



Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations
Heaven in Our Hands
Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R. Servant Publications 1994

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Meditation – Works of Mercy

Chapter 6: The First Beatitude of Illumination: Giving God a blank check

Twenty-five years ago I sat in a humble, sparse apartment in a rundown tenement on the lower east side of Manhattan. The tiny living room had been transformed into a plain but prayerful chapel. The elderly sister who looked at me was a study in calm contrast. Her face would have intrigued any of the great photographic artists of our time. It showed the effects of age and chronic illness, but it also radiated an inner light and peace which would have captivated any perceptive person. Her name was St. Mary Mercy.

Although none of her personal surroundings suggested it, St. Mercy was a renowned missionary physician and of the best known of the Maryknoll Sisters. She had worked for years in the Orient as a physician for the very poor. That part of life is told in a biography, *Her name is Mercy*.

In her old age Sr. Mercy had joined two other Maryknoll sisters, Regina and Eileen, in an effort to bring a contemplative prayer presence to a very poor part of the vast slums of New York City. The intrepid foundress of the Maryknoll Sisters, Mother Mary Joseph Rogers, had established a cloister next to the mother house as a spiritual engine for the missions of this great American community. There the sisters lived humbly and quietly in the tenement. But they had become known to the people of this wildly colorful neighborhood. They attended St. Bridget's Church and were well cared for spiritually by the parish priests, especially Fr. Ed Keehan, who enjoyed his unforeseen role as a chaplain of contemplative nuns.

Now Sr. Mercy was a great realist, as one might expect of a physician who had worked around the world. The twinkle in her eye often let you know that she thought more deeply about things than appeared on the surface of the conversation. At times I'm sure she thought I was off base in some of my youthful enthusiasms, but she was always merciful. It was just that twinkle in her eye that kindly suggested I might be missing some obvious point.

This holy woman's life had a profound impact on my own; I recall one encounter with her that brought me up short and made me realize that I was gliding over deceptively deep waters. Sr. Mercy's conversation was very quiet and plain, like the room we sat in. I noticed some audio tapes on the table—talks given years before by Thomas Merton to the Trappist novices.

“Have you listened to these?” I asked her.

She smiled and said, “I can't listen to them. I can't listen to anything. I can hardly read anything because it's all so complicated. My prayer is very simple, very simple.” She saw my incomprehension, smiled broadly, and said, “You see, I am a very simple soul.” It is my impression that Sr. Mercy was in contact with—in fact, absorbed into—the light of the merciful Savior whom she had followed faithfully all her life.



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Chapter 9: The First Beatitude of Union with God: The Power of Poverty

This most confusing of all the Beatitudes—blessed are the poor in spirit—has wound its agonizing way through Church history and through the history of spirituality. Occasional saints such as Francis of Assisi have shed light on it by raising high the banner of poverty. But for the most part, the first Beatitude has been denied, muddled, misunderstood, and rationalized away.

I have heard many people say that Christ doesn't call us to be poor in *fact* but just in *spirit*. Loose translation: "I can have lots of worldly possessions so long as I really *want* to be poor." I'm always left wondering exactly *how* they want to be poor, in precisely *what* their poverty consists. And in many cases, these same people eventually give up pretending to be poor and end up living their lives in search of wealth...

William Barclay's commentary explains that among the Jews of Jesus' time, two kinds of people were called to be poor: the dirt poor and the utterly destitute. The *dirt poor* scratched out a meager existence from the soil and lived from hand to mouth. Outside of harvest time, they often had no idea when they would eat again or where their next meal would come from. These hard workers usually belonged to a village or a tribe. They had social roots. And although they were extremely poor, their membership in a small community of people guaranteed their basic survival....The second kind of poor were the *utterly destitute*: people with no farm, no regular place to work, and no village. They simply roamed the city or countryside looking for occasional work, something to eat, and shelter. Their lack of roots and community created a much deeper sense of desperation than did simple hunger. No plot of land, however grubby, stood between these people and starvation. Now be honest with yourself. Would you volunteer to belong to either group?...

...This profound spiritual poverty cuts against the grain of human nature. The worldly spirit exalts impatience and rebellion by which we proclaim our independence from God. In this Beatitude, however, Jesus calls us to live with an entirely different attitude: to be constantly aware of and to acknowledge our absolute poverty and emptiness before God, our utter nakedness before all the world. Not always a pretty sight!

I sometimes look into my soul in the early light of dawn—when my mind is uncluttered by the demands of the day. I find only the unspeakable poverty, wretchedness, misery, and sinfulness—a misery accentuated by my priestly role and duties....A bishop must feel poorer still when he thinks about serving as one of the chief shepherds of the Church....And how humiliating the papacy must be! How alarming to stand as pope in the gray light of dawn. An old Italian proverb sums up the steep price of spiritual leadership: "Heavy hangs the great mantle on the shoulders of him who would guard it from the mud."