

BANNY

'As a child in Tyrone you'd be told
to banny the cat, to stroke it gently.
I suppose it comes from *beannaigh*,' she says.

She uses the word for the first time in eighty years, maybe,
as she rhythmically blesses her own old cat,
in its own tactile, enduring vernacular.

Moya Cannon

(Beannaigh: Gaelic, to bless, to greet.)

This poem by contemporary Irish poet Moya Cannon is deceptively simple and conversational in tone. Time spent with it reveals layers of meaning, most of them pertinent to Mercy.

By way of disclaimer, for those not well disposed to the feline species, let us begin by saying that this poem is only cursorily about a cat! In its economical six lines it evokes the tenacity of memory, the wisdom of age, the significance of language, and the importance of reverence towards all creatures of God. It directs us to search the recesses of our own memories for the “enduring vernacular” of blessing and of mercy. Where did you learn the idiom of mercy, who taught you the quotidian reality of blessing?

The poem rests on the connection between the idiomatic “banny”, meaning to touch gently and rhythmically, and the Irish word for blessing. Ponder that. To touch is to bless. To touch is to bless. To comfort and hold a little creature, any little creature, is to bless it. And be blessed by it. That is the truth of appropriate and reverential touch. How far is this from the violations of touch, the intrusions of power that we have learnt about with dismay in terms of the sexual abuse in the Church and other institutions. The deep abhorrence we experience towards the reality of sexual and physical abuse is an innate awareness of the travesty that makes touch *not* a blessing. On a more mundane plane, how far it is metaphorically to speak of touch as blessing from the blunders we each of us sometimes make in our approaches to others, in our unwitting insensitivities and well-intentioned ignorances.

As the poem implies, the word for blessing in the Irish is also the word for greeting. John O'Donohue explains in his book *Anam Cara*:

“In the Celtic tradition, and especially in the Gaelic language, there is a refined sense of the sacredness which the approach to another person should embody. The word ‘hello’ does not exist in Gaelic. The way that you encounter someone is through blessing. You say, *Dia dhuit*, God be with you. They respond, *Dia is Muire dhuit*, God and Mary be with you. When you are leaving a person, you say, *go gcumhdái Dia thú*, may God come to your assistance or *go gcoinne Dia thú*, may God keep you. The ritual of encounter is framed at the beginning and at the end with blessing.”

The word “banny”, so closely allied to blessing, means not merely to touch but to touch with the utmost and concentrated gentleness. I am reminded of Catherine McAuley’s letter dated July 27th, 1837, in which she issues instructions for the care of a debilitated Sister in need of convalescence by the sea. After the practical considerations of food and rest and exercise, Catherine advises Sister Elizabeth Moore to demonstrate *great tenderness of all things*...It is easy to misread this imperative as great tenderness *IN* all things but Catherine’s injunction is more qualitative than that. She is clear that above and beyond everything else, more important than anything else to this sick woman, Maria Sausse, is the need for tender dealing. In this wonderful letter tenderness of approach meets and responds to tenderness of need, because of course the other meaning of tenderness indicates vulnerability and is symptomatic of malaise.

What do we believe about the connection between tenderness and mercy? Mother Silverius Shields rsm wrote the following powerful description of tenderness and its relationship to mercy:

Tenderness is a quality of nobility, a mark of sensitivity; it is the signature of mercy.

Those words appear on the small desk calendar produced some years ago by Mercy International Centre which features a quotation for each day from Catherine McAuley and information regarding foundations and ministries. That they feature for the date of March 14th is a grand coincidence of spirit, because this was the day after the Papal conclave that elected Pope Francis.

How very moving for us, kindred of Catherine, to hear the new Pope speak in the homily at his installation of the need for tenderness:

We must not be afraid of goodness or even tenderness!

Here I would add one more thing: caring, protecting, demands goodness, it calls for a certain tenderness. In the Gospels, Saint Joseph appears as a strong and courageous man, a working man, yet in his heart we see great tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love. We must not be afraid of goodness, of tenderness! (March 19th, 2013)

It is incumbent on each of us to express that quality of tender blessing, of “banny” towards others and incumbent on each of us to keep alive, perhaps to rediscover, the “enduring vernacular” of Mercy. An enduring vernacular survives all fleeting fashions, economic rationalism, strife and changes. It cannot be stifled by institutionalisation. The enduring vernacular of mercy, of tender blessing, will quietly assert its grace and potency. We just have to await it, recognise its goodness, affirm it and go on uttering it, insisting on it as the “signature of mercy.”

- You can access via Google etc the Homily from the Inaugural Mass of Pope Francis, March 19th 2013.
- Check out more of Moya Cannon’s evocative poetry on the web.
- Consider your experience and expression of tenderness.
- When was the last time you were aware of the enduring vernacular of Mercy or of its absence?

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