People of mercy: theological laicity in The Brothers Karamazov

Giulio Maspero

ABSTRACT
The depth of the understanding of reality that emerges from the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky is simply ineffable. The divine and human is continuously recalled in his narrative plots and in the development of his characters. This is why various theologians have considered the great Russian writer an exceptional interlocutor. The object of this work is the understanding of the people found in his writings, already masterfully studied by Romano Guardini. We seek here to consider it through two fundamental theological lenses: mercy and laicity. The thesis proposed is a presentation of the Christian mystery that places at the centre the idea that the mercy of the Father makes the very constitution of the people possible. In fact, if the relational openness of God is unconditional, then even the weak person and sinner can be a member of His people. Theologically (and etymologically), laicity is connected precisely to laos, that is, to a relational identity that is not marked by a categorical differentiation.

1. Introduction
Writing about the work of Dostoevsky is a bold undertaking, both because of the depth that characterizes it and the breadth that it encompasses, a vastness that is connected to that of the Russian soul, always suspended between two abysses (Dostoevsky 1957, XII.61). However, precisely such characteristics have irresistibly attracted theologians to the thought of this great writer in an attempt to confront the challenges of modernity and postmodernity (De Lubac 1949, 288–4042). Distinguished examples are von Balthasar (1998) and Guardini (2015). The latter wrote that Dante’s Divine Comedy closed the Middle Ages, while the great Russian novelist closed modernity (Guardini 1932, letter to Jacques Maritain, 7; Castangia 2010, 402–403). Both von Balthasar (1991, 172–183; 1998, 202–419, esp. 411) and Guardini (2015, 13–97) have identified a fundamental theological category in the conception of the people that emerges from the works of the great Russian.
The perspective proposed in this work is clearly theological, but it also refers to an ontological dimension, in consonance both with the patristic approach, so important to Dostoyevsky, and to the necessity of responding to Nietzsche. The original starting point is the juxtaposition of mercy and laicity in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Salvestroni 1996). It is effectively undeniable that mercy is present through the entire novel, being irradiated primarily by the Elder, indeed even before by his brother Markel, and then by Alyosha. Laicity may seem totally estranged from mercy itself at first glance, but it is at the heart of the thought of Ivan. What we shall try to show is precisely the connection between the two and the link of this connection with an authentic realism. In a brief summary, we shall emphasize how, in the work being examined, mercy underpins the very possibility of the existence of the people, as an affirmation of a possibility of relation that is not *a priori* conditioned in any way. However, laicity, both etymologically and theologically, refers precisely to that people whose identity is based on divine mercy, made present in the world and in the history of the Church.

That is why the current work is divided into three main parts: the first shows the link that connects Alyosha and the Elder to mercy, thus emphasizing the element of laicity, and concludes with the metaphysical perspective. The epistemological option assumed in this research is the relational one, according to which the metaphysical depth contained in the text is mainly revealed through an analysis of the relationships of the main characters.

2. The founding relation: Alyosha and the elder

In the opening Dostoevsky immediately presents Alyosha as a non-hero and not even as a mystic or zealot (I, 4), but as a realist who does not believe in miracles (I, 5). This realism concerns, first of all, his concrete relationship with Christ: “I can’t give two roubles instead of all, and only go to mass instead of following Him.” (I, 5, i. p.22). Thus, he does not want to be a judge of people, not even of his father who breaks his heart (III, 1), and they all love him. He does not compete with them, and for this reason he does not fear, forgetting all offences without even considering them as such (I, 4). It is known that Alyosha is innocent, but not naïve, to the extent of having pondered the possibility of his father’s murder. Grushenka calls him *prince* in addition to *cherub*, (VIII, 3) but she identifies him as her own conscience (VII, 3). He knows sensuality: he is a Karamazov from head to toe, a sensualist like his father and a crazy saint like his mother (II, 7).

And the ultimate cause of this happy disposition, while remaining mysterious, seems to be deeply rooted precisely in the foundational relationship he has with his mother. Alyosha lost her when he was only 4 years old, but he still remembers her tenderness, her caresses, so much so that he can still see her alive in front of him as she entrusts him to the Mother of God (I, 4). As we shall see, the presence of this trace in the soul of the young man takes on a fundamental value in light of the epilogue of the work, and in light of the connection between mercy and the “onion” (VII, 3). This is an internalized relationship that gives a human basis to the radical opening up to the other that is based in Christ.

The reference to Mary is present even in the figure of the Elder, in whose cell is kept a Catholic cross of ivory with a *Mater dolorosa* who embraces it (II, 2). And this
is immediately connected to his love for sinners. In the beginning, the happiness of the master surprises Alyosha. And this is immediately linked to his love for sinners, in fact: “he was more drawn to those who were more sinful” (I, 5, i, p.25). Immediately, Dostoevsky shows here the foundation of the connection of the Elder, and therefore of the disciple, with the Russian people, who, despite being tormented by fatigue and injustice, feel and reason from a place of the security of the presence of holiness, the presence of a concrete holy person, capable of restoring justice (I, 5). It is said of the Elder that, “He carries in his heart the secret of renewal for all” (I, 5, i, p.26).

Thus, he is attracted by the people and knows their pain, both mute and patient pain, and the cutting pain that is expressed in lamentation, especially that of women, which resounds in history from the cry of Rachel for her children (II, 3) and that echoes in the very Heart of the Mater dolorosa. This is particularly evident in the encounter with the young consumptive peasant, who confesses to having killed her sick husband who beat her. Now she is angry and afraid of death. She has already confessed her sin twice and was readmitted to Communion. The Elder tells her:

Fear nothing and never be afraid; and don’t fret. If only your penitence fail not, God will forgive all. There is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord will not forgive to the truly repentant! Man cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God. Can there be a sin which could exceed the love of God? Think only of repentance, continual repentance, but dismiss fear altogether (II, 3, i, p.47).

Note how the Elder, grounded in God, lives with a perspective that can be called ontological. The foundation of his words is not only a goodness of character or an ideal and moral position, but the awareness of the greatness of God relative to the smallness of humanity, the metaphysical excess between the Creator, who is capable of embracing everything with His Love, and the creature. This is why the Elder tells the woman to forgive the deceased, then adding:

If you are penitent, you love. And if you love you are of God. All things are atoned for, all things are saved by love. If I, a sinner, even as you are, am tender with you and have pity on you, how much more will God. Love is such a priceless treasure that you can redeem the whole world by it, and expiate not only your own sins but the sins of others. (II, 3, i, p.47).

This directly contrasts with Madam Khokhlakova, the mother of Lise. She only sentimentally loves people (II, 4). And in the face of the suffering that grips her due to her lack of faith in the future life, the Elder invites her to love actively (II, 4). In fact, her hatred for specific persons is directly proportionate to the growth of her abstract love for humanity (II, 4). The contrast between the monk and the lady, the contrast that Dostoevsky particularly loves, as Guardini has masterfully shown through his theory on polar oppositions (see Castangia, 2010) cannot be more acute. The first is in real relation with the sinner, is moved by her, and feels compassion; the second is moved only at the level of ideal representation and does not support contact with the reality of the other, even while declaring herself realistic (IX, 1).

3. The relationship with the people: a question of laicity

The realistic perspective also has to do with the heart of the whole philosophical dilemma that dwells within Ivan’s soul. His position on the relationship between the
Church and state is not simply a marginal question in the development of the novel, but encompasses a deep core of what may be the theological response to Nietzsche. If Catholicism is presented as a reduction of the Church to the state, the position propagated by the brother of Alyosha is exactly the opposite: everything must become the Church (II, 5). The reduction of the guilt society to a shame society is present here, to take up the distinction to which the contribution of Federica Bergamino refers (see also Dodds 1951, 28–63). In other words, we could say total clericalization.

Note that Ivan aims to protect the common good. The response of the Elder becomes prophetic, against the backdrop of the messianic socialism and of the successive destiny of Russia. In fact, according to the monk, the only true punishment that can keep one away from evil is the one enclosed in the recognition of sin on the part of one’s own conscience in which the law of Christ is expressed. The point is that Russian criminals still have faith, and only before the Church can they find true justice. However, unlike the state, the Church never loses communion with the criminal. If the Church became the state, like in the west, this would be impossible, just as it would be impossible if the state became the Church (II, 5).

Therefore, from the beginning, everything revolves around the position of Ivan, for whom love of his neighbour is connected to faith in immortality. For him, if this faith were removed, then everything, even cannibalism, would be permitted. Hence, the tragic doubt in the face of the loss of faith in God. Significantly, this conviction is revealed after the arrival of Dmitry. Later, Rakitin would note that precisely Dmitry caught the fact that without immortality everything is permitted, while he personally believes that even without it, the love of liberty, fraternity, and equality enable virtue (II, 7).

Three positions are, therefore, compared: Rakitin’s optimistic position of philanthropic humanism, which was just stated (there can be good without God), Ivan’s pessimistic position (there cannot be good without God), and the realist position of the Elder (there can be good, and one can always return to being good, because there is God). To these correspond three opposing conceptions of the people: the romantic and enlightened conception of Rakitin, the nihilistic conception toward which Ivan is drawn, and the Christian one, which recognizes in the mercy of God the very foundation of the existence of the real people, with all their sins and passions. Laicity and the distinction between the Church and state are linked precisely to these positions, depending on the fact that immortality can be recognized, or not, as a condition of the possibility of virtue. In fact, Ivan would want a fusion between the Church and the state, in stark contrast with the spirit of the time, in which only the judgement of the Church seems to ensure survival. However, it is precisely here that the Elder reveals the theological and prophetic depth of his teachings, identifying in mercy the basis for the separation between the throne and the altar: the foundation of the value of laicity. In fact, only in the case of the Church is the relation with the sinner a priori, and, therefore, unconditional with respect to any crime committed and any punishment that must be inflicted (II, 7).

This comparison assumes an absolutely central value within the narrative structure of the novel, insofar as it concludes with the request for forgiveness addressed to all and with the proskinesis of the Elder before Dmitry, who flees from the room (II, 6). It is known that the gesture of the monk was what preceded the celebration in the Divine Liturgy: it is as Dmitry’s passion began here, i.e. a celebration in which
Alyosha would be the lay witness. This is why the Elder tells him to leave the monastery shortly after his death, calling him “my son” (II, 7). He sends him into the world because he trusts the presence of Christ in him, and he wants him to be close to both of his brothers, in order to pray when the demons will be unleashed.

The relationship with the people is, therefore, connected precisely to the possibility of the recognition of the presence of God in the world. Every person, in their conscience, finds themselves before this call and can always choose. Dmitry, for example, who would be condemned, composed the following verses, which re-appear several times in the text:

Glory to God in the world,/Glory to God in me … (III, 3, i, p. 101)

They are like a prayer, a latreutic act, which recognizes the presence of God in the world and in the heart of man, even though the call of evil is equally evidenced:

For when I do leap into the pit, I go headlong with my heels up, and am pleased to be falling in that degrading attitude, and pride myself upon it. And in the very depths of that degradation I begin a hymn of praise. Let me be accursed. Let me be vile and base, only let me kiss the hem of the veil in which my God is shrouded. Though I may be following the devil, I am Thy son, O Lord, and I love Thee, and I feel the joy without which the world cannot stand. (III, 3, i, p. 105)

Even the murderer Smerdiakov is exposed to this ambivalence of the contemplative persons who are among the people, capable at the same time of leaving everything to go on a penitential pilgrimage to Jerusalem or setting fire to his village (III, 6).

Now it is essential to note that this ambivalence is not connected to the peculiarity of the Karamazov lineage, but has deep metaphysical roots. It concerns the comparison between human finitude and the infinite nature of God, whose call is constantly revealed in the heart of the creature in terms of love:

Beauty is a terrible and awful thing! It is terrible because it has not been fathomed and never can be fathomed, for God sets us nothing but riddles. Here the boundaries meet and all contradictions exist side by side … The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man (III, 3, i, p. 106)

The enigma here is metaphysical and relational (see Donati 2015). Everything plays on faith in the presence of God on the other shore, just as at the sea of Galilee where the poorest people lived at the time of Jesus (VIII, 4). Is there Someone, infinite and omnipotent in His mercy, beyond the human heart, precisely toward which the heart itself tends, or not? This is the metaphysical question, the terrible enigma given by a relation whose reality is evident to humanity, but which at the same time constantly points back beyond humanity itself.

Thus, for Alyosha, the faith of the Russian people can be summarized in the feeling of security that there are still hermits in the desert who have a faith that is capable of moving mountains (III, 7). For Ivan, on the other hand, neither God nor immortality (nor even the devil) exists. For the disciple of the Elder, on the contrary, immortality is in God (В бёг и бессмертне) (III, 8, i, p. 135).

This point is crucial: without faith in immortality there cannot be virtue, therefore, we cannot have civil coexistence, and there cannot be a people. But immortality is in God himself, in such a way that if the people exist it is because God exists, according
to an expression that was especially important to Pope Francis (on 27 May 1988, he quoted this phrase exactly):

One who does not believe in God will not believe in God’s people. He who believes in God’s people will see His Holiness (узрит и святыию егο) too, even though he had not believed in it till then (VI, 2, i, p. 302)

In light of this connection it is understood why the Elder sends Alyosha into the world and why the essential task of the monk is service to the people. The prayer is for the world and the prayer must be in the world:

– Love one another, Fathers, – said Father Zossima, as far as Alyosha could remember afterwards. – Love God’s people (народ). Because we have come here and shut ourselves within these walls, we are no holier than those that are outside, but on the contrary, from the very fact of coming here, each of us has confessed to himself that he is worse than others, than all men… And the longer the monk lives in his seclusion, on earth, the more keenly he must recognise that. Else he would have had no reason to come here. When he realises that he is not only worse than others (мирских⁴), but that he is responsible to all men for all and everything, for all human sins, national and individual, only then the aim of our seclusion is attained. For know, dear ones, that every one of us is undoubtedly responsible for all men and everything on earth, not merely through the general sinfulness of creation, but each one personally for all mankind and every individual man. This knowledge is the crown of life for the monk and for every man. (IV, 1, i, p. 164)

The dialectic between the Church and the world is radically overcome in light of the relation that unites the monk to each person. The Elder bases his entire teaching on the reality of a metaphysically-based universal solidarity, from which the capacity to love all is fed and from which springs the strength to conquer the whole world with one’s love, in order to embrace the universe and wash the sins of everyone with one’s tears.

4. The relational identity: loving the world

On the contrary, Smerdiakov hates all of Russia and despises the people who should be scourged for him (V, 2). So Ivan does not welcome the world (V, 3) and does not know how it is possible to love one’s neighbour, although he does accept that one can love in the abstract someone who is far away (V, 4). His scandal for the suffering of children is included in this picture. The dialectic is thus, at the centre of his position, along with the denial of liberty and of conscience that is the true message of the Legend of the grand inquisitor (V, 5). Christ is accused of increasing the freedom of human beings while humanity constantly searches for someone to whom to return that freedom (V, 5). There would be only three forces on earth capable of defeating the conscience of weak and rebellious human beings, allowing them to be happy: miracles, mystery, and authority. And all three are rejected by Jesus at the moment of the temptations in the desert (V, 5). The inquisitor, rather, thinks he has rectified God’s work by basing it precisely on miracles, on mystery, and on authority.

This pessimistic view of people and the world finds its disproof not in a theory, but in the life of Markel, the Elder’s brother. In his illness he begins to state that the world is a paradise and that if we all knew it we would instantly live in paradise.
He spoke of not being worthy of being served and of instead wanting to serve all, feeling guilty in the face of everything (see VI, 2):

“Mother, little heart of mine,” he said (he had begun using such strange caressing words at that time), “little heart of mine, my joy, believe me, everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything. (Vi, 2, i, p. 296)

But this culpability is not despairing because there is forgiveness, and precisely forgiveness underpins love of the world, even that of birds, (see VI, 2) and it makes possible the beatitude experienced in the world and in history.

It must again be emphasized that the perception of universal solidarity is not only moral or sentimental. This position is constantly contrasted with that of the characters who are actually not in solidarity, but who speak of unconditional love in theory. Rather, what is at play here is the real relational identity of each person, who cannot be herself but in relation with others. Life passes from one person to the other. Thus, the life of Markel’s younger brother will be his own. The phrase “Go and play, live also for me!” (VI, 2) is in the positive what the perception of sin is in the negative.

The revelation of such relational being is accomplished by Scripture, with which the Elder has a special relationship. The first text that strikes him is Job. He also speaks of reading to children the story of Joseph coming to his brothers, and he has special care for the parables of Luke. These are references that always point to the personal exchange, to the identification with one’s neighbour. And this identification must be lived in the first place by the priest:

Let him too weep, the priest of God, and be sure that the hearts of his listeners will throb in response. Only a little tiny seed is needed – drop it into the heart of the peasant (душу простолюдина) and it won’t die, it will live in his soul all his life, it will be hidden in the midst of his darkness and sin, like a bright spot, like a great remainder. And there’s no need of much teaching or explanation, he will understand it all simply. Do you suppose that the peasants (простолюдин) don’t understand? (VI,2, i, pp. 301–302)

Only people with spiritual strength can convert atheists, but the people are at risk without the Word of God, because each soul yearns for it and for the perception of beauty. In fact, Christ is with all, in that he is the Word. The smallest leaf aspires to Him, everything sings His glory and mourns Christ (VI, 2). Love of the people and the world are here theologically rooted in the presence of the Word in the world. And this presence is a real solidarity precisely based in relation, on account of which the Elder says to his monks:

Take care of the people (народ) and guard his heart. Go on educating him quietly. That’s your duty as monks, for the people (народ) has God in his heart (богоносец). (VI,3, i, p. 326)

The last term is literally equivalent to the Greek Θεοφόρος and comes to the thought of Dostoevsky through the patristic and liturgical tradition. The Elder especially recommends praying for those who die without anyone to pray for them. God has, in fact, mercy for both, for the deceased and for the one who prays for them. Time and eternity make contact here: this is the exact point in which the relation between them is present:

Brothers, have no fear of men’s sin. Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love
the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the
divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better
every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.
(VI,3, i. p. 331)

This concerns total love (всeceлою любвию) that must primarily have children
as its object, but that is very far from sentimentalism:

Brothers, love is a teacher; but one must know how to acquire it, for it is hard to
acquire, it is dearly bought, it is won slowly by long labour. For we must love not only
occasionally (случайное), for a moment, but for ever. Everyone can love occasionally,
even the wicked can. My brother asked the birds to forgive him: that sounds senseless,
but it is right; for all is like an ocean, all is flowing and blending; a touch in one place
sets up movement at the other end of the earth. (VI,3, i, p. 331)

The teaching of the Elder is authentically metaphysical because it indicates that the
call to love each person and the world is based on the deep unity of each thing. This
unity is not pantheistic. It is relational in that it is based on the relationship with the
Word and therefore on the presence of God. Everyone and everything is united
because everyone and everything is in relation with Christ. This is a radical realism
that has as a consequence the impossibility of judging the other if one has not previ-
ously pleaded guilty of one’s crimes (see VI,3).

5. Conclusion

This last element is immediately connected to the end of the novel, with the con-
cluding process; after the pleadings of the prosecution and the defence cause an
ironic effect, because they mutually exchange the charge of having constructed a
“novel.” The people here are in the foreground, since the jury is made up mostly
of farmers, but also by the other representatives of the local society. This seems
opposite to what had happened in Mokroe, when Dmitry, being led away, asked
the people for forgiveness, and two or three voices answered “forgive us too.”
By contrast, Trifon Borissovitch scorned the people and did not say goodbye to
Dmitry, indignant because he has squandered money with ignorant peasants
(IX, 9).

In this finale there is revealed all the realist strength of the novel, which at the
same time criticizes both the western enlightenment and the pre-Nietzschean pessim-
ism embodied by Ivan. However, in order to truly respond to idealism and to nihil-
ism, one needs to present the Christian mystery in all its purity, without reducing it
to the idols of miracle, mystery, and authority, which according to the Grand
Inquisitor would eliminate the problem of liberty. Rather, through the people,
Christianity must announce the Word of God that is always addressed to the human
conscience, prompting human beings to realize real universal solidarity. All of us are
culpable because we are all ontologically united in the reciprocal relations that cre-
ation in the image and likeness of the one and triune God has imprinted into our
being. Love of the world is based precisely on human freedom of conscience carried
out by the Christian announcement. This point was also highlighted by Romano
Guardini, whose interpretation of the role of the people in the work of this great
Russian author has already been recalled.
In this way, faith does not push one to distance oneself from others, hiding behind an ideal, however pious or morally elevated it may be. Christianity is not merely a set of morals or a doctrine, but the revelation of the presence of God among sinful human beings. Thus, the very underground, explored by Dostoevsky in his first novels, can become the meeting place with divine mercy, as Dmitry says, shouting at Rakitin:

If they drive God from the earth, we shall shelter Him underground. One cannot exist in prison without God; it's even more impossible than out of prison. And then we men underground will sing from the bowels of the earth a glorious hymn to God, with Whom is joy. Hail to God and His joy! I love Him! (XI,4, ii, p. 245).

The readings at Optina Monastery, meaningfully cited in the novel, (I, 5) coupled with his personal experience in forced labour camps, pushed Dostoevsky to narratively translate the revision of the cave myth that characterized the Greek patristics into a novel (see Maspero 2010, 131–132): if God is made man and his Light shines in the darkness, then there is no longer any need to abandon the darkness to encounter the Word. Where there is Light there is no more darkness, even if one is in a stable and in a cave like the grotto in Bethlehem, or even if one is underground as in the sepulchre.

Thus, if the relational opening of God is unconditional, then even the weak person and sinner can be part of His people. Theologically and etymologically, laicity is connected precisely to laos, that is, to the people. This refers to a relational identity, that is, to a real ontological union between each human being, and also between each human and nature, laically perceived by the personal conscience. The last page of the novel presents precisely Alyosha who, as we have seen, is called by Grushenka prince, and also her conscience, is now presented in the act of speaking to boys about eternal life and about when they will be together with Ilyusha. In this way, he offers them the possibility of a memory that, like a tiny seed or like the onion planted in their conscience, will allow them to always be a people, always free in the world, remaining united to that thread which, life in life, runs from the Elder, goes back to Markel and from Alyosha to his mother and, therefore, to Mary.

Notes

1. See XII, 6. The translation quoted is by Constance Garnett: F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: The Aldine Press, 1957). The references will be given as book plus chapter, but in the case of quotations, the volume and the exact page will also be added. When Garnett’s translation is modified (mainly for theological reasons), it will be highlighted in a note.

2. See how Henri de Lubac presents the thought of Dostoevsky in comparison with Nietzsche: see H. de Lubac, *Il dramma dell’umanesimo ateo* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1949), 288–404.

3. As the presence of Isaac of Syria in the same novel demonstrates. See also S. Salvestroni, “Motivi biblici nel romanzo ‘I Fratelli Karamazov’ di Fëdor Dostoevskij,” in *AION Slavistica 4* (1996): 111–182.

4. Meaning “Laypeople”.

5. The second term, also present at the end of the quote, means *common man*, i.e. someone of the people.

6. Here the translation has been modified: *peasant* has changed to *people* for the term народ.
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Notes on contributor

Giulio Maspero is a professor at the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome). He is a member of the Association Internationale des Etudes Patristiques (AIEP) and a full member of the Pontifical Academy of Theology (PATH). His published works are mainly on Gregory of Nyssa, Trinitarian theology, and the relationship between philosophy and theology. In particular, he has published Trinity and Man (Brill, Leuven 2007) and has directed, together with L. F. Mateo-Seco, The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa (Brill, Leuven, 2009) and, together with R. Wozniak, Re-thinking Trinitarian Theology (T&T Clark, London 2012). His most recent monographs are Uno perché trino (Cantagalli, Siena 2011) and Essere e relazione (Città Nuova, Roma 2013).

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