

Pilgrimage: A Path to Mercy and Peace

Dear Reader,

In the fall of 2016 I was able to take a trip to Italy as part of a belated jubilee celebration of my 50th Anniversary as a Brother of Holy Cross.

The retreat I attended in Assisi was titled "A Holy Year of Mercy Pilgrimage Retreat exploring paths of Mercy: Francis of Assisi, Thomas Merton and Our Own."

Being in Assisi and visiting the shrines of Sts. Francis and Clare provided a perfect setting and being with the retreat directors and participants added much to making this an experience that will be hard to forget.

In these seven sessions I will attempt to share the major themes of the retreat in a way, I hope, that will let you take part in the experience that was so beneficial to me.

The path of mercy begins with ourselves and as Thomas Merton beautifully puts it: "The mercy upon mercy upon mercy that God has showered on us" - that with His grace, energy and love we might share it with others bringing some understanding and peace to our world.

May God grant you mercy and peace.

Brother Carl Sternberg, CSC

1 Cor. 13:12-21

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink on one Spirit.

Now the body is not a single part, but many. If a foot should say, "Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body, it does not for this reason belong any less to the body." Or if an ear should say, "I am not an eye I do not belong to the body," it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

Chapter One: Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage begins with a longing – a realization that one has to walk further on the road to arrive at an even greater awareness of one’s destiny. What has God called us to be and do with our lives now?

We will never arrive! To arrive would mean that there is no more to learn, no further growth, no more to awaken in us of a deepening experience of God’s unconditional love and mercy. There is still the possibility for God to lead us down uncharted paths walking in darkness now but leading to marvelous light.

Scripture Reading

“Our God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and commanded. Count seven times seven years, a total of forty-nine years. Then, on the tenth day of the seventh month, a day of atonement. Send a message out to blow a trumpet throughout the whole land. In this way you shall set the fiftieth year apart and proclaim freedom to all who dwell in the land. During this year, all property shall be restored and anyone who is held captive shall be set free. You shall not plant your fields or harvest grains or gather the grapes from your vineyard. The whole year shall be sacred for you, for it is a year of restoration, a year of jubilee.” Leviticus

Go on pilgrimage

- Open the door of Mercy
- Set free that which is captive
- Deepen in the art of restoration
- Let the land lay fallow
- Return to the ancestral Home

“No Man is an Island” – Thomas Merton

“Whoever seeks to catch Him and hold Him loses Him. He is like the wind that blows where it pleases. You who love Him must love Him as arriving from where you do not know and as going where you do not know. Your spirit must seek to be as clean and as free as His own Spirit in order to follow Him wherever He goes. Who are we to call ourselves either clean or free, unless He makes us so?”

“Lord, lead me on this pilgrimage to grow closer to You.”

Chapter Two: Shadow

In the structure of the human psyche Carl Jung posits various components:

The Personas or Masks

These are the different roles we play in life such as wife, husband, parent, child, teacher, student, businessperson, religious, priest, etc. Some people never know who they really are without wearing their masks.

The ego

This is our conscious self. It includes aspects that make up our conscious personality such as being introverted, extroverted, basically thinking or feeling etc. It is the task of adolescence to develop an ego that separates them from their parents. It needs to be surrendered in midlife so that the true self can emerge.

The shadow

The shadow resides in our unconscious. It is the aspect of life that we have not chosen or traveled, and have not owned or recognized. It can be positive or negative. Our shadow includes our tendencies toward violence, sexual fantasies, unlawful ambitions, our own goodness or holiness, what married life would be like if we are single, what single life would be like if are married. Midlife is a time for dealing with the shadow (midlife crises). The shadow contains a lot of energy, which needs to be transformed such as taking a spiritual pilgrimage. If not recognized or owned, it can lead to projecting negative or positive characteristics on to other people or groups. "All black people are lazy." "All priests and religious are holy." There are some things in our shadow that we are not ready to deal with at this time. And that is OK. Put these things in God's hands.

The Self (with a capital S)

This is the ultimate structure. It allows for transformation and integration. Jung calls it individuation. It connects us with the divine within (Christ) and with all humans and all creation. (Jung's term is the collective unconscious). St. Paul can say, "It is no longer I that live (ego) but Christ who lives in me (the Self)."

We can say the Jesus had a shadow side because he was completely human, as well as being divine and we call these three aspects of life temptations.

Scripture Reading

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him. ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But Jesus answered. ‘It is written, one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple. ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you and on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you Satan, for it is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.”
(Matt.4: 1-11)

“Seven Story Mountain” – Thomas Merton

“Lady (Mary or the anima-feminine soul of the shadow) when on the night I left the island and that was your England, your love went with me, although I could not know it. It was your love, your intercession for me before God that was preparing the seas before my ship, laying open the way for me to another country... You opened the seas before my ship, whose track led me across the waters to a place I had never dreamed of, which you were then preparing for me to be my rescue and my shelter and my home. And when I thought there was no God, and no love and no mercy, you were leading me, all the while into the midst of His love and His mercy. And taking, without my knowing it to the house that would hide me in the secret of His Face.”

“Lord, teach me the gift of wisdom that my shadow has for me.”

Chapter Three: The Enemy

When Christ says love your enemies he might be saying love that part of you that you have not recognized and owned. First I need to love myself as I am with all my imperfections including what lies beneath the surface in my unconscious. If God has shown me mercy and loves me as I am, I can begin to show mercy to others. Not being able to do this means that I will likely project what I have not recognized in myself on to the other – the enemy. This can breed a passionate hatred in me. Love of the enemy becomes more accessible and a real possibility when I realize what I do not like in the other is also lying dormant in me.

Scripture Reading

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect (compassionate) as your heavenly Father is perfect (compassionate).”
(Matt. 5:43-47)

“No Man is an Island” – Thomas Merton

“There must be a time of day when the person who makes plans forgets the plans and acts as if there are no plans at all.

There must be a time of day when the man who has to speak falls very silent. And his mind forms no more propositions, and he asks himself, did they have a meaning?

There must be a time when the woman of prayer goes to pray as if it were the first time in her life she had ever prayed,

When the person of resolutions puts those resolutions aside as if they had all been broken and she/he learns a different wisdom – distinguishing the sun from the moon, the stars from the darkness, the sea from the dry land, and the night sky from the shoulder of a hill.”

“Lord, help me see a new kind of wisdom that helps me to love unconditionally.”

Chapter Four: Two Paths to Mercy

There are two paths to showing mercy to others.

On the first path I can be thinking: "I am glad that I am not like you. But I want to be good and holy so I will show you mercy. That really makes me feel good about myself."

On the second path I can be thinking: "When I see you I see myself. I see what I could have become except for the grace of God and the many advantages and blessings that I have been given. I am only letting God work through me to show you mercy."

Scripture Reading

"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself was praying thus; 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off could not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'" (Luke 18:9-14)

"Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander" – Thomas Merton

"Father, I beg You to keep me in this silence so that I may learn from it the word of your peace, the word of Your mercy, the word of your gentleness to the world, so that perhaps through me, Your word of peace may make itself heard where it has not been possible for anyone to hear it for a long time."

"Lord, may my mercy to others reflect your mercy to me."

Chapter five: Christ in Our Midst

It is said of Michael Angelo that when he saw a block of marble he need only to cut away the stone to reveal the figure that was already there. In the same way Christ is present in us and among us. When we are in touch with our true selves surrendering our ego and befriending our shadow, his presence will become evident.

To encounter Christ we need to walk on our pilgrimage road like the disciples on the way to Emmaus. They were first caught up in their own story but the stranger began revealing the mystery behind what they had experienced. It was during a meal with him that they recognize Christ. When he left them, they realized not only who he was but what his presence had done to them. “Were not our hearts burning.” Christ wants our hearts to burn with love and joy and be surprised as we allow the Christ within to give us an amazing life.

Scripture Reading

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-23)

“Dancing in the Water of Life” – Thomas Merton

“...seeing the multitude of stars above the bare branches of wood I was suddenly hit, as it were, with the whole package of meaning of everything: that the Lord in infinite kindness had looked down on me and given me this call out of love, and that he had always intended this and how foolish and trivial had been my fears and twistings and desperations.”

“Lord, let me experience your presence within me.”

Chapter six: Peace through Kindness

How do we bring peace into our World? One way is through kindness. Thomas Merton in his famous experience on Walnut and Fourth St. in Louisville, KY, saw himself identified with all of the people on that busy street. He realized that all human beings are of the same “kind.” This means that he as one individual shared the same nature as everyone else in the world. The realization of this common heritage can be an opening to the “oneness” of all humans. This point of departure, added to the “kindness” we show to one another, is the basis for a connection. Our pilgrimage of mercy and peace leads us to a brotherhood and sisterhood with all people.

Scripture Reading

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the Day of Judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love but love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:16-21)

“No Man is an Island” – Thomas Merton

“As long as we are on earth, our vocation is precisely to be imperfect, incomplete, insufficient in ourselves, changing, hapless, destitute and weak, hastening to the grave. But the power of God and His eternity and His peace and His completeness and His glory must somehow find their way into our lives, secretly, while we are here, in order that we may be found in Him.

And in Him there will be unending variety, newness of life, progression in His infinite depth. There, rest and action will not alternate, they will be one. Everything will at once be empty and full. But only if we have discovered how to combine emptiness and fullness, good will and indifferent results, mistakes and successes, work and rest, suffering and joy, in such a way that all things work together for our good and the glory of God.”

“Lord, let your peace and love live in me and through me, to my sisters and brothers.”

Chapter Seven: Lord, make me a channel of Your Peace

St. Francis of Assisi prayed for peace, but he also did something about it. He could relate even to the Muslims in the Holy Land. His influence is still present there today. Only the Franciscans are able to be in charge of the Christian pilgrim sites. What action can we take to make God's mercy and peace break through the divisions and the hatred we see in today's world? Pope Francis says that prayer alone is not enough. But it is our prayer that changes our attitudes and our hearts, which leads to action. At this point in our pilgrimage we should understand that only God can bring about real change. But like St. Francis we can be channels to bring about a new day. We are people with hope and zeal to bring.

Scripture Reading

"He said to them. 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person, but if not, it will return to you.'" (Luke 10:2-6)

"New Seeds of Contemplation" – Thomas Merton

"It is God's love that speaks to me in the birds and streams; but also behind the clamor of the city, God speaks to me in His judgments, and all these things are seeds sent to me from His will.

If these seeds would take root in my liberty, and if His will would grow from my freedom, I would become the love that He is, and my harvest would be His glory and my own joy. And I would grow together with thousands and millions of other freedoms into the gold of one huge field praising God, loaded with increase, loaded with wheat."

"Lord, make me a channel of your peace."