

Epilogue

The process of collecting these papers has been a fruitful exercise in bringing together different experts from diverse fields of research to make sound judgements on how the value of mercy can be integrated evermore into our social matrix. This approach, undoubtedly, marks the way forward for a holistic understanding of any human condition. That the theme dealt with, namely that of mercy shown towards the migrant, is topical can be seen from the fact that last year, “Word of the Year 2016” chosen by the Oxford Dictionaries was *post-truth*, an adjective described as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”² Post-truth is indicative of the way a society’s norms and policies (even unwritten ones) can be shaped unless due rational consideration is allowed to form part of the equation. The encounter with people of different cultural, racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds may still cause anxiety, despite the presumed ability of the World Wide Web to diffuse fear related to such interrelations, and this can be inferred from the fact that the term *xenophobia* was chosen as another “Word of the Year 2016,” this time by the renowned website www.dictionary.com.³ Xenophobia differs from the somewhat neutral concept of “otherness” in

¹ Stefan M. Attard obtained a doctoral degree from the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, and is currently a lecturer in Old Testament studies at the Faculty of Theology, University of Malta.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>, accessed August 2, 2017. The issue of migration or displacement goes back to biblical times and beyond. It has been treated by the present author in a recent publication: Stefan Attard, “Dealing with Displacement and Homelessness in the Psalms: Divine Action as a Paradigm for Human Mission,” in *Like a Watered Garden: A Festschrift for Rev Prov Dr Lucien Legrand MEP on His 90th Birthday*, ed. Stanislas Savarimuthu et al., (Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2017), 1:216-245. See also the United Nations’ report entitled *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* and its “New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants” (Doc. A/71/L.1).

³ Cf. http://blog.dictionary.com/xenophobia/?param=email&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_

that the former is imbued with overtones of fear.⁴

One participant at a recent annual meeting organized by the *Fondazione Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice*, which focuses on Catholic Social Teaching, commented on how, too often, little importance is given to the social aspects of society, and that an overarching concern when dealing with such matters could easily be related to the economy. Having said this, it must also be stated that much has been done on the local level to relieve the plight of countless migrants reaching our shores. It must be admitted that methodologically, more emphasis on the tried and tested projects, practices and actions in favour of the migrant would have been in order before delving into areas which need to be rectified. However, it must also be noted that so much more is being done in the Maltese context than can possibly be quantified and acknowledged in this modest publication.

The contributions in this special number of *Melita Theologica* offer various practical proposals and recommendations that should particularly interest stakeholders and policymakers, for while compassion (*cum passio*) may focus on feelings, mercy belongs to the realm of action.⁵ These proposals are intended to supplement what is already in place, and build upon the structures that already function satisfactorily. Needless to say, new and daring measures are also being proposed, the application or otherwise of which might constitute a gauge of the national willingness to implement important changes or advances in favour of the migrant.

The initiative to organize the Symposium of which this publication is the result was not a solitary cry but must be seen within the broader context of efforts being made along the same lines. In April 2016 the title of the “Third Goody Lecture in Society, Culture and History” delivered at the University of Malta Valetta Campus was *The Importance of Being Kin*. More recently, in May 2017 the “Frederick Ofoosu Memorial Lecture” entitled *Speaking for Ofoosu: Immigrant Experience, Multiculturalism and the Psychological Trauma of Migration*, was organized by the Department for Inclusion and Access to Learning (University

medium=email&utm_campaign=WOTY%202016:%20Xenophobia&utm_term=wordoftheday, accessed August 2, 2017.

⁴ Attard, “Dealing with Displacement and Homelessness in the Psalms,” 220: “The question of otherness is an age-old phenomenon which, despite impressive fluxes of peoples between nations, our modern world’s advances in technological connectivity, and the generally increasing move away from traditional mores to an apparently bland universal, cosmopolitan existence, has not abated nor prevented modern-day human beings from having to face the complexities that arise out of living in close proximity to people from diverse milieus.”

⁵ Cf. Charles Elliot, *Comfortable Compassion?: Poverty, Power and the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

of Malta, Faculty of Education). This year a project entitled *Building Capacity for Local Volunteer Initiatives and Promoting Welcoming Communities* was launched by Kopin (*Koperazzjoni Internazzjonali* - an organisation that works on international development cooperation) with the aim of enhancing the integration of refugees, asylum seekers and third country nationals living in Malta. This present publication differs in that it combines aspects of non-theological disciplines with theological insights. The rationale for having a theology paper follow a less noticeably theological one cannot be found in the belief of the medieval period that the humanities are at the service of theology. Rather, what is at stake is a two-way contribution:

- the sciences deal with the specific nitty-gritty situations of migrant issues and have to operate a hands-on approach wherein their particular fields of expertise are made to bear on the lives of migrants in order to alleviate their burdens and enhance their advancement in ways that are viable;
- theology gives a sound anthropological framework with which to approach this reality, broadening our perspectives in order to envision the human person in his or her highest possible potential. This is achieved by coordinating the entirety of human life in relation to the higher, supernatural being we call God, who thereby becomes the fixed reference point by which to gauge the value of human existence.

Only by roping in various University faculties could the achievement of a view that was as expansive as possible be ascertained in the present treatment of the subject. It is not just one research area or field that should be engaged in the implementation of mercy but it has to be a holistic and coordinated multidisciplinary approach, of which the aforementioned Symposium is but a sign. Only by allowing the sciences at large and theology to mutually inform each other would it be possible to formulate a theology of hospitality that is worth endorsing. This, indeed, must be a local (but not parochial) theology of hospitality as every country has its own specific matrix and peculiarities. It is opportune to remember that the Church's vision has never been simply to give directives on suitable ways of action vis-à-vis those arriving in multitudes at our shores or any other country's borders. It has, indeed, honoured those who have shown special concern for strangers. To mention but two, King Stephen of Hungary and Frances Xavier Cabrini are counted among the saints who have championed the cause of the underprivileged.⁶ Given its Christian

⁶ In his homily at the canonization of Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini on 7 July, 1946, Pope Pius XII stated: "She extended a friendly and helping hand especially to immigrants [in America] and offered them necessary shelter and relief, for having left their homeland behind, they were

anthropological compass, the Church's approach has been to raise awareness on a universal level of the great dignity of all human beings and the importance of upholding public morals; an approach which, if taken seriously, can not only lead to a drop in forced migration, but also ensure that migrants are always treated with dignity.

When one human being is helped, the entire humanity is raised. In the rationale of unity - because each human being is a unique and irreplaceable reflection of the whole human race - in welcoming the other we are welcoming a part of ourselves. Rejecting the other is tantamount, to some degree or other, to a rejection of the fullest expression of our very humanity. All discourse on the migrant as a person to be respected and not merely as a case to be handled can be most notably enlightened by the concept of "le visage d'autrui," this being one of the seminal ideas of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.⁷ The face of the other can be said to speak to me, imposing a moral duty upon my behaviour. In many respects, it constitutes a criterion by which I must regulate my interpersonal relations. Levinas' philosophy of hospitality is thus intriguing:

The idea of the perfect is not an idea but desire; it is the welcoming of the Other, the commencement of moral consciousness, which calls in question my freedom. ... Conscience welcomes the Other. It is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being.⁸

This concept can be coupled with Valjean's powerful statement in Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*: "To love another person is to see the face of God." Beholding the face of the other can therefore be said to offer a glimpse of the divine in human form. For this reason, the effort that migrants make to learn the culture and language of their host country should be matched by the endeavour of the locals to create a new language, or rather, a rich vocabulary that equips them to converse with these migrants not only verbally but socially and culturally. No one is exonerated from the arduous task of exploring ways of communicating with the other in such a way as to make oneness possible.

Modelling his or her ethic on God's work in creation, when the human being was formed out of the dust and had life breathed into his nostrils, the theologian is not fascinated only by "the starry heaven above" in some Kantian fashion, but must use his/her hands to handle the human form even when it appears but clay

wandering about in a foreign land with no place to turn for help."

⁷ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991), 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

and earth.⁹ The human being cannot be contemplated merely in some anagogical, ideal form but in its very earthly substance, which is where God's original design for humanity first reveals itself.

One of the notable concepts proposed by the moral and political philosopher John Rawls was that of the veil of ignorance. Rawls postulates a situation wherein none of the main decision makers on a certain issue knows his or her eventual position in life. Policies and norms should be created in such a presumed state of unknowing if they are to be truly just, objective and unbiased. In other words, any decision taken and any law enacted vis-à-vis migrants should originate from individuals who, conceptually, take into consideration the possibility that they themselves might end up being the recipients of such migrant-related policies.

In this regard, it must also be noted that it is fallacious to perceive oneself as the sole giver and to characterize the other as a needy receiver.¹⁰ The givers themselves are receivers, for the Lord Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Together with theology, the other four main disciplines that have contributed to this project become more authentic inasmuch as they embrace the challenges migrants bring with them. It is in mercifully dealing with migrants' predicament that laws become more just, and that educational, health-related, and social welfare efforts engage in what is most genuinely proper to their areas of expertise. But it must also be borne in mind that, whilst what is offered to migrants is often quantifiable - new laws enacted, so many hours of teaching given, a certain amount of people treated in hospitals, so many houses allocated - the wealth they themselves bring to the locals can never be measured. Hence, in line with the blessedness spoken of by our Lord, migrants are not to be seen merely as individuals whose rights are to be safeguarded, but as persons who can engage with the nationals in a human and social framework of fraternity.

⁹ "Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gn 2:7). As for Kant, it must be stated that he was also filled with wonder by "the moral world within," cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 133.

¹⁰ In his unpublished M.A. dissertation *The Process of Grace in Julian of Norwich's Experience of Prayer and Contemplation*, Edward J. Clemmer skilfully expounds Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of "givenness" and states that for Marion it is the giver that is decided by the gift and not vice versa (p.29); cf. Jean-Luc Marion, "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift" [Esquisse d'un concept phénoménologique du don, 1994], in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. John Conley and Danielle Poe (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 91: "The gift itself decides: it resides in the decision of the giver, but this decision rests upon the obligation motivated by an anterior gift."

It is significant that in the Old Testament, the entry of the Israelites into the land of Canaan, the so-called Promised Land, and their settlement therein, is not envisaged as a conquest but rather as the reception of a divine gift. This truth can be gleaned from the fact that the land was apportioned by the casting of lots (believed to express the divine will) and not by personal choice. The hermeneutic implied is that the land is God's to give as he so desires (cf. Jo 18:1-10). Moreover, the settlement did not entitle the Israelites to some kind of superior attitude vis-à-vis foreigners where mercy was at stake. The Covenant Code (Ex 20:22–23:33) lays down the following command: “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt” (Ex 22:21). Deuteronomy takes this to a higher level in its formulation of a positive command: “And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt” (Dt 10:19). In both cases, the reason behind kindness to the non-national is historicized.¹¹ To some extent, from a Biblical perspective, the condition of all humankind, from the moment Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, their natural homeland and place of origin, is one of endless wandering. What all of humanity strives to achieve on an existential level - the return to that primordial condition where we truly belong - is lived out in the flesh by a smaller (though still significantly large) number of human beings who search for a real home in a sometimes hostile world.

The Greek word *perichoresis* may inspire our reflection on this topic. The term has been used by the Church Fathers (e.g. Maximus the Confessor) to describe the kind of relationship that exists between the three Persons of the Trinity. Among its various meanings, a key concept of the term is that of “making room.” In the light of the related English term *choreography*, one can poetically envisage a Trinitarian relationship that can metaphorically be described as a dance, wherein each divine Person allows the free movement of the other Persons. Would it be too far-fetched to presume that such a generous and “life-giving” movement should be reflected in the interplay between nationals and migrants, where the final choreographic movement is brought to a brand new level of performance?

It becomes clear from the papers included in this special number of *Melita Theologica* that migration is not a problem to be solved, but a challenge to be embraced. Mercy is, in the last analysis, a construct through which all must learn to view, not only a group of individuals, but society and humanity at large. In other words, mercy should be (or at times become) a principle criterion by which laws are enacted, health services are dispensed, education is offered, and social

¹¹ See also Pietro Bovati, “‘Mio padre era un forestiero’: L’insegnamento biblico sui migranti,” *Civiltà Cattolica*, no. 167 (2016): 548-562.

services are structured; where the whole social family is taken into consideration. But even when the few are given prominence in the employment of this principle, it will turn out that an attitude of mercy that is based on rational considerations will be beneficial to one and all, as it creates the kind of society that is most attentive to the deepest needs of humanity at large. This so-called Mercy Project, epitomized in these papers, points to that ongoing effort which should be made by each and everyone to exalt humanity. As far as theology is concerned, this is a small contribution to the truth that this discipline's milieu is none other than the world, where the human venture steadily unfolds.

Stefan M. Attard
Department of Sacred Scripture, Hebrew and Greek
Faculty of Theology
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080
Malta

stefan.m.attard@um.edu.mt