

ALL SAINTS

Of all the Beatitudes that we just heard, it is perhaps the fifth that strikes the theme we have been hearing about the most in recent times: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy,” for mercy has been the prominent message of Pope Francis ever since his election to the papacy. For example, almost exactly one year ago, in an address on the new evangelization, he said: “We need Christians who make God’s mercy and tenderness for every creature visible to the people of our day. We also know that the crisis of modern man is not superficial but profound. That is why the new evangelization, while it calls us to swim against the tide and be converted from idols to the true God, cannot but use a language of mercy, which is expressed in gestures and attitudes even before words.”

It would be very misleading, however, to give the impression that this has somehow been the discovery only of our current pope. When the recently canonized John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council, he stated that the Church will always oppose the errors of the age, but then went on to say: “Frequently [the Church] has condemned these [errors] with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity.”

Similarly, John Paul II, canonized on the same day as John XXIII, titled one of his very first encyclicals *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy), whose subtitle was “The Endangered Human Being and the Power of Mercy.” Two decades later, the first person he canonized at the beginning of the third millennium was the Polish sister Faustina Kowalska, who had written of God’s mercy as the greatest and highest of the divine attributes, and when John Paul traveled to his native land for the last time in August of 2002, he again visited the suburb of Cracow where St. Faustina had once lived and there dedicated the entire world to divine mercy, declaring that the Sunday after Easter would henceforth be known as Divine Mercy Sunday.

And Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, at the opening of the conclave that would see him elected John Paul's successor, said to the assembled cardinals: "Jesus Christ is divine mercy in person. To encounter Christ is to encounter the mercy of God.... We are charged with proclaiming 'the Year of the Lord's Mercy' not only with words but also with our lives and with the effective signs of the sacraments."

It would be easy to go on and on about the prominent place the beatitude about mercy has had in the teaching of recent popes, but it would probably be more helpful to see something about its practice in the life of the kind of person we commemorate on All Saints Day. This is someone who is not at all well-known and who will certainly never be canonized, if only because he was not a member of the Catholic Church. But when you hear something of the life and work of Rev. Abraham Luckhoff, a Dutch Reformed pastor who lived his entire life in South Africa, you will surely be ready to count him among all the saints.¹ He ministered during the Boer War (1899-1902), which pitted the forces of the South African Republic and the Orange Free State against the British, largely over the issue of who would control some very lucrative gold mines. As the British gradually gained the upper hand, they resorted to a scorched-earth policy to deny supplies to the guerrilla forces and then embarked on a number of "drives" that had the intention of cornering the Boers but that in fact mainly produced large numbers of displaced Boer and African families, who were sent to concentration camps around South Africa.

At that time, Luckhoff was a young chaplain, only in his mid-twenties, sent to minister to families in one of the most notorious of these camps. During his several months there, he kept a diary that he had never intended to be made public, but when it was some years later, it revealed a man who had made mercy absolutely central to his ministry. Although he had many ministerial responsibilities, such as preparing and attending church services, prayer meetings, church board

meetings, Sunday school classes, and funerals, references to such activities in his diary are made mostly in passing. The bulk of the diary is about his visits to people in their tents and in hospital. From the very first day of his stay in that concentration camp, he gave himself spontaneously and thoroughly to the people interned there, above all the women and their children. He constantly took the initiative to visit and spend time with them, no matter to what denomination they belonged. At times, he expressed great joy at the way young people in particular sang with great fervor during prayer services that he led, but at other times he was altogether honest about the strain that the practice of mercy put on him. It was above all the deaths of the people he served and the removal of their bodies that haunted him. At one point in his diary he wrote: "Horrible whistle that! It signals the people from the morgue tent to come and remove the dead. It is Death's shrill, harsh, jarring, triumphant shout! It shivers one through." And a few days later he added: "The nights here are so awful, one yearns for the day; and then the fearfulness of being awakened repeatedly in the night by the tramp of those who carry away the dead to the morgue tents . . . It is so hard to pray, and so very wearying. And then, to comfort and cheer, when your own heart is lead within."

One can only applaud the honesty with which that man wrote, and the fidelity with which he continued his mission of mercy until the war was over. Abraham Luckhoff is surely not only among those whom we honor on All Saints Day but also a man who can serve as a genuine model for our own lives. No one ever said that the practice of mercy will never take a toll on a person, but mercy is definitely one of the most important guideposts along the straight and narrow path that leads to the kingdom where all the saints now rejoice. May the power of this Eucharist and our reflection on the words of St. John XXII, St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis and on the words and example of someone like the Rev. Abraham Luckhoff

help us become more earnest and persevering bearers of the Lord's mercy to those in any need who cross our own path.

1 The material about Abraham Luckhoff is taken from Pieter G.R. de Villiers, "A Spirituality of Mercy in a Time of War," *Religion & Theology* 18 (2011): 147-72, online at <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=bfd60de5-d699-4da4-bacc-30f89dc1813d%40sessionmgr4002&vid=20&hid=4214> (accessed 10-31-14).