

Continuing the Face of Mercy After the Jubilee Year

Following the conclusion of the Jubilee Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis, what image or experience from your work in Catholic health care helps you carry our value of compassion and the spirit of mercy forward? Dr. Gordon Self, Vice President, Mission, Ethics and Spirituality, shares his own personal story, inviting you and your colleagues to do the same.

Mercy in the face of those we serve

Mercy has many faces. I have witnessed mercy often during thirty-seven years in Catholic health care. Sometimes etched on the faces of those impacted by unspeakable tragedy; other times when words of forgiveness and reconciliation lifted up the brokenhearted. Merciful stories bringing tears to my eyes; and other moments, laughter and sheer joy.

One unforgettable image was the anguish of a man I helped walk back and forth to the washroom on a palliative unit one Saturday evening in the summer of 1981. The patient's wife was exhausted looking after her husband throughout the past few days, and went home earlier to rest. I promised her I would look after him. He did not want to use a bed pan and feared soiling his bed. It took all his strength and my help to walk those fourteen steps to the toilet and back. Fourteen steps of struggle and anguish – much like the Stations of the Cross. We have learned a lot about pain and symptom management over the years but in those early days of palliative medicine there were still occasions when a patient's complex pain needs were difficult to address. All I could do was be present to this man, to at least try lessening the added indignity of diarrhea.

His face said everything. He winced in pain while leaning heavily on me as together we made our way with unsteady steps. He cried out when I helped him stand from the toilet, cleaning him with as much gentleness as I could, before we made the seven steps back to his bed. This went on all evening. Mostly we were lucky in making the journey to and from the toilet without an accident, but not always.



Several times that evening I saw the face of Jesus. Not the wooded corpus on the crucifix hanging on the patient's wall in the room of this Catholic hospital. Rather, on the face of the patient himself. I felt like Simon of Cyrene, the reluctant bystander, who was obliged to carry the Lord's cross. I have never felt such a profound sense of mercy and compassion as I did that Saturday evening, forever shaping my experience of Catholic health care. I knew then, as I am reminded ever since, of the awesome privilege of being present and walking together

with other hurting human beings at some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives. This man taught me about the sacredness of our work. As an orderly, then chaplain, then ethicist, then executive, I have been indebted to this person. Of the gift to have walked the Wounded One to and from the bathroom, and helping to shoulder his cross.

Mercy in the Face of our Fellow Caregivers

But that evening I also glimpsed, however briefly, a reflection of the Lord's face in my own. To have been privileged to accompany this man and to be present to him days before he died revealed a calling within me to serve, to be present, to be merciful. A stranger whom I had never known before, but in the span of eight hours opened my heart in a shared experience of vulnerability in ways I will never forget. In humility, I was able to draw deep from a well of compassion within because I have been afforded mercy myself. I too have stumbled in life. Struggled to pull myself to my feet when down. Soiled my reputation at times, and yes, of course as an infant, my crib. The ever present temptation of an inflated ego has plagued me in life. But also, knowing on any given day I may be reduced to just fourteen steps, then at least grateful for the reminder, resolved again to make every step in my life count.



As the Jubilee Year of Mercy draws to an end, it is important for all us to look back to those privileged moments in our lives. Not to wallow in the enslavement of guilt or regret, but to be liberated to live our lives truthfully and courageously, as did this man that Saturday evening long ago. When Pope Francis announced the Extraordinary Year of Mercy, it was not his intent that we would “do” mercy for a year, and then forget about it! Or that we would simply be compassionate and merciful to the people we serve, but overlook the needs of those we work alongside with. Nor ignore the human being we see reflected in the mirror.

In the same way, the [reflection questions](#) I posed to Covenant staff, physicians and volunteers last year at the beginning of the Year of Mercy are meant to be an ongoing reminder; a challenge to “gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives,” as Pope Francis writes. I chose not to forget this formative story of encounter with that patient as it also served to remind me what is at the heart of our health care ministry. Of what Covenant, and covenantal promises are all about. I promised this man’s wife that I would look after him. And she trusted me that I would. In the same way, who places their trust in you that you will be a compassionate and merciful presence today? And in the same way, who do you count on to hold your head up in dignity, and help shoulder your burdens in order to take those few courageous steps forward?

The Ongoing Face of Mercy

I spent the last Saturday evening of this man's life with him, helping him with the most undignified of tasks, hoping to affirm his dignity. His wife is likely long gone and maybe even now their adult children, too. But the trust he and his family placed in me that evening continues to shape me. The face of mercy I experienced reminds we are all brothers and sisters; pilgrim people on a journey in life. The Holy Father invited us to pause during the Year of Mercy so that we could recall such personal stories that have shaped our lives, to remember their impact and ongoing relevance. We were afforded a special year so that we can recommit in being a merciful presence to others every day of our lives, and in our work together at Covenant.

There have been many patient, resident, family and staff encounters we have been a part of this past year. Each one a treasured doorway and threshold of encounter we have been invited to enter. And there will be many more. The Jubilee Year is over but we are just beginning the next chapter of Mercy!

Thank you for being and continuing to be the ongoing face of mercy and the embodiment of compassion.

Gordon Self

Vice President, Mission, Ethics and Spirituality

November 9, 2016