



Considering Mercy in the Human Agency of *Sensus Fidelium*

ABSTRACT

*Recent literatures on the human agency of *sensus fidelium* (sf) establish categorical criteria and require dispositions in determining authentic human agency. In particular, Ormond Rush sets three sources of sf and the International Theological Commission (ITC) publishes necessary dispositions in the witness of authentic sf. This paper exposes the pattern, the theme of exclusion inherent in those arguments and proposes mercy as an enlarging, enriching, and inclusive principle of human agency in sf. Through biblical exegesis, systematic articulation, moral deliberation, and pastoral consideration on mercy, this paper aims to offer foundational arguments on mercy as basis towards a shared possibility of authentic witness of sf beyond the Catholic ideals of human agency.*

Keywords: Sensus Fidelium, Human Agency, Theology, Mercy, Exclusion, Inclusion, Authentic Witness.



PRELIMINARIES

Background

The Second Vatican Council is the first ecumenical council that explicitly recognizes and teaches the reality of *sensus fidelium* (sf). Among its conciliar documents, *Lumen Gentium* 12 and 35, *Dei Verbum* 8, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 9, 15, and 16, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 30, *Gaudium et Spes* 7, 18, 52, 59 and 62, *Ad Gentes* 19, and *Perfectae Caritatis* 12 are cited as key and related references to sf.¹

In contrast to the previous centuries when the laity (labelled as *ecclesia discens* or passive learning church) and the hierarchy (referred as *ecclesia docens* or active teaching church) are placed in sharp dualism or opposition, Vatican II, in its specific references to sf, emphasizes the organic unity between the laity and the hierarchy as agents of sf based on the unique context of their own vocation and calling.

However, recent literatures on the agency of sf present categorical criteria and require dispositions in determining its authentic human agency. Ormond Rush, in *The Eyes of Faith*, offers the concept of well-delineated sources of authentic sf, namely: (1) primary, (2) secondary and (3) ancillary sources.² The primary sources refer to “baptized and committed Catholics”³ who have an “insider knowledge through intimacy with Christ.”⁴ On the other hand, secondary sources include “baptized Catholics but not ‘fully’ faithful to their baptismal commitment.”⁵ They are Catholics referred as “inactive”, “lapsed”, “disaffected”, or “marginalized”.⁶ Finally, ancillary sources pertain to “baptized Christians from other churches”⁷ who also share “ecclesial experience of Christian

¹Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2001).

²Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 244-274.

³Ibid., 245.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 247.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 249.

salvation . . . outside the Catholic Church.”⁸ Based on the well-defined sources, Rush puts premium on practicing Catholics as enjoying the witness of authentic *sf* over all other sources.

On the other hand, the International Theological Commission (ITC) enumerates “a set of dispositions needed”⁹ in discerning authentic *sf*: (1) participation in the life of the Church, (2) listening to the Word of God, (3) openness to reason, (4) adherence to the magisterium, (5) holiness, and (6) seeking the edification of the Church.¹⁰ The said criteria are drawn from the Commission’s “biblical, historical, and systematic investigation and are influenced by ecclesial, spiritual, and ethical factors.”¹¹ There is nothing in the commission’s statement that sets a minimum requirement of criteria to be fulfilled or a mandate which offers a selective combination of any of the said criteria. Apparently, it was the intention of the ITC that such criteria, being communicated as required and necessary, becomes binding for all baptized Catholics: “those characteristics which are required of the baptized if they are truly to be subjects of the *sensus fidei*; in other words, the dispositions necessary for believers to participate authentically in the *sensus fidelium*.”¹²

Status Quaestionis

While the set of criteria and required dispositions by Rush and the ITC are truly ideals of Christian praxis, they also exclude those members of the Body of Christ who are not in “full faith”, who struggle in their life of faith and praxis through varying degrees of perfection and sinfulness. They also exclude the faithful who wrestle with questions or crisis about God or members who take a critical stance or who are in a state of dilemma towards the institutional Church and its clergy.

⁸Ibid.

⁹International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, Series Vatican Documents (Pasay City: St. Pauls, 2014), 77.

¹⁰Ibid., 76-84.

¹¹Ibid., 77.

¹²Ibid.

Looking at other Christian denominations and non-Christian religions, the presence of inspiring lives of men and women in these affiliations cannot simply be ignored. Also, the Indigenous Peoples, the *Lumads*, of which some are neither Catholics nor Protestants, proudly embrace their way of life and traditions which foster reverence to the Supreme Being and advocate a life which champions the interest of the common good over the self.

Certainly, if the rubrics of Rush and the ITC on authentic sources of *sf* are imposed, the Catholics who are not in “full faith”, the non-Christians and the Indigenous peoples would certainly fall short to such normative standard. This is a form of exclusion that needs to be talked about and be brought about to the open for greater debate and deeper discernment.

Thus, pressing questions need to be asked pertinent to the witness of *sf* through mercy: What are the biblical, systematic, moral, and pastoral foundations of mercy? Is it possible that those who are excluded can also become witnesses of *sf* through mercy? How does mercy play a role in their witness of *sf*? Can mercy be a hallmark sign of authentic witness of *sf* regardless of religious affiliation, sex, gender, and political belief? Thus, I propose that the witness of mercy is also a witness of *sf* particularly those who are excluded by the definitive criteria and necessary dispositions of Rush and the ITC. However, in elaborating the relevance of the mercy, it is not the intention of this paper to make this proposal as an alternative to the magisterial teaching but simply a way too broaden and deepen the theological discourse on the agency of *sf*.

EXPOSITION

Scriptural Foundations

How does the Sacred Scripture present the mercy and its corresponding agency?

Etymologically speaking, the English word “mercy” is derived from its rich Hebrew and Greek equivalents. In the Old Testament, it was first applied to Yahweh. John McKenzie

proposes *hesed*, mercy, as key in understanding God's character.¹³ Mercy enables God to voluntarily reveal and offer himself as a gift to humanity, uncoerced by external necessity and unobligated by any persuasion of worthiness and merit. Being a gift, it "reaches all flesh"¹⁴ – without discrimination, and "endures forever"¹⁵ regardless of context and circumstance. God's mercy is not exclusive and discriminating; rather, it seeks out all – always as a gratuitous offer to each and every person.

In Genesis chapters 15 and 17, it narrates the story of the covenant between God and Abraham whereby it signifies forging an agreement, a relationship of mutual reciprocity and obligation – known in Hebrew as *berit*. Reflective of the tradition of the ancient Near East, the violation of the covenant by either party entails a corresponding consequence and punishment. However, Pentateuchal narratives attest to the recurrent sinfulness and infidelity of Abraham and his descendants towards God by their worship of foreign idols and their transgressions of the commandments of the covenant. Legally speaking, Abraham and his people, Israel, because of their failure in their covenantal duties and obligations, rightfully deserve punishment and abandonment by God. However, God, in so many erring occasions in the life of Israel, transcended the legalities of the covenant by becoming merciful and compassionate.¹⁶ For John Paul II, such mercy which is tied up with *berit*, the juridical bond that unites God and Israel, is superseded by something more profound: "love that gives, love

¹³John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1998), 566.

¹⁴Sirach 18:11 (New American Bible Translation)

¹⁵Psalm 136:1. The King James Bible version uses the words, "for his mercy endureth forever" while both the Revised Standard Version and the New American Bible translate "mercy" with "love". In any case, the idea of mercy, in the Old Testament usage, oscillates into love, tenderness, forgiveness, compassion, and protection.

¹⁶Hosea How could I give you up, O Ephraim, or deliver you up, O Israel? How could I treat you as Admah, or make you like Zeboiim? My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred. I will not give vent to my blazing anger, I will not destroy Ephraim again; For I am God and not man, the Holy One present among you; I will not let the flesh consume you.

that is more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin.”¹⁷ It is on a similar note that enables John McKenzie in explaining the extraordinary character of *hesed*:

*Hesed is kindness that is above and beyond the minimum duties imposed by the association, but the maintenance of good human relations demand that people go beyond the minimum duties.*¹⁸

Mercy is also associated with the Hebrew word, *rahamin*. *Rahamin* pertains to the “instinctive attachment of one being over another.”¹⁹ It is derived from the Hebrew word, “*rehem*”²⁰, which means “womb or belly”²¹ and indicates “genuine emotional state... to those who suffered misfortune or those who, like children, are helpless.”²² As *rahamin*, mercy pertains to “a nurturing womb, implying a physical response and demonstrating that mercy is felt in the center of one’s body...and requires action.”²³ In other words, to feel mercy, to embody mercy is visceral: something that awakens one’s inclination or repulsion from the core of the individual.

In the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as the mercy of God, the *eleos* of God,²⁴ that is, “the saving will which is antecedent to any deed of man.”²⁵ Such saving will, *eleos*, starts and culminates in his dying on the cross and his rising from the dead whereby all are saved by him.²⁶ But the true encounter of Jesus as the mercy of God finds a diversity of vindication in his personal witness and his public ministry to “people from all strata of society.”²⁷ During his lifetime, Jesus freely associates himself with the sinners and outcasts

¹⁷*Dives in Misericordia*, 20–21.

¹⁸John McKenzie, “Aspects of the Old Testament”, Raymond Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Ronald E. Murphy (eds.), *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore: Theological Publications of India, 2003), 1301.

¹⁹Xavier Leon-Dufour (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 309.

²⁰John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 566.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³Michael Downey, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), 653.

²⁴John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 567.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Michael Downey, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 654.

of first century Palestine and courageously upholds their dignity especially the women, the sick, and the children – the marginalized sectors – against a backdrop of a dominant, discriminating patriarchal culture, even if it dearly cost him his life.

Systematic Articulations

Walter Kasper laments for what he calls as a “criminal neglect of mercy”²⁸ in dogmatic theology. According to him, the poverty of such treatment arises from a metaphysical bias on God²⁹ which “implies absolute fullness of being”³⁰ and therefore, excludes the possibility of God to suffer, or the capacity of God to suffer with human beings. He also reiterates the need to study mercy, to reconsider mercy, and to have mercy which originates “from the historical self-revelation of God.”³¹

While Kasper’s observation is notable, the Church, in its official documents, firmly teaches the importance of mercy. John Paul II refers to God’s revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus, as a divine “philanthropy”³² which aptly incarnates the mercy of God through His Son in the Spirit and is fully revealed through His Son’s passion and death.

*The cross of Christ on Calvary stands beside the path of that admirable commercium, of that wonderful self-communication of God to man, which also includes the call of man to share in the divine life by giving himself, and with himself the whole visible world, to God, and like an adopted son to become a sharer in the truth and love which is in God and proceeds from God.*³³

²⁸Walter Kasper, *Mercy the Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2014), 9.

²⁹Ibid., 10-11.

³⁰Dives in Misericordia, 7.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 11.

³³Ibid., 10. This is also alluded in Isaiah : “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

Why suffer for humanity who constantly succumbs to sin and disobedience?

Pope Francis speaks of mercy “as the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity”³⁴ and cites mercy as a distinction that sets God apart from humanity.³⁵

*When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.*³⁶

Finding its root in God, how does the Church position herself in the witness of mercy?

Mater et Magistra emphasizes the Church’s “maternal care in upholding human dignity”³⁷ by clarifying the landmark achievement of *Rerum Novarum* for human beings and their work and stressing the demand for the common good.

Paul VI’s *Voi Forse Sapete* inspires sinners and even unbelievers on the mercy of God:

Now, two other big questions arise. How will the catechumens, or better still, all those who do not know the Gospel and the Church, be saved? Do sinners, who are not in God’s grace, belong to the Church? ...We will simply say, with regard to the first, that a person can belong to the Church in reality, or “in voto” virtually, by desire (as the catechumens) or even by properly directing a life that may be deprived of any explicit knowledge of Christianity, but that is, because of the person’s moral uprightness, open to a mysterious mercy of God...even sinners can belong to the Church...Sin interrupts union with God, but if it doesn’t interrupt adherence to the communion of salvation which is the Church...then it

³⁴*Misericordiae Vultus* 4.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Mater et Magistra* 1.

can find its redemption in this institution which was established specifically in order to save men. Recall the parable of the net: “The kingdom of heaven is like a net cast into the sea that caught every kind of fish.”³⁸

The Church must truly be a welcoming home for both saints and sinners; after all, the greatest mandate of the Church is salvation of souls.

The Church also directs her attention to those new “poor” – the handicapped and the maladjusted, the old, different groups of those on the fringe of society, and so on – in order to recognize them, help them, defend their place and dignity in a society hardened by competition and the attraction of success.

Among the victims of situations of injustice – unfortunately no new phenomenon – must be placed those who are discriminated against, in law or in fact, on account of their race, origin, color, culture, sex or religion.³⁹

In defining and describing such phenomenon, the Church truly understands its mission as belonging to those in greater need, to those who are most vulnerable in diverse circumstances, and to those whom society excludes. In fact, mission to the poor and the “discriminated” exemplifies Jesus’ priority in his public ministry as God’s *eleos*.

The Church is enjoined to open its door to all and to refrain from making judgment that precludes even those who are considered sinners and unbelievers. In situations of injustice and discrimination, the Church embraces Jesus’ preferential option for the poor and the marginalized. Without a doubt, mercy is the Church’s greatest calling.

³⁸Paul VI, *Voi Forse Sapete*. Accessed at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/p6voi.htm> on September 10, 2017.

³⁹*Octagesima Adveniens* 15.

Moral Considerations

On the moral aspect, it would be worth noting to highlight both the horizontal and the vertical aspects of mercy. To do so, the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan are judiciously cited to expound their moral wisdom and relevance.

GOD'S MERCY: VERTICAL ASPECT OF MORALITY

Morality begins with the utmost recognition of an indispensable Christian confession:

*God created humankind in the image of God he created them; male and female he created.*⁴⁰

From this revelation, the dignity of human beings becomes sacred and inviolable, regardless of race, gender, orientation, color, condition, and orientation. In the eyes of God, all of humanity is created equal and precious to him – a bedrock conviction that has always formed the teaching and tradition of the Church on moral issues, social concerns, and missiological engagements throughout the centuries. No less than Walter Kasper makes a bolder re-affirmation on the importance of human dignity:

*The starting point and foundation of the church's social teaching is the Christian image of humanity, concretely, the unconditional dignity of each human being and all people. This dignity is given to human beings not by society, but by the Creator and, therefore, it is sacrosanct and inalienable.*⁴¹

Such sacrosanct and inalienable human dignity is beautifully captured in the moral story of the Parable of the Prodigal Son where the Father, upon the return of his son who “squandered his property in dissolute living”,⁴² was moved with mercy and compassion:

⁴⁰Genesis 2:27.

⁴¹Walter Kasper, *Mercy the Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, 186.

⁴²Luke 15:13.

*But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*⁴³

In this parable, two contrasts visibly emerge: (1) an erring son who could have been punished for his misdeed and (2) a forgiving Father who meets his son with an unconditional, merciful love. Further in the parable, the elder son fails to understand his Father's welcome for his undeserving younger brother and complains:

*But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I may celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'*⁴⁴

Here, the parable presents another contrast: (1) an elder son whose appeal on morality is founded on his implicit view of merit and demerit, of the notion of a deserving, hardworking son *vis-à-vis* the categorical terms of an undeserving, sinful son and (2) a Father who rejoices at the return of his lost son whose only desire is to be reunited with him ("this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found")⁴⁵, and whose sense of morality is formed by the core of mercy, transcending the limitation and sinfulness of the erring son.

In *Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis comments on the Parable of the Prodigal Son:

*...God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he pardons. In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon.*⁴⁶

⁴³Luke 15:20.

⁴⁴Luke 15:29-30.

⁴⁵Luke 15:32.

⁴⁶Walter Kasper, *Mercy the Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, 100.

In addition, Walter Kasper, quoting Anselm of Canterbury, describes God's mercy that far exceeds our sense of justice:

...how can God be simultaneously merciful and just. For, he said, justice would require God to reward the good and to punish the bad. But how can he then, in his mercy, forgive sinners? Anselm gives the answer: In his mercy, God conforms not to our deeds, but conforms to himself and his goodness. God is just, not in reference to us and our deeds, but rather in conformity with himself and his goodness...His mercy is his own distinctive justice.

In other words, the true measure and the only limit to God's justice is his mercy – a truth clearly embodied by the merciful Father. To insist on a morality based on merit and reward, demerit and punishment runs the risk of falling into a Pelagian contest of morality. Christian life is not a strict accounting of who is good, better, and best in word and praxis. First and foremost, life is a gift. Christian faith is grace. Morality only becomes authentic when it is first encountered as an experience of love, of mercy with God and/or with others. Only from such experience of love or mercy or forgiveness that a wellspring of a sense of identity and a being-with-and-for-others emerges in its gentle and liberating metamorphosis. It is only in this sense that morality is “graced” and becomes a gift of grace to others. It is only through a genuine encounter of mercy that humanity can truly respond on how it is to be merciful.

BEING MERCIFUL TO OTHERS: THE HORIZONTAL ASPECT OF MERCY

On the horizontal aspect of mercy, the Parable of the Good Samaritan offers a rich insight on the concept of “neighbor.” For James Keenan, the example of the Samaritan embodies a meaningful challenge to Christian discipleship and puts into flesh the concept of how a neighbor should be wisely conceived:

*But by the end of the story we are no longer looking at the neighbor who is wounded but rather at the neighbor who is acting. The Scribe therefore answers that the neighbor is the one who shows mercy. In the beginning we think that the parable is about whom we should assist. But the end is really about who we are called to be. We are called to be like the Good Samaritan, that is, to be a neighbor.*⁴⁷

Keenan puts forward a worthy insight – the heart of the matter in the parable is the fundamental call of identity, a sense of who we are from which a certain response follows. As the parable teaches, an identity which epitomizes the call to be merciful, to be virtuous. Following this line of moral reasoning, the horizontal aspect is a turn to virtue – a turn properly captured by virtue ethics.

The turn to virtue is further explicated in significant biblical references underlining the imperative of the virtue of mercy in praxis. Hosea 6:6 and Matthew 9:13 narrate God’s desire of mercy/steadfast love, rather than sacrifice from human beings. In Luke 6:36, it similarly commands: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” In one of the Beatitudes, the gospel according to Matthew states: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”⁴⁸

But why the turn to virtue ethics in moral reasoning? What is virtue ethics anyway?

Mooney and Nowacki’s perspective on virtue posits an affirmative statement:

Flourishing includes the acquisition of virtues . . . Virtues allow their possessors to make appropriate and effective practical choices without requiring formal deliberation. They do so by inclining the virtuous individual both to perform actions of a certain type and to develop a sort

⁴⁷James Keenan, *Moral Wisdom Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Moral Tradition* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2004), 124–125.

⁴⁸Matthew 5:7.

*of character that will be a font of actions of this desired type.*⁴⁹

Being a virtue in itself, mercy disposes the person to a habit of greater sensitivity to one's own moral sentiment and the need of the other. By the vindication of time and the constancy of practice, mercy, as a specific virtue, transforms into what is referred to as "habitual connaturality."⁵⁰ In other words, the virtue of mercy, by faithful practice over time, becomes "second nature" to the person that his/ her actions and decisions spontaneously proceed from his/ her identity formed by being merciful.

Therefore, mercy, proceeding from the giftedness of the divine, must also be received as a task: a responsibility to cultivate the virtue and habit of mercy. Not for his/her own end, the moral agent exemplifies mercy as a response to a witness of being touched by God's mercy and the compassion of others and of being called to share mercy.

Pastoral Considerations

The 1983 Code of Canon Law explicitly stipulates the "genuine equality of dignity and action among all of Christ's faithful"⁵¹ – without citing distinctions and classifications within the members of the Church.

Mercy, as a virtue in itself, properly incarnates itself towards and among persons and communities. In more concrete terms, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy aptly define both the call of the pastor and the flock while, at the same time, identifies the persons to be ministered to and the kind of persons they intend

⁴⁹Mooney, Thomas Brian and Nowacki, Mark, "Virtue, Connaturality and Know-How" in *PHILIPPINE SACRA*, Vol. LII, No. 156 (May-August, 2017), 549.

⁵⁰Ibid. Thomas Brian Mooney and Mark Nowacki distinguish ontological connaturality and habitual connaturality in the following descriptions: "Ontological connaturality is connaturality that belongs to animals qua beings of certain sort...[while] Habitual connaturality involves our second natures, in other words our first natures suffused with virtues – or vices...is acquired through the practice of virtue and involves perceptiveness awakened by the possession of the virtue in question" (Ibid.). However, a certain point must be registered that Aquinas himself forwarded the idea of infused and acquired virtues (See also Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015).

⁵¹Code of Canon Law 208.

to become: to be witnesses of mercy and at the same time, to recognize the need for God's mercy.

Pope Francis even spells out mercy as a “criterion for ascertaining who his [Father's] true children are”⁵² and as a yardstick “whether or not we are living as his [Jesus'] disciples.”⁵³

*[To] rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead...and the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray the living and the dead.*⁵⁴

For the pope, the persons ministered to in the works of mercy represent “those living in the outermost fringes of society: fringes modern society itself creates.”⁵⁵

In the pastoral ministry of mercy, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned, the doubtful, the ignorant, the sinners, the afflicted, and the offender take the center stage. These persons serve as the crucial existential turn of the faith, setting the direction to which Christian discipleship should be ordered. In other words, all that we have, all that we are, and all that we do must be directed to these persons. Pope Francis even makes a more elaborate and strong statement on our inescapable duty of mercy:

*We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison [cf. Mt. 25:31-45].*⁵⁶

⁵²*Misericordiae Vultus* 9.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

These persons in the outermost fringes of society paradoxically magnify the dignity of the human persons by the existential focus they rightly deserve and the kind of ordering in Christian witness that must be in flesh. More than the praise that is extended to those who are righteous and adherent to the hierarchical magisterium, those in the fringes of society rightly claim the center stage of new evangelization: the urgency of the sense of mission, the sense of God must never be ignored or delayed. Going beyond the institutional prescriptions and the careful coherence that must be observed towards the hierarchical magisterium, the sacredness of human dignity obliges the priority of witness in mercy.

In the concrete pastoral implication, those in the outermost fringes of society are not dependent or conditioned by their religious affiliations or adherence to a tradition; rather, they “de-center” the pastor and the flock’s priority in their witness and commitment to evangelization.

CONCLUSION

This paper frames its conclusion based on two guide questions: (1) After studying mercy from its biblical, systematic, moral, and pastoral aspects, what are its significant notes?; and (2) based on those notes, how could mercy be related to the discourse on the agency of *sf* particularly beyond the claims of Rush and the ITC?

One, mercy is a gift of an encounter: primordially, the divine reaching out to humanity out of gratuity and generosity, unconditioned by any merit of worthiness or a measure of due compensation. The encounter is propelled by an interior drive of abundance to be connected, to relate, to be in a relationship, to be in a commitment for its own sake. Thus, if one speaks of mercy, it has its primordial origin from and exemplar in God who is Mercy Himself, the Mercy Incarnate. Therefore, it is not something that derives its genesis or mandate from an institution or a particular set of prescriptions.

Two, being a gift, mercy is freely offered, generously and unconditionally squandered for all, for each and every person – without any exemption, without any hint of exclusion. It stands coherent to the interior drive of abundance because it seeks everyone, it embraces all without citing a set of qualifications or criteria to be fulfilled. Mercy's own criteria is its own inexhaustible and unmeasurable inclusion and unconditionality that transcend personal affiliations and institutional prescriptions.

Three, mercy is also a task: a way of life that offers an opportunity for a response. It challenges a coherent witness of life. It presents a vision of inclusivity where the impeccable truth of human dignity stands as a paramount importance and great equalizer among human beings regardless of gender, sex, race, affiliation, and any other human category of profiling or ordering.

Four, mercy is most meaningful and, as Jesus showed in the New Testament, most urgent when it is extended to those who are excluded in and by society. Based on the gospel accounts, Jesus' mission priority belongs to those who are discriminated and marginalized: the sinners of society and those people adjudged by society as failing to its social criteria and erring to their norms and expectations. These sinners and marginalized people, touched by mercy in the diverse contexts of their lives and stories, are also empowered to be instruments and witnesses of mercy to others.

Five, the way of mercy is universal and accessible to all – to both saints and sinners; hence, each person is capable of mercy through his witness of life and deed. In other words, the human agency of mercy dispels any possibility of a monopoly by a few or limitation and control of its possibility of witness by an institutional prescription or directive. While there may be varying degrees of witness on mercy, it always stands true that no one is ever deprived of its gift or its call to witness.

Mercy is an antidote to any attempt or any pattern of exclusion, whether implied or explicit, intended or not. The rigid categories of what (or who) is authentic or not in *sf* pushes certain sectors of the Church, and even those outside the Church, to the

domain of exclusion. It unnecessarily sets limits on the greater role of grace in and through each person outside the fence of institutional mandates and religious adherence. On a positive note, mercy consoles all persons, righteous or not, with the immediacy of God's gracious and unconditional offer of love and pardon to their recurring lives of sinfulness and holiness, to their stubborn inconsistency of witness in goodness and failure. It offers hope for a witness of renewal and encourages a steady commitment of praxis through an encounter at the personal and communal contexts.

Therefore, human agency in mercy is universal and encompassing breaking the barriers set by prescriptive and institutional categories. Instead of limiting the human agency in sf to the few qualified people, it gratuitously empowers all, especially the excluded and the marginalized, to stand as capable agents of sf based on their unique context and circumstance. Such empowerment of witness even includes those who are non-Catholics, non-Christians, and the *Lumads*. After all, the Church, as an *ekklesia* of real people and communities, can only be true to its identity and mission when it has become the least among the leasts, when she embraces the gift of diversity of peoples, and when it refrains from differentiating peoples based on their identities and affiliations and their varied contexts of chaos and crisis. As Gerald O'Connell describes Pope Francis's Church of mercy:

[Pope] Francis wants a Church that is on mission, reaching out to others...especially those on the peripheries; a merciful Church that is a field hospital to the many wounded of this world; a church that builds bridges, not walls. He wants a church that is poor and for the poor, one that rejects careerism; a church that is committed to encounter, inclusion, and reconciliation, not one that is confrontational, self-referential and judgmental.⁵⁷

⁵⁷As cited by Gerald D. Coleman, "Pope Francis, Mercy and the Meaning of Marriage," in *The Catholic Bioethics Center* (2016), 37.

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