

Dr. Nussberger spoke about memory, empathy, and action as the vital chain that God expected to form the consciences of the people of Israel; that is, he expected that the people's memory of their own oppression at the hands of Egypt (and eventual deliverance by God) would lead to their empathetic response towards the vulnerable among them, which would then translate into their compassionate action. Take, for instance,

Deuteronomy 20:20: "You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you too were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt." We could say then that Israel's mistreatment of migrants demonstrated a rupture in the chain between memory and empathy: the problem is that their own experience did not lead them to compassion, did not move them as it should have. For this failure, God's wrath flares (cf. Amos 2:6-10, 8:4-17).

To apply the matter to ourselves: How do we bring this chain-resolving-into-action to bear on our present experience, societal and personal? As a nation and Church, where do we collectively succeed or fail to translate memory into empathy and empathy into action? And do the harsh experiences from our personal histories tend to rally us to lead lives full of charity? Or rather, in certain cases, do they harden us into shells of self-concern and callous disregard for the Other?

Note that in the above Old Testament texts, the linchpin of the movement from memory to empathy is the way that God behaves. Precisely, the guiding example for the Israelites' own conduct is God's liberating action, borne of love, to lead the people out of Egypt. The Israelites are to do unto others as God did unto them. Their previous experience of mercy should become their own rule, as it should have been for the man in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew's Gospel. By the same token, our model – the spur to our righteousness – is the way that Jesus acted both towards the economically poor and towards the whole of humanity in their spiritual poverty. We are to be, as he was, patient, attentive, and loving.

Yet, as Dr. Nussberger invited us, we can look even deeper than Jesus' personal expressions of tenderness towards the poor: we can look all the way down the line to the substance of his mission, prompted by his anointing by the Spirit (cf. Luke 4:18f.) As we reflect upon the task Jesus carries out – the task that his Father gives him and for which the Holy Spirit strengthens him – we come into contact with the consistent will and action across the ages of the one Triune God; for it is the same God who rages against injustice in ancient Israel, who comes down to "bring glad tidings to the poor... proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18). The apostles continued the mission, and we take up theirs...