

## Review of Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis

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**Book Review:**  
***Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis***

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*Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis*. Thomas Massaro, SJ, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, 2018. Paper, 208 pp. ISBN 9781442271746

As a pastoral minister who provides parishioners opportunities to pray, study and act on the call to work for justice, I welcome the work done by Thomas Massaro SJ, in his book, “Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis.” The book is both academically sound and accessible for most Catholics with a heart for social justice.

One of Fr. Massaro’s most important contributions to understanding Pope Francis’ social teachings is his emphasis on change and continuity. As Massaro points out, Francis’ teachings are firmly rooted in the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. At the same time Francis does not just embrace previous teachings but significantly advances them. In light of a steady stream of attacks by anti-Francis factions within the Church (including parishes), this book will help Catholic parishioners understand and defend how Francis’ teachings fit into the larger tradition.

Massaro begins with a good description of what Catholic Social Teaching is all about, “the place where the Church turns its face most deliberately to the wider world.” He also includes parts of the pope’s biography to help us better understand where Francis is coming from: a man from the global periphery.

Why is it that when Pope John Paul II or Pope Benedict XVI taught in strong terms about economic justice, peacemaking or caring for creation they did not get push back in the same way that Francis does? Part of the reason is that often, when John Paul II or Benedict XVI had something important to say, they would issue encyclicals – which are hardly if ever read or taught to the faithful. Francis, on the other hand, speaks directly to believers in ways that are easy to understand. This often shocks the sensibilities of those who benefit the most from the *status quo*.

Massaro points out that Francis speaks as a pastor more than a pontiff. His ethical method is “inductive,” giving priority to actual human experience rather than starting with abstract first principles. This new model of teaching authority, “pastoral magisterium,” focuses attention to specific personal needs. It is all driven by the pope’s emphasis on mercy. As Massaro writes, “Mercy is difficult to enact because it requires sacrifice and the overturning of ordinary expectations for how human life proceeds, such as with the perpetuation of petty grudges and automatic punishment for infractions of rules.”

Francis seems to understand that if he wants his teachings to reach every day Catholics he needs to break out of the stifling limitations of formal teaching means and methods. Massaro points out that Francis does not just issue formal teachings but also uses creative opportunities, like the

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Vatican World Meetings of Popular Movements, and synods of bishops to speak directly to the faithful. (His recent series of reflections on the moral challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and Catholic Social Teaching is another innovative way of applying Church teaching to the signs of the times.)

Pope Francis is also a master of using social media and traditional media as forums for teaching; including Twitter, YouTube, media interviews, even a TED talk. As Massaro writes, Francis' words carry so much impact because he often matches his words with deeds – inviting refugees to the Vatican, attending to the needs of the homeless in Rome; pausing a motorcade to embrace a sick child; washing the feet of women, Muslims and recovering addicts.

Massaro also identifies many aspects of Francis' teachings that significantly advanced Catholic social thought. On the environment Francis expanded our understanding of “integral ecology” which connects concerns for natural ecology with human ecology. In Francis' understanding it cannot be emphasized enough that everything is interconnected. In regards to peacemaking, “reconciliation” best captures the efforts of Pope Francis. Francis insists that peacemaking is the work of solidarity; and creative active nonviolence is the best way to peace.

Massaro reminds us that mercy and inclusion are two guiding lights of the ethical approach of Francis. He writes, “While [Francis] occasionally uses the terms ‘justice,’ ‘rights’ and ‘obligations,’ the pope shows a rather marked preference for the language of mercy and love.” Pope Francis talks about the relationship between mercy and justice, not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love. Francis cites Jesus' example of going beyond the law. For Francis, mercy is at the absolute core of the Gospel.

Another important innovation in Pope Francis' social teaching is the emphasis he places on culture and the importance of cultural transformation. As Massaro points out, “Francis invites us to see the connection between our external actions and our internal state of mind, driven as they are by our culture and spiritual motivations.” When you add these connections to Francis' insistence on addressing the systemic roots of social problems we begin to see how important the concept of culture is to Francis' teachings.

This pope speaks of, “the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution.” Over the years he has spoken of “a culture of care,” “a culture of mercy,” “a culture of welcome,” “a culture of accompaniment,” and “a culture of encounter.” On this point the book would have benefited from a more in-depth exploration of the meaning of culture and how cultures change and transform.

From my limited experience with institutional cultural transformation, as an anti-racism organizer and in my work to establish a missional culture in my parish, I have a few insights that may help Catholic social justice activists begin the cultural revolution called for by Pope Francis.

One way to think about the social conventions of the dominate culture is that they are generated by institutions and systems in order to legitimate, defend and promote the values, beliefs and outcomes of these institutions and systems. Individual behaviors and attitudes are formed by these

institutions and systems through a process of socialization. This means that in order to transform culture, you not only need to change personal attitudes and behaviors, you need to transform the institutions and systems that form individual attitudes and behaviors.

Institutional cultural transformation includes changing formal structures, policies, practices and procedures and informal structures, policies, practices and procedures. Like an iceberg, most of an institution's culture is below the surface and is often unacknowledged and unexamined. This means that the first step in transforming institutional culture is to disrupt its normal operation in an effort to invite reflection on what is taking place; why it is done the way it is done; and can it be done in a different way that better reflects the professed values of the institution. To do this work we need "holy disrupters."

Institutional cultural transformation is as much about un-learning as it is about learning something new. Old patterns of behavior will need to be disrupted; new patterns will need to be created that will, at first, be un-natural and at times uncomfortable. Over time these new ways of doing and being can begin to re-shape attitudes. You cannot simply educate your way into a new institutional culture. You will need to organize your way to a new culture. It is a process of dismantling, reforming and in some instances reconstituting formal and informal ways of doing and being.

Being a "holy disrupter" is no fun; it is often dangerous, thankless and isolating. For this reason community is essential. No disrupter can survive alone. We need each other and we need to embrace intersectionality, the conviction that all of our struggles in all of our respective institutions are connected. As Pope Francis teaches, everything is interconnected.