

# Comment

It is not widely known that Popes think and write about things other than sex. Those who take papal authority very seriously may be thrown into a grave crisis of conscience by *Humanae Vitae* but seem curiously undisturbed by the strong statements on the evils of capitalism, racialism or the spending of money on arms. So it is hardly surprising that almost no notice seems to have been taken of John Paul's latest encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*.<sup>\*</sup> In this powerful and profound document he insists that at the heart of Jesus' gospel was the gift and appeal for mercy. "Making the Father present as love and mercy is, in Christ's own consciousness, the fundamental touchstone of his mission as the Messiah" (p 13). Our gospel too must therefore have as its centre God's mercy for us and our mercy for each other. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy".

Many *New Blackfriars* readers will immediately want to ask how a gospel of mercy relates to a gospel of justice. Does forgiveness overthrow justice? The Pope's primary model for mercy is the parable of the Prodigal Son. The merciful father does not patronisingly agree to overlook his son's mis-spent youth. His mercy is in restoring him to the dignity of sonship that he had lost. He sees what the son himself cannot see, the fullness of his humanity, and mercifully offers it back. Mercy "restores to value". It creates the space for the other to be what he most truly is, human. If justice is man's living in a right relationship with man and God in Christ, then God's mercy does not overthrow it but brings it about. "Properly understood, justice constitutes, so to speak, the goal of forgiveness" (p 75). The Cross is God's mercy making us truly just.

Though John Paul shows very convincingly how justice and mercy are one in the Kingdom of God, what is less clear, to me at any rate, is how the mercy that we must now offer and accept relates to the justice that we now, in the name of the gospel, seek. What would it mean for the unemployed to have mercy on the

Government? Or for the blacks of South Africa to have mercy on those who support *apartheid*? We may all need God's mercy, but what mercy can the oppressed offer their oppressors? The Pope maintains that the pursuit of justice is often distorted by hatred and revenge, and that therefore justice is not enough. Mercy is needed in addition. But what precisely does mercy add?

What is needed is an extended analysis of the relationship between the justice of the kingdom, "that salvific order which God willed from the beginning in man and, through man, in the world" (p 39), and the just demands that we can and must make now. Our justice can give us a genuine but only negative insight into the fullness of our humanity. Whatever it means to be human it cannot be compatible with being tortured, imprisoned, starved or oppressed in any way. The justice that we can pursue is, so to speak, the obverse of an injustice that we experience and reject. It is a protest against an intolerable world. Political analyses help us to locate the evil to be overthrown, to see our situation. Mercy marks the boundaries of that perception. It is the offer of a transformation of our humanity more radical than we can imagine. It offers redemption to us who are all so caught up in a situation that warps and deforms our humanity that we cannot even imagine what it might mean to be truly human. It is the promise of that which our justice can only perceive negatively, the justice of the Kingdom. Without the search for justice now, mercy would be blind and apathetic. Without mercy our justice would be merely ideological self-righteousness. "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I Jn. 3:2).

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- \* All quotations are from *Dives in Misericordia*, published and translated by the Catholic Truth Society, 1980.