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THE RHETORIC OF MERCY: DO-GOODERS,  
CORPORATISTS, AND WARRIORS

*Timothy B. Neary, Assistant Professor of History*

On this celebration honoring the sixtieth anniversary of Salve Regina University – an institution founded by the Sisters of Mercy – I find it instructive to examine the rhetoric of mercy employed by our political leaders. The concept of “mercy” is often absent among the rough and tumble of electoral politics (we need only to look at the current U.S. presidential race for examples). Nevertheless, mercy has long been an important – if not always practiced – aspect of political leadership. The ancient Roman playwright and philosopher Seneca instructed his young emperor Nero, “It is impossible to imagine anything which better becomes a ruler than mercy.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately for Rome, as well as a number of the emperor’s family members and the early Christians, Nero did not heed the sage counsel of his tutor. President Abraham Lincoln, speaking after nearly four years of brutal civil war, told a Washington, D.C., audience shortly before his untimely death, “I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, if we are to believe Lincoln – that the application of mercy is a superior approach to leadership – why do so many leaders, like Nero, neglect the virtue of mercy?

Catherine Elizabeth McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy in 1831 specifically to serve the poor of Dublin. Within decades her ministerial outreach spanned the globe, including much of urban America (in cities like Providence, for example). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Sisters of Mercy operated schools, Catholic hospitals, and social service ministries throughout the United States. By 1910, about 4,700 Sisters of Mercy taught more than 100,000 students in parochial grade schools, as well as nearly 10,000 pupils in Mercy academies and high schools. In addition, the Sisters operated fifty-three hospitals and sixty-seven orphanages throughout the nation.<sup>3</sup> Mother McAuley and her religious sisters best expressed their vision of mercy through direct action: feeding the hungry, educating the ignorant, comforting the sick and dying. Rhetoric, for them,

was less important; or, expressed colloquially, “talk is cheap.”

While talk certainly can be cheap (and cheapened further by lack of actions backing it), rhetoric is still an important aspect of leadership, especially political leadership. This brief paper will explore the rhetoric of mercy used by U.S. presidents during three periods of significant social reform in the twentieth century: the Progressive era, the New Deal, and the Great Society. Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson led their respective campaigns during the 1910s, 1930s, and 1960s to ameliorate suffering and conditions of poverty among millions of American citizens. I use the terms “Do-Gooders,” “Corporatists,” and “Warriors” to describe (in a shorthand way) distinct attitudes toward social reform during the three periods. A consideration of these attitudes from our relatively recent national history, I hope, will allow us to consider strategies for engaging political solutions to problems of poverty and injustice now facing us in the early twenty-first century. Finally, I will end the paper by briefly examining the rhetoric of mercy found within the speechmaking of a few of our contemporary national leaders.

#### PROGRESSIVISM

In his first inaugural address, Woodrow Wilson declared that the nation had arrived at a “new age of right and opportunity...where justice and mercy are reconciled.” Why such profound optimism? Progressive reformers, like Wilson, held a steadfast belief in the improvement, if not outright perfectibility, of human society. Applying the growing body of scientific and social scientific knowledge to the body politic, Progressives (or “Do-Gooders” as I call them) championed legislation meant to protect citizens from such social evils as child labor, impure food, and alcohol consumption. I refer to them as “Do-Gooders,” because, at times, Progressives worked to “protect” Americans from that which many did not believe they needed protection (e.g., witness the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment initiating Prohibition in the United States in 1919 followed fourteen years later by the Twenty-First Amendment, which repealed it in 1933). Progressives, like social work pioneer Jane Addams and environmental conservationist Gifford Pinchot, embraced the principles of moderation, order, and morality. As members of the nation’s growing middle class, they sought to impose their middle-class sensibilities on an American society scarred by the sometimes violent conflicts arising from acute class divisions

that resulted from the yawning gap between the unbelievable wealth and crippling poverty of the industrial age.

Historians have argued that the Progressive movement was an attempt to remake American politics and economics in the image of the middle-class, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant home of the Victorian Age. Within this feminized, domestic sphere, wives and mothers safeguarded the moral wellbeing of the family. Such women instructed their children in religious faith, taught manners, and modeled respectable behavior. Outside the home, however, in the public sphere, it was understood that men – even good, middle-class men – often needed to act in aggressive, ruthless, and even downright un-Christian ways to succeed in the race for the “survival of the fittest” within the realms of business and politics. Progressivism sought to extend the so-called “Cult of Domesticity” to the public sphere in order to make society more like middle-class family parlors imbued with order and morality. The Social Gospel Movement of mainline Protestantism guided this Progressive thinking. Organized religion had long emphasized the great reward found in the afterlife, but these Christian reformers took seriously the Gospel message to build the kingdom of God on Earth. After World War I, President Wilson went so far as to attempt to impose this middle-class Progressive model on the rest of the world in the form of the League of Nations. In his famous “Fourteen Points” speech to the U.S. Congress, Wilson called for a world governed by “covenants of justice and law and fair dealing,” because “an evident principle ... is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak.” This Wilsonian internationalism called for a “New World Order” to make the world “safe for democracy.”

Progressives did make remarkable strides in improving our society. I think we all can agree that the Food and Drug Administration and National Parks improved quality of life (although this time of year we might not be such fans of the Progressive’s Sixteenth Amendment which in 1913 created the federal income tax). Yet the do-gooder, top-down approach to mercy also left room for myopic self-righteousness. Woodrow Wilson, a southerner, Ph.D. in history and political science, former university president, and Progressive, was also a white supremacist, who, upon entering the White House, ordered the segregation, and – in some cases, wholesale rejection – of African American civil servants in the executive branch, nearly

fifty years after passage of the Fourteenth Amendment had guaranteed citizenship to African Americans.<sup>4</sup> Jane Addams, in her work in the slums of Chicago, expressed condescension and disdain for the religious and cultural practices of the Italian immigrants she encountered, pledging to “Americanize” them, because festivals venerating the Madonna did not fit within the Progressives’ vision of America.<sup>5</sup> The Progressive policy of prohibition, moreover, was just as much an attack on Roman Catholic immigrants, who were preserving the drinking cultures of their homelands, as it was on alcohol use itself.

Father James Keenan of Boston College, who spoke in this hall last October, defines mercy as “the willingness to enter into the chaos of others.”<sup>6</sup> Progressive reformers like Addams did enter into the chaos of others for the purpose of transforming the poor and the immigrant, but seldom did they leave themselves open to the possibility of being transformed by those they sought to help. When we look at examples of this top-down approach to reform at the local, national, and international levels, we find that justice achieved in this way, if achieved at all, most often is untenable. History shows us that true mercy and lasting justice requires humility from all parties. But the Progressive understanding of mercy most often favored zeal and pity over sensitivity and humility.

#### THE NEW DEAL

Nothing quite humbled the nation as much as the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Unemployment rates at 25 percent (as high as 80 percent in some cities), homelessness, hunger, and despair gripped millions. An urban coalition of working-class, white ethnic Catholics, along with African Americans and Jews, helped put Franklin Delano Roosevelt in office in a 1932 landslide. Faced with the apparent failure of *laissez-faire* capitalism, Roosevelt embraced social corporatism, a philosophy which emphasized protection of groups over individuals. Corporatism was an idea dating back to the guilds of medieval Europe endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout his time in elected office, the Protestant Roosevelt actively courted Catholic support, working closely with big city Irish Catholic political machines and appointing a Catholic to his cabinet, as well as to the U.S. Supreme Court. A confidant of Cardinal George Mundelein of Chicago, FDR felt at home among American Catholics and adopted the

language of Catholic social teachings as interpreted by Monsignor John Ryan of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, who lobbied tirelessly for minimum wage legislation. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin's Catholic Worker Movement arose from the same social Catholic teachings championed by Ryan and grounded in two influential papal encyclicals – *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) – calling on Catholics to work for social justice, especially for laborers in industrialized societies.

It was within this context that President Roosevelt urged Americans to set themselves “resolutely to the performance of those spiritual and corporal acts of mercy which have ever been the salvation of men and Nations.”<sup>7</sup> If America were to survive the Depression, her people must work together. A spirit of solidarity and community needed to supplant the competition and individualism of the Roaring Twenties. Through his intimate “Fireside Chats,” Roosevelt used the modern technology of radio to comfort everyday Americans who often felt helpless amid economic insecurity. Despite his elite pedigree, FDR entered into the chaos of others without condescending. Some historians argue that his battle with polio greater sensitized Roosevelt to the suffering of others. New Deal government policies, such as the Works Progress Administration, Social Security, and the newly established federal minimum wage, emphasized communal responsibility. Roosevelt's language went so far as to endorse what Catholic social teaching today calls the “preferential option for the poor.” In his second inaugural address, Roosevelt told his countrymen, “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

The New Deal began the creation of the modern welfare state in the United States. In concert with the Catholic notion of communion, this new approach to government meant to create a social safety net for the elderly, the sick, and the downtrodden. Today, Social Security is considered the “third rail” of American politics, an untouchable entitlement. Rejecting Social Darwinism, social corporatists believed mercy meant including each member of society under its protective umbrella. The New Deal's comprehensiveness resulted not only from a philosophical commitment to corporatism but also from the reality that the Depression affected almost every segment of American society. Class antagonisms between the seemingly unaffected wealthy and the rest of society did exhibit themselves

in the 1930s, but, for the most part, Americans found themselves together in the proverbial same boat. The white-collar, middle-class reformers left over from the Progressive era were not now in a position to objectify the poor as “other,” since severe economic hardship was no longer an aberration assigned only to immigrants and the chronically poor. Out of the New Deal developed a liberal national consensus committed to protecting Americans from the sting of poverty through government action, which shaped public policy for more than twenty-five years following World War II.

#### THE GREAT SOCIETY

The unprecedented economic boom in the postwar United States led to a standard of living among Americans commonly described as the highest in human history. As the middle class rapidly expanded and homeownership dramatically increased, conventional wisdom held that the American Dream was within reach of every citizen. This aggregate economic prowess provided a bulwark for the United States in the Cold War, as the stunning scope of middle-class consumerism became ipso facto an argument against Soviet communism. The 1962 publication, therefore, of Michael Harrington’s *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* garnered much national attention. The book focused on the rural poor, African American poor, and aged poor hidden in plain view. Harrington described the conditions of those living in persistent poverty, which he calculated to be between 40 and 50 million Americans, nearly one quarter of the U.S. population. Many commentators wondered out loud, “How could such poverty exist amid such wealth?” And more than a few worried that the Soviet Union could exploit this weakness.

Born into poverty in the hill country outside of Austin, Texas, Lyndon Johnson did not enjoy the early-life privileges of the middle-class Wilson or well-to-do Roosevelt. A political product of the New Deal Democratic coalition, LBJ possessed an almost unlimited faith in the American government’s power to make life better for its people, as well as people around the world. As president, Johnson became what I call a “(Cold) Warrior” against poverty. “[I]n your time,” he told the University of Michigan’s 1964 graduating class, “we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.”<sup>8</sup> Johnson’s Great Society became the sequel to Roosevelt’s New Deal and Harry Truman’s Fair Deal, an attempt to employ the resources

and authority of the federal government to alleviate suffering and provide opportunity. Johnson's War on Poverty included the establishment of healthcare for the elderly (Medicare) and poor (Medicaid), as well as federally sponsored preschool (Head Start). The (Cold) Warriors against poverty were motivated by both nationalism and ethical principles. On one hand, how could a nation hoping to defeat communism allow one-fourth of its population to live in poverty? On the other hand, how could a just people enjoy unprecedented affluence, while so many fellow citizens suffered from chronic deprivation?

Like the Progressives, the (Cold) Warriors against poverty approached their task with a certain missionary zeal. Volunteer programs, like the Peace Corps and VISTA, tapped into progressive idealism. Yet, these Warrior reformers were more likely to allow the chaos they encountered to transform them. They became more interested in, and respectful of, the folk traditions of workers, the rural poor, and racial minorities. Even so, top-down control still beleaguered the War on Poverty, and in 1974 Congress created the Community Development Block Grant, which allowed state and local governments, closer to the ground, to distribute funds for anti-poverty programs. Like the New Dealers, the Warriors emphasized corporate – or group – rights. The modern American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s demanded recognition of African Americans' Constitutional rights, while parallel movements – the women's, Chicano, American Indian, and Gay and Lesbian movements – redefined legal and political approaches to civil rights in the United States. The effort to protect historically subjugated groups developed a greater focus on group rights, which shared some similarities with New Deal corporatism. In 1964 and 1965, Johnson signed the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, respectively, honoring at last the federal government's commitment to Reconstruction begun, and then abandoned, a century earlier.

Faced with stark discrepancies between great abundance and great need within American society, the Warriors refused to believe that the challenge to end poverty was beyond the nation's reach. Massive spending on the war in Vietnam, civil unrest in the streets of American cities, and a growing critique of the modern welfare state combined, however, to work against Johnson's ambitious campaign. At the same time, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called on Roman Catholics to be merciful toward the poor. "[E]xcessive economic and social differences between the members of



the one human family or population groups,” wrote Pope Paul VI, “cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Church began acknowledging the sin of racism. Meanwhile, the inability to fight wars on two fronts – in Vietnam and against poverty – ultimately destroyed Lyndon Johnson politically; but as he lit the nation’s Christmas tree in 1963 only a month into his presidency, LBJ concluded that “mercy and compassion are the really enduring values.”<sup>10</sup> For without them, all the government programs in the world would not achieve true justice.

#### MERCY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

As spending on social welfare programs accelerated and U.S. troop levels in Vietnam neared the 400,000 mark, a backlash against Johnson’s two wars dramatically altered the midterm elections of 1966. Former vice president Richard Nixon stumped for candidates around the country that autumn, helping to rebuild the Republican Party’s voter base and begin his own political comeback. Ronald Reagan became governor of California, and George H. W. Bush was elected to his first term in the U.S. House of Representatives from Houston’s Seventh Congressional District. This year 1966, then, marked the political origins of four presidencies spanning twenty-six years between 1969 and 2009. The foundations were laid for what would become the dominant political ideology for the last quarter of the twentieth century. A profound distrust of the welfare state and increasing focus on privatization and individualism replaced the faith – held by Progressives, New Dealers, and Great Society warriors, alike – that government activism could affect genuine social reform.

Despite this movement to the right, the social welfare state, did not, of course, dissolve, as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid still serve millions of Americans. Today, some politicians look for new ways to invoke mercy. Former North Carolina Senator and presidential candidate John Edwards speaks of “Two Americas,” one rich and one poor. “Poverty,” Edwards argues, “is the great moral issue of our time.”<sup>11</sup> In his 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush championed “compassionate conservatism” and “faith-based initiatives,” and in 2003 announced the President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR), which he called “a work of mercy beyond all current international efforts to help the people of

Africa.”<sup>12</sup> More recently, U.S. Senator from Illinois and presidential candidate Barack Obama has invoked the words of Genesis 4:9. In his speech last month on racism in America Obama said, “Let us be our brother’s keeper... Let us be our sister’s keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.”<sup>13</sup>

As in the time of Seneca, the rhetoric – and actions – of mercy are often difficult to find among today’s leaders. Too often, compassion and mercy take on connotations of weakness and naiveté. The example, however, of Catherine McAuley – intrepid, resourceful, and resilient – provides us with a model of a merciful leader in this world who worked for lasting justice.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Essays*, Volume 1, *De Clementia*, “On Mercy” (ca. 55 A.D.).

<sup>2</sup> Quotation from 1865 attributed to Abraham Lincoln in Osborn H. Oldroyd, ed., *The Lincoln Memorial: Album-Immortelles* (Springfield, IL: Lincoln Publishing, 1890), 459.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Stanislas Austin, “Sisters of Mercy,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume X (New York, 1911). Internet: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10199a.htm>, Accessed April 18, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Blumenthal, “Woodrow Wilson and the Race Question,” *Journal of Negro History* 48.1 (January 1963): 5-9. See also David W. Southern, *The Progressive Era and Race: Reform and Reaction, 1900–1917* (Wheeling, WV: Harlan Davidson, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Jane Addams, “Religious Education and Contemporary Social Conditions,” *Journal of the Religious Education Association* vol. 6 (June 1911).

<sup>6</sup> For more on this definition, see James F. Keenan, SJ, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Greetings to Catholic War Veterans,” October 30, 1935. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, eds., *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted). Internet: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14969>, Accessed April 18, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Commencement address, Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 22, 1964.

<sup>9</sup> His Holiness, Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican, 1965). Internet: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), Accessed April 20, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks at the Lighting of the Nation's Christmas Tree," December 22, 1963. Woolley and Peters. Internet: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26587>, Accessed April 18, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Policy address to the National Press Club, June 22, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> State of the Union speech, January 28, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> "A More Perfect Union," March 18, 2008.