

# **MERCY IN MOTION**

## **On Being Patiently Merciful to Those Who Do Us Ill**

by David Gibson

We know patient people when we see them. Yet patience is rather difficult to define in a precise way. After all, two people known for their patience may have greatly different personalities. It can be said that patient people are not always in attack mode, nor do they make it a goal to win every debatable point in a discussion. Notably, too, they do not expect others close to them to act and think just as they do. Patience may be hard to define, but it pleads for careful attention during the Church's current Year of Mercy. What is implied by the spiritual work of mercy that calls Christ's followers to "bear patiently those who do us ill"? I have three questions. First, who does us ill? Second, what does patience look like in action? Finally, how is patience merciful?

The troubles, or ills, that stand ordinary life on its head arrive in many forms. Perhaps a family member makes a big decision that we would not make—a consequential decision that definitely will complicate matters for us. Or maybe trouble arrives in the form of unexpected developments no one really invited but that will require hours of work on our part, despite already overloaded schedules. Or maybe a family member forgets to pay a bill on time, thus adding a financial penalty to an already unwelcome expense. Not all the "ills" of life result from ill will. Still, they can prove disheartening and even rather sickening. Often people react somewhat automatically to those who do them ill—shouting angrily at them or, conversely, giving them the "silent treatment." Reactions like these, however, only serve to highlight just how demanding true patience can be. Patience, as Pope Francis once wrote, is God-like. God "always invites us to take a step forward." Yet God is "understanding" and "willing to wait." Patience does not give up easily on others or refuse to hear them out. Instead, patience expresses ongoing hope in others, even when something they do is disruptive for us. So patience is merciful.

Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa drew a compelling picture of mercy, as well as patience, at work in a marriage when he delivered the Good Friday homily in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome this March. Father Cantalamessa is the official preacher of the papal household. First, he noted that vengeance is mercy's opposite. But "we need to demythologize vengeance," he said. For contemporary society frequently extols it, even placing those who practice vengeance on a pedestal. "A large number of the stories we see on the screen and in video games are stories of revenge, passed off at times as the victory of a good hero," he said. Father Cantalamessa observed that "half, if not more, of the suffering in the world (apart from natural disasters and illnesses) comes from the desire for revenge, whether in personal relationships or between states and nations."

Then turning attention to marriage, he affirmed that "only one thing" can "save the world: mercy!" This encompasses "the mercy of God for human beings and the mercy of human beings for each other." "In particular," he said, mercy "can save the most precious and fragile thing in the world at this time, marriage and the family." People marry "because of love," he observed. But over time, "the limitations of each spouse emerge, and problems with health, finance and children arise. A routine sets in" that lessens joy. What saves "a marriage from going downhill without any hope of coming back up again is mercy," Father Cantalamessa insisted. By this he meant mercy "understood in the biblical sense." He referred, therefore, to "spouses acting with 'compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,'" qualities of Christian life that St. Paul listed in his Letter to the Colossians (3:12). Note the appearance of patience in that list by St. Paul. When patience is discussed among Christians, it tends not to stand alone but to be paired with other terms like the ones Paul chose—terms that help to flesh out its meaning.

You might say, then, that patience is known by the company it keeps. Thus, according to St. Paul, patience travels in the company of mercy, compassion and kindness, for example. Consider also the company patience keeps in St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. "Love is patient, love is kind," he writes. It seems safe to conclude that he believes patience is lovingly kind. St. Paul goes on to say that love "does not seek its own

interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury" (13:4-5). Whenever I witness truly patient people, I have the sense that they possess a quiet, clear strength and are not at all passive. If they do not go to the wall over every ill that makes itself known to them, they nonetheless exhibit a strong sense of themselves and appear to know just what kind of people they want to be.

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