of great trial.

In the midst of COVID-19 pandemic, everything is turned upside down—what is under is turned over. Because of the threat of viral contagion, *not* hugging our loved ones is considered as an act of showing love to them; *not* sharing time and presence is a gesture of being considerate; *not* visiting others' place as a sign of thoughtful concern. Our lives have been thrown into utter chaos. There is no promise that this crisis will be over soon—as days turn into weeks, weeks become months, and months change into years. Everywhere, we see the ravages of COVID-19 pandemic. Many poor people around the world are afraid. Many people are without jobs, without health security, without home. Isn't it that it is in this time of great trial that the message of *compassion* as an authentic *way of being* becomes more relevant and more urgent in today's context?

At this point, let us go back to the image of *the Good Samaritan*. The Good Samaritan dares to bridge the abyss—or boundary-level—which requires him *not* to traverse. An important question arises here as to what urges him to *get out* of the confines of social restrictions and cultural expectations?

In his valuable book *Mindfulness*, Festin (2012) writes that “the Samaritan helped the injured man on the road, not because he chose to be good, but because it was the *Good* that called him to be of service to the victim” (p. 341). This author wonderfully explains that the act of charity of the Good Samaritan is *not* something for which the victim ought to be grateful. In fact, it is the other way around. The honor and gratitude belong to the Good Samaritan because he *feels privileged* to be obliged by the *Good* (i.e., God) to attend to this helpless man in distress. In a sense, this “revolutionary” story teaches us that we do *not* have a neighbor. Rather, we make ourselves *a neighbor* to the *other*.

In line with Festin's (2012) claim, G. Gutiérrez (1988) maintains that the Good Samaritan exemplifies a “*theology of the neighbor*,” which “has yet to be worked out” (p.116). By caring for the hapless victim, the Samaritan enters “the world of the *other*; of the *insignificant* person, of the one *excluded* from dominant social sectors, communities, viewpoints, and ideas” (p. 318). Theologically speaking, God's *Incarnation* is rooted in His mercy and compassion towards humanity. Put in a concrete way, the theology of God's *Incarnation* is closely connected to the “*theology of the neighbor*.” For it is *mercy* that makes the *other* (neighbor) recognizable. It is *compassion* that reveals the neighbor as identifiable.

Practically speaking, compassion and mercy are never constrained into any framework; neither do they have any standard, nor do they conform to any form/stereotype. It is merely the *Good* that impels us to “be ethically responsible for the *other* in her/his moment of extreme grief” (Festin, 2012, p. 341). As the COVID-19 pandemic drives many into the depths of isolation and helplessness, the sound of the call to be *merciful* and *compassionate* is urgent—growing stronger and louder every day. To be compassionate, therefore, calls each one of us to act beyond the ordinary ethical obligation and responsibility. Evidently, our responses to the suffering people are our responses to Jesus Christ when He says, “*Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me*” (Mt 25: 40).

The story of Good Samaritan is not only the most brilliant example of mercy and compassion. It also has deep, inner theological insights. Certainly, there is no evidence in the story of the Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) suggesting that the Good Samaritan is *looking for* a neighbor to help on his way to Jericho. It is just that as the Samaritan goes on his way, he is confronted by a situation in which he has to make a choice and to act *compassionately*—i.e., making room for the other's needs to be addressed. The Samaritan's act of *compassion* and *kindness* in a boundary-breaking movement serves as a template to best understand the ethical responsibilities demanded by Christian compassion and mercy. Such responsibilities should not fall on the individuals but also on the Church—especially in the time and context of the global pandemic. Based on discussions above, this paper puts forward the following recommendations:

4. Recommendations

Firstly, to the Universal Church: The *Incarnation* of God's Word is beautifully *embodied* in the Samaritan's compassion. The Samaritan does not only *stop* to offer help to the victim. He also *personally* attends to the needs

of the injured man who is a total stranger and brings him to safety—to the *Inn*. The Church in our time should constantly ponder the eloquent meaning of the inspired acts of the Samaritan and apply them to her mission—following in the footsteps of the Good Samaritan. For the *Mercy of God* lies in the mission of the Church (Pope John Paul II, 1980). Thus, this inspiring story challenges the Church to see herself not as a structure built on the proud distinction between the clergy and the laity; rather, it should be “a field *hospital*” (Pope Francis, 2019), in which both *wounds of the world* and *the wounded persons* are healed.

In this time of global pandemic, the Church performs its role as “a field *hospital*” which welcomes everyone who needs care and healing. A field *hospital* does *not* choose its clients. It accepts every sick person without discrimination in terms of color, religion, and culture. The image of a field *hospital* is a most fitting image of the Church in this very contemporary situation. It is a refuge where humanity finds help and healing, not only for its physical afflictions but also for its spiritual, social, mental, psychological, and moral traumas. Indeed, wherever the Church is present, God’s compassionate love must be evident. The mission of the Church realizes itself in the concrete deeds of mercy and compassion (Stransky, 2016).

Secondly to the local Churches. The local churches should organize “Community Pantry Week” to promote *compassion-ministry* activities. While this activity has been held in some areas including universities, public groups, and local churches, this “community pantry week” may also be extended to, and held in *all* local churches over the world. This will create awareness among the believers that “*one piece when hungry is equal to one package when full; no act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted*” (Vietnamese proverb). Therefore, in this great time of need, even a small gesture of kindness is one sure way of bringing the Covid-19 pandemic under control.

Thirdly to *individual persons* (the global citizens). Although compassion applies to everyone, it does not demand the same responses from everyone. Compassion is *beyond* the measure of instinct or impulse. It is essentially *incarnational*. It makes our heart *inspired, animated, and moved* to action, especially when the reality is marked by suffering, uncertainty, and fear. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we see “several persons passed the injured man by, but failed to stop. These were people holding important social positions, yet lacking in real concern for the common good . . . *only* one person stopped . . . approached him and cared for him personally . . .” (Pope Francis, 2020, no. 63, p. 17). Commenting on this particular situation, Festin (2012) writes that “[n]othing in his psychological state, character, and temper made [the Samaritan] more susceptible to the most powerful human emotions than the other two individuals who passed the area before him” (pp. 340-341). However, the Good Samaritan’s act of unsparing charity springs from the very core of his compassionate heart which has been awakened, as it were, by the sight of the wounded man. The Good Samaritan has his own plans for that day. However, he completely forgets himself and everything connected to his person and interest. He even dares to take serious risks in recognizing the dignity of the *other*. In a broader sense, he totally forgets his own identity—and safety—to listen to the cry of the *other*. For the Samaritan, the values of human life matter the most at the end; and by upholding and preserving these values in his conduct towards the victim, he celebrates the beauty of human interconnectedness. In a word, the Samaritan leaves *everything* behind—and risks *all*—when he is faced with the needs of the *other*.

The COVID-19 outbreak reminds each individual of her/his ethical obligations toward vulnerable people. What is striking is that the Samaritan himself is vulnerable, even more so because he *is* a Samaritan who belongs to a discriminated people. However, it is this very vulnerability that evokes his compassionate touch for the injured person—an action rejected by the priest and the Levite. The compassionate act of the Samaritan is actually modeled on the *Incarnate Word*. Yes, there should be no hesitation and harm in acting compassionately. What matters most is what kind of person we decide to become—whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders (Pope Francis, 2020, no. 67).

To be a good neighbor means to reach out—or to stand alongside—to our neighbors in a tangible way. It means showing kindness even to strangers/haters. It may take the form of listening attentively to another person’s

perspective and stories. It can be in the shape of sparing our own time and priorities to be with someone who needs empathy or to render aid and assistance to those who desperately need our support. For “the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions” (Pope Francis, 2020, no. 66. p. 18).

5. Conclusion:

Mercy and compassion are the most prominent themes that run through the entire Scriptures. This has been made visible and tangible in Jesus' life on earth. His compassion is profoundly deep and intense, the magnitude of which is unfathomable and unmeasurable.

The Samaritan's example and Jesus' challenging words “*go and do likewise*” (Lk 10:37) are binding at all times—not only in moments of emergencies. Rather, they teach us what it means to be a neighbor to the *other*. The deepest longing of the human heart—and the profoundest meaning of human life—is to never allow *anyone*—i.e., our brother, sister, friend, stranger, etc.—to go through life as an outcast. For this reason, we are motivated and impelled by the “*theology of the neighbor*” which enjoins us not to be indifferent or insensitive to the sufferings of our neighbors particularly in the present COVID-19 pandemic. The person of a neighbor appears as an *indication* or *manifestation* of mercy and compassion. What makes one a neighbor to the *other* is *compassion in action*. In other words, the image of a neighbor needs to be made known, to be concretized. It is, indeed, *Incarnational!*

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