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Les Malades of Lourdes: Opening the heart through painful emotions

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In April 2015, Pope Francis announced the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in his Bull of Indiction "Misericordiae Vultus" (The Face of Mercy). Focusing particularly on God's forgiveness and mercy, the year was a special occasion for the remission of sins and universal pardon. Believers were invited to perform a pilgrimage to Rome, walk through the holy door and confess to a priest. For the first time, the Jubilee was celebrated not only in Rome but all around the world. In many cathedrals or historical churches, holy doors were designated and opened - they became a symbol for spiritual renewal and passage to a more positive elsewhere. In the Bull, he states: "The Holy Door will become a Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instills hope". (Misericordiae Vultus, 3)

Mercy, transferred from the Latin term misericordia, is a constitutive virtue and duty in all major religions. In Catholicism, it is an essence of God and tightly related to the forgiving of sins. Sin, pain, injustice and other non-desirable states of being are still around and they are still reacted upon, battled against or healed with the Christian measure of misericordia. Misericordia is an overreaction. Too much feeling and action are activated against the evils of the world. It offers much greater kindness than what would be necessary to achieve justice and balance. An affect enhanced with a pedagogic and moral ideal, it calls out believers to give out empathy and love in an unconditional and excessive - I'm tempted to say potlatch-like - way.

In the Hebrew bible, misericordia is described as grace (chesed - loving-kindness), clemency (chen - grace / favor) and mercy (rachamim). (Augustin, p.20) The term rachamim stems from rechem - the womb, the guts. In the Qu'ran, the Basmala - the phrase that is recited before each sura - bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm, meaning "God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful", goes back to the same root. In Buddhist traditions, the Pali and Sanskrit term karuna means selfless compassion that expects nothing in return, not even gratitude. To the Buddha, karuna represents the "quivering of the heart" when it enters in resonance with suffering. In Ancient Greek, the term translates to σπλαγχνίζομαι (splanchnizomai), to be moved in the inward parts, to feel compassion. Splanchna, the inward parts, were the nobler entrails - the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys - that gradually came to denote the seat of the affections (<http://biblehub.com/greek/4697.htm>) These terms indicate that movements and sensations were located and felt in some organs, and that these perceptions became affects and emotions. With the Latin term misericordia, the feeling moves up from the gut to the heart, which is in most cultures a symbol for the center from where spirituality and virtues emanate. One quality of the heart is its attachment to the miserable and the afflicted. Moving and translating the concept from one culture to another, from one language to another, an array of terms is centered around a loving attitude towards other beings: pity, mercy, grace, compassion, empathy, loving-kindness, caritas (charity), altruism, forgiveness, generosity.

Political concepts like fraternity, solidarity and tolerance emanate from the devotion to other beings, too. A multitude of scholarly texts and books in the fields of theology, psychology, philosophy, affect theory seek to distinguish one term from another, pointing out the different histories and meanings of that which can be described either as a moral virtue, a practice, a medium, a feeling, an emotion, or an affect. For the Catholic church, misericordia is the cure and the weapon against the omnipresence of pain and suffering. In his interview with Andrea Torielli, Francis imagines "the Church as a field hospital, where treatment is given above all to those who are most wounded." (Francis p. 28) When he is asked why humanity is so in need for mercy, he replies: "Because humanity is wounded, deeply wounded. Either it does not know how to cure its wounds or it believes that it's not possible to cure them. And it's not just a question of social ills or people wounded by poverty, social exclusion, or one of the many slaveries of the third millennium. (...) The fragility of our era is this, too: we don't believe that there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet. We need mercy. We need to ask ourselves why today so many people, men and women, young and old, of every social class, go to psychics and fortune-tellers." (Francis, S. 36)

Why do so many people go to Lourdes? In 1858, in the remote Pyrenean village of Lourdes, the Virgin Mary appeared several times to a young girl, daughter of an impoverished and suffering family. In a grotto, Bernadette Soubirous perceived a small luminous figure floating above the ground who spoke to her. Miraculous healings immediately happened in the grotto, as soon as the population came to know of the apparitions and gathered at the spot. The events in Lourdes are part of a succession of apparitions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that took place around France and that reoccurred in a similar form: Mary appeared to young persons with difficult lives, gave messages, made water well out, miracles happened in the aftermath. The mystics' accounts were always contested by the local clergy and they had to undergo long struggles until the Catholic Church approved of their miraculousness. The historian Ruth Harris points out that the history of Lourdes, which became the largest and most visited shrine of Europe, is intricately linked to the development of science and of modern medicine in the 19th century, it was a reactionary movement.

I traveled there in 2015 to seek healing as well as to start a photographic project. Lourdes fell out of time and out of Europe, it had it's own unique logic, rituals, procedures, and aesthetics. I had never seen so many severely ill and disabled persons gathered in one place. Some of them were paraded in processions lasting for hours, I cried when seeing them passing by in rikshaw-like wheelchairs and on stretchers. Prayers and Hymns were recited in many languages, at night, everybody carried a candle. I felt remarkable energetic currents in my body when visiting the grotto. Ruth Harris in her extensive account on Lourdes describes her own emotional experience: "Mostly, Lourdes impressed and moved me; less frequently, some of the people there shocked and horrified me. (...) Despite the great differences between my experience and that of nineteenth-century pilgrim, at the core there was the same intense physicality, backbreaking labour, and centrality of pain and suffering. The body in pain was the focus of our collective and personal ministrations, a world that was rendered spiritual by ritual. This spirituality was invested in rites such as the Eucharistic processions and bathing in the pools, activities that seemed to have a timeless, unchanging character. In fact, they originated out of specific nineteenth-century conditions, and encapsulated a particular vision of body and spirit. (Harris, p. XV) She continues: "For at the centre of the history of Lourdes lies physical pain. Omnipresent if often inarticulate, neither suffering nor its alleviation were easily contained within the defining power of language. (...) there was a

paradox in the heart of the sanctuary, for the more physical pilgrimage became - with its emphasis on disease and dying - the more spiritual it became as well, as if the assembled at Lourdes were obliquely aware of an attempt to transcend the mind-body divide of contemporary society." (Harris, p. 22)

Christians from all social classes spend from one week up to several months on their own cost to volunteer for the malades, helping them on the sanctuary ground, in the hospitalités, in the piscines, or during a journey in a hospital train. Some of the volunteers have recovered from severe illnesses themselves, very few are even miraculés (healed by a miracle) who have dedicated their life and service to Mary and the shrine. Local archdioceses and Lourdes societies organise yearly pilgrimages and support disabled and sick persons financially so that they can participate. Some of them live in foster homes, where budgets and nursing staff have been severely shortened by neoliberal politics, and a pilgrimage to Lourdes is their only possibility to travel. During the days of the pilgrimage, a very particular communality emerges between les malades and their caretakers that temporarily transcends social boundaries like class, nation or health. Lourdes is an elsewhere of overflowing temporary misericordia. Later they will return to the total institutions that nursing homes have become - many of which are operated by the Church as well. A journalist wrote in a reportage for Geo magazine in 1982 of "an atmosphere of care and friendship that wouldn't be possible anywhere else. In this intimacy, I understood what affects the sick pilgrims; not so much the hope of a miracle. But the gratefulness that here they can cope with their suffering. Not desperation, but the happiness that at least here it's not a cold world, here they are not excluded, forgotten, or ignored. Here they take center stage." (Brückner p. 430) In an interview for a documentary, a woman with multiple sclerosis who travels to Lourdes since 30 years, states: "It just gives me strength. No doctor can give me the strength, no medicine can give me the strength."

The piscines, the baths of Lourdes have several small tubs that are separated by a curtain from the open arcade hall. I had to move from seat to seat and row to row until they asked me in. Another curtain separated the tub from the changing room, where six women were sitting on chairs while undressing. A volunteer in a uniform spread a large blue cotton towel in front of me with both her arms, and under her gaze, I was supposed to take off my clothes. The woman wrapped the blue towel around me and when the curtain opened, she pushed me in front of the tub. The curtain closed behind me, and a wet white towel, used by the previous pilgrim, was wrapped around me. I had to speak a prayer now, silently, and make a wish while looking at the statue of Mary on the wall. Both the piscinières prayed, took my arms, and moving backwards, I let myself fall into the 12°C cold water. It happened very fast. The next person was already waiting, I walked too slowly on the slippery ground, and the piscinières pushed me again. I had to yell at them that I have a walking impairment.

In a promotional video about the piscines on the sanctuary's website, a volunteer explains the particular emotional intensity that is experienced there. During the bath, as well as during the Eucharistic Procession, most of the miraculous healings have taken place. The water of Lourdes is granted to have holy and miraculous qualities. As I was trying to pull my jeans over my wet legs and still acted to slowly for the routine dispatch, an elderly woman on a stretcher was brought in. Her body was covered in bandages that the helpers gradually took off, she was lifted on a smaller stretcher that would fit into the pool. They covered her with a wet towel, as she disappeared behind the curtain. Maybe she had an infectious skin disease, or festering wounds: everybody would bathe in the same water. We would have to deal with overcoming our disgust and our standards of hygiene, our „écœurement“, where our guts

and heart turn inside out, where our limits are crossed in the intensity of the sacred moment. Ruth Harris describes a scene from a mass pilgrimage in 1897, where, "after a long day of exertions, Père Picard asked for a drink. Rather than drawing some water afresh, he asked a stretcher-bearer to fill his glass from an infected pool, filled with the pus, blood and scabs of the sick pilgrims. When the father had received the water, he made the sign of the cross and drank slowly, right to the end. (...) He concluded with a smile: „The water of the good Mother of Heaven is always delicious.“ With this gesture, Picard drew dramatically on a largely female tradition of medieval sanctity. (...) For such women, the holy food of physical suffering had been transformed into delicious fare, and, like the Eucharist itself, embodied the pain of redemption. Picard both enacted a nineteenth-century vision of medieval fervour and underlined his belief in the power of faith over science at the height of the Pasteurian 'revolution'." (Ruth Harris p. 246, quoted from „Lourdes“ by Emile Zola)

The exposure to extreme situations can spontaneously bring forth visceral, negative, and undesired affects like disgust, fear, anger, grief - contemporary and popular neurophysiological theories would state that the nervous system is flooded with stress. Through the high arousal, the unpleasant feelings can tilt at any moment and transform into more sublime states of all-encompassing love and resonance with others. Experienced pilgrims are able to reach a state of enduring compassion, others have to theatrically perform their "holiness" and overcome the reality of their bodily reactions through discipline and will power. For people with illnesses, it is extremely exhausting to participate in the tight schedule of the daily ritual program. Sitting for hours in 19th century wheelchairs, being walked through masses and processions, through heavy rains and icy Pyreneean winds while being covered in a plastic poncho with a printed logo from your archdiocese might raise your awareness for the elsewhere.

The experience that pilgrims particularly strive for is a contact with Virgin Mary. She can become present in a vision or through a sensation in the heart. They pray for healing from physical conditions where high technology medicine has proven to be powerless, and from hardships that are caused by the cruelty of societies, bureaucracies and governments. "The miracle is the sign that God can act, and in this sense it obtains an irreplaceable meaning", wrote Josef Ratzinger. (Geppert / Kössler S. 17) Illness and suffering will appear more unexplainable and irrational in a contemporary world where the concept of rationality has profoundly changed. It's a framework where everything is well organized and flowing smoothly. Accidents and conditions that fall out of the normalcy of a successful and healthy life are deeply unsettling. The Church however needs suffering, illness and failure as a resource in order to affirm the kingdom of Christ. In the Sanctuary of Lourdes, the malades are the medium from where the affective nexus of empathy, pity, misericordia, solidarity, grace, pain and suffering ignites and blazes up.

Neuroscientist and psychologists have found out that affects and emotions can be modulated, regulated, learned and changed through different methods, as well as they can arise and be implemented through social practise. Meditation and Mindfulness- based stress reduction (MBSR) originating from a Buddhist tradition are trendy and very helpful techniques to learn to control your unpleasant affects like stress or anxiety. The Buddhist practice of cultivating compassion is the opposite of the Catholic passion of misericordia. Instead of producing overstimulation through intense feelings, the Buddhist meditator exercises the levelling down of any arousal. Their minds are trained to become like a still pond. At that point of complete stillness, visions or extraordinary states of consciousness can as well emerge.

Joan Halifax, a Buddhist scholar, explains the complex difference between cultivated compassion and simple empathy: "Compassion is the capacity to attend to the experience of others, it is our ability to engage in a quality of mind where we are both able to focus, to gather our attention and to drop into the body, and to be deeply present for others. At the same time another quality of attention is present, and attention is moving between these dimensions. It's an attention that is reflective, panoramic, inclusive, unperturbed, unjudgemental, like the image of the mirror or the still pond. One quality of attention is broad based and the other is focused like a laser. We're moving between these types of attention as we're in the experience of presence." (Halifax) Empathy however is considered an edge state of compassion, it is "the inadequate regulation or transformation of our sensing into the experience of others that can lead to personal distress". In compassion, positive and comforting feelings arise, while through being too empathic and entering too much in resonance with someone else, neural networks are activated that include one's own pain matrix. (Mühl, FAZ)

The description of empathy as a self-harming and exhausting affect comes close to the qualities of Catholic misericordia, as Pope Francis conceives it: „Saint Augustine wrote: “Search within your heart for what is pleasing to God. Your heart must be crushed. Are you afraid that it might perish so? From the mouth of the Psalmist comes this reply: A clean heart create for me, God (Psalm 51:12). The impure heart must be destroyed so that the pure one may be created. (...) The Church Fathers teach us that a shattered heart is the most pleasing gift to God. It is the sign that we are conscious of our sins, of the evil we have done, of our wretchedness, and of our need for forgiveness and mercy.“ (Francis S. 53)

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