

READER'S GUIDE

"THIS BOOK HAS DONE ME SUCH GOOD."

—POPE FRANCIS

MERCY

The ESSENCE *of the* GOSPEL
and the KEY *to* CHRISTIAN LIFE

WALTER KASPER

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A Readers Guide to
*Mercy: The Core of the Gospel and the
Key to Christian Life*

Walter Cardinal Kasper

By Mark-David Janus



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Introduction

On Tuesday March 12, 2013, the cardinals of the conclave to elect the next Pope moved into the seclusion of the living quarters in the Casa Santa Marta where they would remain until a new Pope was chosen. The rooms in which the Cardinals stay—drawn by lot—placed Cardinal Jorge Maria Bergoglio of Argentina and Cardinal Walter Kasper of Germany in rooms across the hall from each other. Walter Kasper had just received the Spanish translation of his most recent book and in a friendly way offered it to his neighbor as reading material. The following Sunday, during his first Angelus address to the world, the now Pope Francis publically praised Kasper’s book saying: “It did me such good that book, so much good.”

That the book in question is *Mercy* will likely not come as a surprise given that “mercy” has shown itself to be so prominent a part of Pope Francis’s words and actions. Kasper’s basic proposal in his book—that mercy is the primary way in which we understand God and the primary characteristic of living a Christian life—can be easily appreciated and has already been widely embraced. Yet, as a systematic theologian, Kasper makes his points in a style that is not altogether familiar to general readers. The chapters and subheadings in this guide correspond to those used in the book. For each we identify and summarize key points so that readers not trained in theology may easily follow the flow of Cardinal Kasper’s

thinking. At the conclusion of each chapter are discussion questions meant to provoke your own thinking or to use in a group discussion. While in no way a replacement for the nuance and insight of the master text, this guide can help individuals and discussion groups reflect on Cardinal Kasper's wisdom.

Chapter One: Mercy

A Crucially Relevant but Forgotten Topic

1. The Cry for Mercy

This book on faith begins with doubt, seriously considering the reasons for not believing in God, especially “the unending misfortune and unjust suffering in the world.” In the face of meaningless suffering Cardinal Kasper contends the fundamental question is not does any God exists, but rather does a merciful God exist.

2. Mercy—A Fundamental Issue for the 21st Century

“Three popes from the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century have, therefore, handed on to us the issue of mercy.” In this section, Kasper reflects on the “medicine of mercy” that characterized St. John XXIII’s pastoral understanding of the church, the role of mercy in the suffering, writings and devotion of St. John Paul II, and the theological imperative of Pope Benedict XVI that love, not justice is the basic principle of Catholic social teaching.

3. Mercy—Criminally Neglected

Kasper states that traditional systematic theology has neglected mercy in the understanding of God, so much so that “new thinking

about the doctrine of God is necessary.” He believes that the roots of this neglect rest in the metaphysical roots of theology which focuses on the essence of God in such a way that God cannot “suffer with his creatures.” An omnipotent God cannot suffer nor abrogate justice. At best God can forgive the repentant and judges the guilty. In the light of the world events of the 20th and 21st centuries, this abstract theology is no longer adequate; in fact Kasper calls it a pastoral catastrophe. Thus, a new doctrine of God is necessary and this is what Kasper undertakes in this book. The new doctrine of God must reconcile the relationship between a God of justice and a God of mercy. This conflict which was at the heart of the Reformation demands a new consensus.

4. Mercy Under Ideological Suspicion

Kasper initially focused on whether or not the Church has paid sufficient theological attention to mercy. He now surveys the critique of mercy conducted by contemporary thinkers. He begins with Karl Marx’s observation that religious consolation was: “*the sigh of oppressed peoples*” who would do better to fight against their oppression than wait upon a merciful God. Frederick Nietzsche sees mercy as a contributor to suffering, not its salvation: “*I do not like the merciful...but all those who create are strong.*” These philosophies undergird what Kasper identifies as the current Social-Darwinian philosophy which champions personal interest above all other considerations and forms the basis for globalized financial markets: “*Whoever does not bend to the current game rules of the society of the strong, healthy, and successful or who doesn’t feel*

comfortable with these rules, whoever holds firm to the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, which put into question exactly this order of things and really invert it, he or she is perceived to be naïve and out of place.”

5. Empathy and Compassion: A New Approach

Despite theological objections and philosophical critique of mercy, the reality of empathic and compassionate response to the experience of pain and suffering, continues to persist in the behavior of individuals and social structures. Empathy on an individual and institutional level is now extensively studied by the social sciences. Theology has also been searching for new ways to think about compassion, because those who suffer continue to reach for a merciful God. Kasper has set as his goal creating a synthesis that resolves the theological divide between justice and mercy, meaningfully addressing the needs of those who suffer and refreshing the message and practice of the church.

Discussion Questions

1. The struggles most people endure raise the question: “Does a merciful God exist?” Have you heard that question from other people or have you asked it yourself? What about the world as you find that makes it difficult to believe in a merciful God?
 2. In what ways do you find the Church applying “the medicine of mercy” to people? In what places and in what ways can your Church community do better as a dispenser of mercy?
 3. Cardinal Kasper states that in many places the entire idea of mercy is pushed aside in favor of the values of strength, a focus on the self, and the right to revenge. In your experience, what is your sense of what people think about mercy as a universal value?
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Chapter Two: Approximations

1. Philosophical Approaches

Because mercy is associated with weakness rather than strength, Kasper looks to the original meaning of the word and examines how that meaning evolved in human thought and what it can mean now. His central thesis is that to have compassion and mercy means the ability to have a heart for others; they represent a self-transcendence that moves us out of ourselves and towards others. He takes us on a whirlwind tour of the history of thought regarding the concepts of compassion and mercy, highlighting what he sees as the principle contributions of great thinkers and movements. In some ways this presumes a familiarity with these thinkers, but even if you have never read them, major ideas from each are highlighted.

Foundations in the Ancient World and the Middle Ages

Plato: Compassion as an emotion cannot be trusted because it can distort the administration of justice.

Aristotle: Our experience of the sufferings of others is valuable because it changes us, reminding us that we might easily be in the place of the suffering.

Stoics: Compassion is a weakness and sickness of the soul, which should be unmoved by emotion.

St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas: Seeing the misery of others creates an unhappy heart in ourselves, and this motivates us to go to their aid and combat the evil of suffering.

Yves Congar: A 20th century theologian who interprets the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas as saying that God is the Sovereign Lord whose mercy transcends and fulfills the justice of God.

Early Church: From its onset, the Church community was moved by suffering and developed organized systems of care to alleviate the misery of the poor, orphaned, defenseless, and sick. This attitude and the systems designed to give it expression influenced the development of western civilization.

The Universalization of Compassion and Its Critique in Modern Times

Rousseau: Compassion is the capacity to put oneself in social relation to another human being, and actually to all of humanity.

Lessing: Compassion is the most important of the civic virtues. The most compassionate human being is the best human being.

Schiller: Building on Lessing, he believed that tragedy has an educational component; the sufferings of others guide us to making the correct moral action.

Hegel: Compassion for those who suffer cannot simply be mere feeling; it must also include recognition of the inherent dignity of the sufferer.

Schopenhauer: Compassion is the common phenomenon that allows us to participate directly in the sufferings of others. Through compassion you find what belongs to you in another. Compassion is the mystery of ethics.

Kant: Starting with the individual subject as the object of reflection, he concludes that moral obligation not the experience of compassion must be the primary moral impetus. Reason, not experience must dominate in moral decisions, after all human hearts tend to evil and require a change of heart that is beyond their power to effect. It is in this sense that God is a moral necessity for Kant.

New Approaches of the 20th and 21st Centuries

Kasper traces the development of modern and post-modern philosophy away from Kant's focus on the individual to the phenomenological reality of interpersonal reality. In this transition empathy regains a place in the discussion. Consequently, compassion is the platform of solidarity with the suffering and oppressed and is the ultimate ethical authority against cruelty. Ethical claims by the others replace a focus with the self. This raises the question: Do not the claims of others invalidate mercy and forgiveness: "How can a God, who is to be conceived of as perfectly just, be merciful and forgive the perpetrators without doing

violence to the victims, when the victims do not agree with God's act of forgiveness? The abstract concept of justice thereby appears to be in competition with the different moral claims that confront God." Paul Ricoeur answers this question by redefining justice to include the love of one's own enemy; love goes beyond the economy of exchange. Kasper's concludes that evidence from the history of philosophy demonstrates that Christian talk about mercy is at the very least compatible with reason, and moreover a "reasonable and helpful response to the human situation".

2. Exploring the history of religion

Kasper presents a survey of mercy in the great world religions, showing that sympathy (*Mitgefühl*) is a theme common to the world religions. From the Hindu tradition Kasper highlights the concept of *ahimsa*, which rejects anything deleterious as well as the use of force. This is the concept embraced with such success by Gandhi in his non-violent efforts for India's independence from Great Britain. Human suffering is central to Buddhist teachings and one of the highest states a person can reach is through selfless sympathy or compassion, denying one's own liberation until all other sentient beings reach enlightenment. The Islamic tradition begins every sura of the Quran with an appeal to God the All Merciful. Muslims are instructed to be merciful to the poor and helpless.

Kasper concludes that while mercy may provide a common touchstone for dialogue among world religions, one must be careful

not to water down these teachings to a least common denominator. A more complete study than the one he provided here, should, *“lead to regard for the respective otherness of the other. Only such a positive tolerance can become the basis for peaceful coexistence and beneficial collaboration.”*

3. The Golden Rule: A Common Point of Reference

Kasper defines the Gold Rule as: *“What you don’t want someone to do to you, don’t do to anyone else. Formulated positively, the Golden Rule states: We should do everything unto others that we ourselves expect and wish for from them in a specific situation. In short, “That means: Compassion [Mitleid], sympathy [Mitgefühl], reciprocal readiness to help, and beneficence constitute the wisdom of humankind.”* He asserts that the Golden Rule, present in some form in all world religions, is a definite point of dialogue between world religions.

While it is true that the Golden Rule does not have a single universal interpretation, the ubiquitous presence of the Golden Rule means violence is an aberration of authentic religious expression.

Nonetheless, even if the Golden Rule in its most basic form can be considered the least common denominator among world religions, a universal ethic cannot be based on the existence of a least common denominator. The contribution a religion makes is based on its interpretation of the Golden Rule. For Kasper, it will be the witness of the Bible, most importantly the interpretation of Jesus to

which he turns the reader's attention: *"it is important to recall anew the potential of our own tradition of Christian mercy, whose potential has not yet been exhausted. It has shaped western culture and, in addition, the culture of all humankind in a decisive way. Such reflection is urgently needed today. There is scarcely a more important topic than this."*

Discussion Questions

1. Cardinal Kasper summarizes a variety of philosophical approaches to mercy. In your everyday life have you heard similar ideas to the ones he summarizes? If so, which ones? If not, what are the common attitudes towards mercy you have witnessed?
 2. Cardinal Kasper suggests that the Bible has some unique insights about the Golden Rule. Do you have some favorite bible stories or sayings that teach the Golden Rule?
 3. Maybe the hardest question Cardinal Kasper asks in this chapter is: “How can a God, who is to be conceived of as perfectly just, be merciful and forgive the perpetrators without doing violence to the victims, when the victims do not agree with God’s act of forgiveness?” How would you answer this question?
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Chapter III: The Message of the Old Testament

Cardinal Kasper believes that the biblical witness adds unique and defining features to the shared universal humanistic values surrounding mercy. Acknowledging that for many people the Old Testament the language of violence overshadows any message of mercy, Kasper contends that mercy is central to the Old Testament witness and lays the foundation for the New Testament. Both witness to the same God.

1. Language of the Bible

Specific words in the Old Testament have rich and deep meanings that cannot be completely appreciated in translation. The imagery inherent in these words is as much a part of their meaning as the words themselves. This is especially true of the words used in relationship to mercy, so Kasper makes a special effort to give us a “feel” for these biblical concepts.

Compassion

“It is characteristic of the Old Testament that it uses the expression ‘rachamim’ for compassion and, for that matter, also for mercy. This word is derived from ‘rechem,’ which means womb; the term can also refer to human intestines. In both the Old and the New Testaments, the intestines are regarded as the seat of feelings. In the New Testament, intestines or guts also express the mercy that comes from the heart.

In the biblical sense, compassion is something that comes from the depths of the human being, literally from the womb; you give birth to compassion as a mother gives birth to a child. Compassion in the biblical sense is not abstract; it is an intimate experience from which you cannot be detached. It is in your gut, it is in your heart—your very core.

Feelings

In the biblical world, feelings are part and parcel of the human communication with God and are part of how human beings understand God's communication with them. Joy, grief, sadness, complaints, and tears are all part of the religious language.

Mercy

“The most important expression for understanding mercy is ‘hesed,’ which means unmerited loving kindness, friendliness, favor, and also divine grace and mercy. Hesed, therefore, goes beyond mere emotion and grief at human deprivation; it means God’s free and gracious turning toward the human person with care... God sees the wretchedness of poor and miserable people, that he hears their lament, that he bends down in condescension, that he descends to persons in their need and, despite every human infidelity, concerns himself with them again and again, and that he forgives them and gives them another chance, even though they had deserved just punishment—all of this exceeds normal human experience and expectation; all of this transcends human imagination and thought.”

Mercy is what God does. It is not that people deserve mercy, having failed so often it is difficult to say how they deserve another chance, but mercy is what God gives to those he loves.

2. Divine Response to Catastrophe and Sin

Kasper now examines common Old Testament stories through the prism of mercy. Each one he relates focuses our attention on the final results of the story rather than the sometimes violent actions in the middle of the story. The end of the story reveals another dimension of God as merciful. He interprets the initial creation stories from the book of Genesis as an expression of the mercy of God. Against the goodness and peace of the original creation is the fall and expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the murder of Abel by Cain, the tower of Babel, capped off by the call of Abraham. Kasper concludes that mercy is how God provides resistance to evil, creating new space for life and blessing wider than human imagination.

3. The Revelation of God's Name as Revelation of Divine Mercy

Names have significant meaning in the Old Testament and Kasper suggests this is especially true for the name of God. The very process by which the people learn God's name reveals a God of mercy.

The story of the Exodus is familiar: God hears the cry of his people who are enslaved in a hopeless situation. God intervenes in their life through Moses, sets them free from bondage and offers them the commandments as a guide to the exercise of their new freedom.

If this were not mercy enough, in spite of all that God has done for them, the people continually rebel against Moses and the commandments themselves. Nevertheless, God is faithful to them and renews his covenant with them.

Less well known is Kasper's analysis of the name of God as indicative of God's mercy. God's very name is a foreshadowing of what is to come. In the story of the burning bush God reveals his name to Moses as "Yahweh." Kasper cites Jewish sources who interpret this as meaning: "I will be present as the one who will be there." From the outset God signals that he is present to his people in all their needs.

When the Old Testament is translated into Greek, Kasper observes that the name of God, "Yahweh" is translated as "I am the one who am" reflecting the Greek focus on the being of God. One translation focuses on the merciful constant presence of God for people, the other focuses on God's essence. In Hebrew, God is essentially a God of mercy; in the Greek translation, theology revolves around the metaphysical attributes of God as Being. This metaphysical emphasis will have a profound influence on theology and spirituality, emphasizing the otherness of God and neglecting the emphasis on God as a God of mercy.

4. Mercy as God's Inscrutable and Sovereign Otherness

Kasper finds the high point of the Old Testament's revelation of God's mercy in the prophet Hosea. Here he finds that the holiness and otherness of God is revealed in a mercy so deep that human

beings can only call it divine: “Mercy is the expression of his divine essence.”

5. The Mercy, Holiness, Justice, and Fidelity of God

Kasper addresses the relationship between God’s mercy and God’s anger: “In his compassion and mercy, God demonstrates his holiness and greatness. Because of his holiness, God can offer only resistance to evil. The Bible calls this the wrath of God. Many people may at first stumble over this statement and regard it as inappropriate. However God’s wrath does not mean an emotionally surging rage or an angry intervention, but rather God’s resistance to sin and injustice. Wrath is, so to speak, the active and dynamic expression of his holy essence. God offers mercy to people who have created injustice so that they have the opportunity to change their ways. The divine wrath that created the second exile abates so that the people can return home and restore the temple in holiness. “Mercy is ultimately grace for conversion.”

6. God’s Option for Life and for the Poor

The mercy and life of God is concrete, so it has special concern for the poor. The book of Exodus reminds the people of their impoverished origin. The book of Leviticus establishes a new social order. The Book of Deuteronomy develops the conception of a people in which there should be neither the poor nor the marginalized, who makes special provision for widows and orphans, aliens and slaves and a people that also acknowledge the obligation to tithe for the poor. In the prophets exploitation of the poor is denounced, true worship is equated with mercy and honesty

towards the least, the Messiah will be sent to the poor and suffering and in the vision of God's kingdom, the poor will have an honored place, while the unjust will have no place at all. This mercy is not only an attribute of God; it is the ultimate religious practice of his people.

7. Mercy and the Psalms

The Psalms are a hymn to God's mercy: believers beg God's mercy and God bestows mercy now and will continue to do so in the endless future.

Discussion Questions

1. The biblical word for compassion means an intimate action that comes from the womb or from the heart. Is that how you experience your compassion for someone else?
 2. The bible states that God has compassion on people who have repeatedly failed God and really deserve punishment. Have you ever had the experience of feeling compassion for people who have wronged you or sinned against you?
 3. Have you ever thought of the books of the Old Testament as the story of God's mercy to his people as Cardinal Kasper suggests? Can you think of a story or passage that makes his point?
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4. In this chapter, the Cardinal says that the biblical prophets teach that mercy is not only an attribute of God, it is the ultimate religious practice of God's people, especially to the poor and alienated. Do you think most people make this connection?

Chapter IV Jesus: God's Message of Mercy

1. Lo, A Rose Ere Blooming

The Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke set the story of the birth of Jesus in the context of Old Testament message of God's mercy. From the onset of the gospel it is clear that the story of Jesus is the story of the fulfillment of God's mercy.

2. Jesus' Gospel of the Father's Mercy

The kingdom of God is the central message of Jesus' preaching. All he says and does is to illustrate the mercy of God, directed now not to a chosen few, but to all. Religious people, who do not understand God's merciful embrace of sinners, have missed the point. Prayer itself acknowledges the presence of the God of mercy. The very prayer Jesus taught makes plain that "*we don't live in a boundless, unfeeling and fatherless cosmos. We are not the accident or product of a meaningless and directionless evolution.*"

3. Merciful Father in the Parables

The parables of the Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan stand among others as clear expressions of a God for whom mercy is the highest form of justice. Mercy enables people to move from selfishness to wholeness: as recipients and distributors of mercy.

4. Jesus' Existence for Others

As Jesus' parables are metaphors of the God of mercy, so too are his miracles. As he restores people to physical wholeness, so he wishes them to be restored to a full relationship with God. Jesus' entire life is a symbol of God's mercy. Kasper argues that the biblical idea of atonement be taken seriously in this regard. He insists on a corporate understanding of the effects of sin, and the need to be saved from it. Jesus' sacrificial death on behalf of all accomplishes that task and enables each person to grasp the mercy of God in a personal way.

5. God's Mercy—God's Justice—Our Life

Kasper understands Paul's treatment of the death and resurrection as providing us with an opportunity to live anew. The understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus he regards as the great "reformation discovery" or rather rediscovery of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. The love of God in Jesus sets humankind free to love. This freedom is not abstract, but dedicated, as was Jesus to a self-emptying love. The implications of this statement are captured in the final sentences of this chapter: *"To believe in love and to make it the embodiment and sum of our understanding of existence has far-reaching, indeed revolutionary consequences for our image of God, for our self-understanding and for our life praxis, for ecclesial praxis and for our conduct in the world. Love, which is proven in mercy, can and must become the foundation of a new culture for our lives, the church, and for society."*

Discussion Questions

1. Cardinal Kasper says that in the New Testament the very act of praying acknowledges that you are in the presence of a merciful God. Is that your experience?
 2. One of the points the Cardinal draws from the New Testament is that receiving God's mercy moves people to be distributors of God's mercy. Have you found that to be true in other people or yourself?
 3. The Cardinal says Jesus' entire life is a symbol of God's mercy. How would you explain that to someone else? What examples from Jesus' life and teachings would you use?
 4. The final sentence in this chapter is: "To believe in love and to make it the embodiment and sum of our understanding of existence has far-reaching, indeed revolutionary consequences for our image of God, for our self-understanding and for our life praxis, for ecclesial praxis and for our conduct in the world. Love, which is proven in mercy, can and must become the foundation of a new culture for our lives, the church, and for society." If this were true, what changes would you see in your neighborhood and in your parish?
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Chapter V: Systematic Reflection

1. Mercy as God's Defining Attribute

Kasper turns his attention to the systematic reflections by the Church, beginning in the earliest centuries on two questions (1) How justice and mercy in God are more precisely related to each other and (2) How the biblical understanding of God as merciful relates to a philosophical understanding of the essence of God.

Augustine could never detach his understanding of God from his Trinitarian conception of God, that is, from his understanding of God as love.

Bonaventure: *“God is Being itself, but Being itself that communicates itself and exudes itself in love. For Bonaventure as for Augustine, that means thinking of God’s essence as love and thinking about and developing the doctrine of God as a doctrine of the Trinity.”*

Next question: Philosophy and the essence of God

Kasper criticizes traditional philosophy as paying too little attention to mercy in discussing the essence of God, even if listed as an attribute of God. He insists: *“In short, mercy expresses God’s own goodness and love. It is God’s caritas operativa et effectiva. Therefore, we must describe mercy as the fundamental attribute of God. Mercy, of which we have just spoken, stands in an indissoluble inner connection*

with God's other attributes, especially holiness, justice, fidelity, and truth."

Turning his attention to the question of mercy and justice, Kasper asserts: *"The determination of mercy as the basic attribute of God has consequences for determining the relationship of mercy to God's justice and omnipotence. If mercy is the fundamental attribute of God, then it cannot be understood as an instance of justice; on the contrary, divine justice must rather be understood from the perspective of divine mercy. Mercy, then, is the justice that is idiosyncratic to God. That was the pivotal insight, which lay at the basis of the agreement between the Catholic Church and Lutherans concerning the doctrine of justification."*

God's omnipotence, as it says in one of the church's prayers, is disclosed above all in sparing and pardoning. It is the omnipotence of his love and mercy."

2. Mercy as a Mirror of the Trinity

Kasper presents a theology of the Trinity, first trying to help us understand it from the perspective of human love:

"For the essence of human love entails not only giving something to the other, but communicating oneself in that gift and making oneself the gift. By bestowing ourselves in love, we simultaneously divest ourselves; we give ourselves away. By giving ourselves away in and through this gift, we nevertheless remain ourselves; in fact, we find our own fulfillment in love."

The doctrine of the Trinity provides an opportunity for us to understand God as love in action. Because God is self-communicating love, mercy is the mirror of God's essence.

“The inner reality of God as self-emptying and self-communicating love, which has become decisively and unsurpassably revealed on the cross, does not remain in itself, but is bestowed on us concretely in the Holy Spirit. In his mercy, God lets us not only see into his heart; he creates space for us beside his heart and in his heart through the Holy Spirit.”

It is God as Holy Spirit who invites us into union with God: *“In and through the Holy Spirit accordingly, God has a place in his heart for us because of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts. In God we have a place, in which we find rest already now and where we will find final rest at a time to come.”* Mercy shrinks the distance between God and ourselves, making it possible for us, despite our selfishness and sin, to find union with the God who is love alone. This forms the basis for centuries of what Kasper refers to as “Trinitarian Mysticism” a two edged sword where the mystic experiences both the radiance of divine love as well as the great distance between their capacity for love and that of God.

4. God's Mercy—Source and Goal of God's Activity

Kasper argues that mercy is God's primary action towards creation. It is not an antidote applied to an experiment gone wrong. Mercy, expressed in Jesus Christ, is God's fundamental creative attitude. This is why the church can say: *“Everything was created in him,*

through him, and for him. Before all of creation, he is; in him everything has existence (Col 1:16f.)” This positive attitude towards creation was obscured by Augustine’s later doctrine of predestination, which emphasized the “*massa damnata*” of all humanity and caused Luther to cry out: “How do I get a gracious God?” Kasper employs the thought of Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, and Karl Barth to find Luther a gracious God for whom mercy is the ultimate justice, thus resolving the apparent conflict between justice and mercy.

5. God’s Universal Salvific Will

In this section Kasper returns to the question posed in the first chapter: Is human life meaningless? If the Christian answer is the merciful love of God, then of what consequence or value is free will and human action? Are we forced to choose a future which features universal damnation or one that promises universal salvation? The first demands frantic conversion to a God without mercy, the second instills a blithe trust in a relentless merciful God regardless of our choice. Kasper suggests another option:

“God’s mercy does not entail bypassing human freedom. God recommends, but he does not force¹; he presses us, but does not overpower or subdue us. For, according to Augustine, the one who created you without you does not justify you without you. In his mercy, God holds the possibility of salvation open for every human being who is fundamentally willing to be converted and who is sorry for his or her guilt, even if their guilt is ever so great and their former life

ever so botched up.”

Kasper then addresses the long standing Catholic tradition of praying on behalf of those who have died. How is this tradition to be reconciled with a merciful God and the free will choices made by human beings? He concludes: *Mercy courts every human being to the very end; it activates the entire communion of saints on behalf of every individual, while taking human freedom with radical seriousness. Mercy is the good, comforting, uplifting, hope-granting message, on which we can rely in every situation and which we can trust and build upon, both in life and in death. Under the mantle of mercy, there is a place for everyone of good will. It is our refuge, our hope, and our consolation.*

6. Jesus' Heart as the Revelation of God's Mercy

Kasper explores the Catholic tradition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as a devotion to God's mercy. The sufferings of Jesus are symbolized in the biblical language of his pierced heart from which flowed blood and water (Jn 19:34). Augustine interprets this image sacramentally, Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure interpret the Sacred Heart of Jesus as an image of divine love, and a variety of Catholic mystics, from Saint Gertrude of Helfta to Saint Faustina continue to represent this tradition to their own age. Kasper continues this tradition: *“In the pierced heart of his son, God shows us that he went to extremes in order to bear, through his son's voluntary suffering unto death, the immeasurable suffering of the world, our cold heartedness, and our lack of love and sought to redeem them.”* He argues that the devotion to the Sacred Heart helps the individual

receive the love of God in an appropriately emotional vein, as well as placing us in solidarity with all who suffer in the world.

7. The God who mercifully suffers with us

Can God truly suffer with those who suffer in the world? Scholastic theology argued against this possibility as rejection of God's perfection, and such was the prevailing thought until the question was raised again by post-Auschwitz theology. Kasper addresses the question by again turning first to the Biblical witness: "*According to the evidence of the Bible, God has a heart for the human person. He suffers with us; he also rejoices and he grieves for us and with us. The Bible does not know a God, who, in his majesty and blessedness, sits enthroned over a world full of terror and is apathetic to it.*" Kasper's solution to the conflict between scholastic and biblical approaches to the idea of God suffering with us resides in his understanding of the Trinity in which Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Inasmuch as mercy is a constitutive attribute of God, it is the mercy of God which allows God to choose to suffer with us in and through Jesus the Christ. Mercy may resolve this long standing conflict in our idea of God, but it still does not answer the question with which Kasper began the book, why then do so many innocent still suffer?

7. Hope for Mercy in the Face of Innocent Suffering

Kasper briefly reviews the philosophical discussion on the question of God and suffering (theodicy) noting that the resolution has proved "intractable." If anything, the question does more than

challenge the meaningful existence of God it also challenges the fundamental meaning of human existence. As has been his pattern, Kasper once more turns to the biblical witness for inspiration. Acknowledging that the Bible was not written with this question in mind, he comments that it was written as a result of human experience with the divine and ultimately offers hope as a fundamental direction. The books of Job and Lamentations provide the framework of tragedy overcome by hope through which we see the reality and significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus: *“This certitude articulates a hope that is not realized in this world or in this life, but that is directed beyond this world toward the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. Only there will every injustice be requited and only there will everyone receive his or her due.”* God’s mercy, shown in the resurrection of Jesus in which we are all promised a share, forms the basis for Christians hope this side of eternity and beyond.

Kasper acknowledges that hope that is born out of the Bible is unintelligible to non-believers and difficult for believers as well. In one of his most eloquent sentences he writes: *“Those who do not share the Christian faith need even more human sympathy, human intimacy, and caring assistance in such situations. We must practice mercy. That is the only persuasive answer we can give. Such practical evidence of mercy is representative hope for others. By means of our merciful action, a ray of light and warmth from God’s mercy can fall in the midst of a gloomy situation. Only in this way can we make talk*

about God's mercy credible and persuasive; only in this way can we make it a message of hope."

It is to the practice of mercy by Christians to which he now turns our attention.

Discussion Questions

1. One of the principle insights of this chapter is that mercy must be seen as part of God's very essence. If mercy was understood to be an essential attribute of God, how would that change the way people think about God?
 2. This chapter devotes many pages to the apparent conflict between a merciful and a just God. If it is God's will that everyone be saved, then what role does human free will play in salvation?
 3. Cardinal Kasper writes: "God has a heart for the human person. He suffers with us; he also rejoices and he grieves for us and with us." Many people would say God, being God, cannot suffer with human beings. How do you come down on this issue?
 4. The practice of mercy is the persuasive answer we can give to suffering people who do not believe in God. How does your Church practice mercy for suffering people?
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Chapter VI: Blessed Are They Who Show Mercy

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1-2). With this quotation from St. Paul, Kasper introduces the imperative for Christians to live lives of mercy.

1. Love—the Principal Christian Commandment

Jesus’ teachings about love are deeply rooted in the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures to live lives of mercy, compassion and justice, particularly towards the poor. Not only must these deeds be accomplished before one goes to the altar, they are the criteria for final judgment before God. Moreover, if we are merciful to others as God has been merciful to us, then the recipients of our mercy also experience the kingdom of God breaking into their lives, whether they are conscious of that reality or not. Jesus proclaims that there is no love of God without love of neighbor, and that the title “neighbor” refers to all people.

The origin of this love of neighbor is the mercy of God already bestowed on us. This is captured in the Pauline writings: “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Eph 4:32; cf. Col 3:12). God’s loving mercy begins a circle of love, which we continue as we bestow that love to others, which in turn leads us back to God, completing the circle of mercy. Kasper’s interpretation of the Paul’s famous litany to love focuses on this point: in the end only

love and the work of love remain for the kingdom of God.

In his examination of the Johannine writings he reiterates that Christian love finds its origin and ultimate meaning in God: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:12-13). *“The measure of this love exceeds every normal human measure; it is measured by the love that Jesus himself demonstrated to us by surrendering his life.”*

Kasper demonstrates the central nature of this teaching in his review of the teachings of Patristic Fathers Basil and John Chrysostom, particularly in regards to the poor, and his citation of Bonhoeffer’s writing on the meaning of “blessed are the merciful”.

2. “Forgive one another” and the Commandment to Love One’s Enemies

“For Jesus, the apex and highest expression of the mercy and love that is demanded in the Sermon on the Mount is the command to love one’s enemies: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Jesus establishes this extreme demand—extreme from a purely human perspective—on the basis of God’s extreme behavior toward sinners.”

With this sentence Kasper introduces what he calls the most breathtaking and difficult teaching of Jesus. While admired and preached as the most unique Christian contribution, Kasper shows how throughout the centuries the best of the Church Fathers wrestled with its application, often applying what Kasper calls a “two tiered” approach that, at times, softened its meaning. Perhaps

nowhere is the divide between the ideal and real better illustrated more than in the history of the institutional Church herself—rife with wars and persecutions.

Kasper is not afraid to ask; Is the Christian injunction to love and forgive enemies not only utopian, but absurd? In the light of the global horrors of the 20th century the imperative for forgiveness and mercy has gained, “a sad new currency” as the limitations of vengeance has become apparent on the global horizon. Far from being absurd, an honest reckoning of fault and failure followed by merciful acceptance may be the only rational way forward.

3. The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

The Church developed from the New Testament lists of corporal and spiritual works of mercy, activities that are not so much concerned with violations of divine law as they are with deepening our sensitivity to the needs of others. We hear God’s call, Kasper says, “in the adversity of others.” These works of mercy are directed to a concrete four fold poverty: (1) physical-economic poverty (2) cultural poverty (3) poverty of relationships (4) mental or spiritual poverty. This structure of poverty requires an equally comprehensive and holistic response from Christians as intimated in the original works of mercy.

4. No Laissez-faire or Pseudo-Mercy

Kasper is sensitive to the reality that mercy can be misused to

protect the status quo and prevent true conversion of hearts. Protecting a wrongdoer more than a victim, ignoring bad and sinful behavior are just two examples of failing to sound Ezekiel's ram's horn when danger is approaching (Ez 33:6-9). Abrogating justice because it is difficult to carry out is not mercy. Concealing the truth is not mercy. You cannot be excused from the difficult tasks of love in the name of mercy.

5. Encountering Christ in the Poor

Jesus has identified himself with the poor, and gives transcendent meaning to a believer's encounter with the poor. *"What ultimately is at stake in Christian mercy is the encounter with Jesus Christ himself in and through those who suffer. Therefore, mercy is principally not a matter of morality, but a matter of faith in Christ, discipleship, and an encounter with him."* This is one of Kasper's key distinctions; Christian mercy is not a matter of social policy or ethics, but a matter of faith.

6. Mercy as Christian Existence for others

By virtue of their baptism Christians have joined themselves to Christ which necessarily entails joining themselves to his mission. *"Apostolic and pastoral service means, in the literal sense of the word, wearing oneself out and, precisely in such apostolic and pastoral suffering, letting Jesus Christ, his death, and his resurrection become present for others. Apostolic existence happens not only with words, but with and through one's entire existence."* Kasper's theology of the atonement includes the actions of the individual lives of Christians. While he roots this interpretation in scripture, he also traces this

theme throughout the history of Christian art and piety, particularly in the Carmelite tradition. Observing that this piety runs the risk of becoming an entirely private relationship with Christ, he cites the work of Leon Bloy, Charles Pugay, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as models that insist the Christian life is lived for others in the world. *“This spirituality of standing up for others and taking their place could break up the inward-looking orientation of many communities in their current diaspora situation within a secularized world, and it could become a spiritual guidepost for both today and tomorrow.”*

Discussion Questions

1. The hardest question in this chapter is: what does it mean to pray for and forgive your enemies? What are the downsides of being merciful, especially to your enemies?
 2. In discussing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, Kasper reflects on a four-fold paradigm of poverty: (1) physical-economic poverty (2) cultural poverty (3) poverty of relationships (4) mental or spiritual poverty. Take a moment and thinking about your own experience, find an example of each type of poverty.
 3. “What ultimately is at stake in Christian mercy is the encounter with Jesus Christ himself in and through those who suffer. Therefore, mercy is principally not a matter of morality, but
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a matter of faith in Christ, discipleship, and an encounter with him.” In the course of being merciful to others, have you encountered Jesus? How would you describe this to others?

Chapter 7: The Church Measured by Mercy

1. The Church Sacrament of Love and Mercy

Kasper begins this chapter: “(The Church) is the sacrament of the continuing effective presence of Christ in the world. As such, the church is the sacrament of mercy.” The Church is created by the mercy of Jesus, it bestows that same mercy upon its members, and because it is made up of sinners, it is constantly the object of God’s mercy. He says most forcefully: “*We must, however, be clear about one thing: A church without charity and without mercy would no longer be the church of Jesus Christ.*”

For Kasper mercy is not an individual enterprise, it lives within the Church, meaning within the Holy Spirit. He notes that there are many internal members of the Church who do not live in the love of the Spirit, and many outside its visible membership, whose love is that of the Spirit. The experience of mercy lived in the Holy Spirit is the basis for ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue.

Mercy is also the measure of the Church, it is the criteria by which those inside and outside of her membership evaluate her. Citing John XXIII and John Paul II, Kasper proclaims that the Church must witness to mercy in three ways: “*The church must proclaim the mercy of God; it must concretely provide people God’s mercy in the sacrament of mercy, the sacrament of reconciliation; and it must allow God’s mercy to appear and be realized in its concrete structures, its entire life, and even in its laws.*”

2. The Proclamation of Divine Mercy

Kasper insists that God's mercy is the central message of the gospel that the Church must proclaim. It is the central message of the scriptures and it must be the central message of Christian preaching today: *"As preachers, we will only reach the hearts of our hearers when we speak of God concretely, in light of people's hardships and woe, and help them to discover the merciful God in their own life story."*

The merciful God is both the deepest truth about God and the deepest truth of the human experience of God. It is a message that can only be authentically proclaimed by discourse which is itself merciful and not polemical or judgmental. All too often the Church's message of God's mercy has been indelibly obscured by the often authoritarian tone that the Church has used to proclaim it. The Church must be particularly attentive in dialogue with those with whom it disagrees.

3. Penance the Sacrament of Mercy

Baptism, Eucharist, and Reconciliation are all sacraments that celebrate and bestow the mercy of God on a needy Church. Kasper frankly and sadly admits that the Sacrament of Reconciliation has fallen into marked disuse. He calls this "a deep wound" in the church and lists multiple reasons why this has occurred.

Nevertheless, he raises up the importance of this sacrament:

"Nowhere else do we encounter the mercy of God so immediately, so directly, and so concretely as when we are told in the name of Jesus:

"Your sins are forgiven!" Certainly no one finds it easy to humbly confess his or her sins and, often enough, to confess the same sins over and over again. But everyone who does that and then is told "I absolve

you,” not generally and anonymously, but concretely and personally, knows of the inner freedom, inner peace, and joy, which this sacrament bestows.”

4. Ecclesial Praxis and the Culture of Mercy

The mercy preached by the Church must also be the mercy lived by the church. Kasper traces the history of the practical mercy of the Church through the ages, concluding that: *“By doing this, Christianity exercised influence upon European culture and human civilization generally. That influence continues to be effective today, but mostly in a secularized form. Without this Christian impulse, neither the cultural and social history of Europe nor the history of humanity can be understood.”*

Against this generous history is a current problem, what Kasper calls: *“The danger of making the church bourgeois in the affluent west... The most serious criticism which can be leveled against the church, therefore, is the accusation that often times only a few deeds follow, or appear to follow, its words. The church is reproached for speaking of God’s mercy, while it is perceived by many people to be strict, harsh, and pitiless.”*

A too ready acceptance of permanent poverty, the marginalization of classes of people in society, the tone of disparagement that characterizes conversations among Christians, a worldly even feudal lifestyle of some clergy, and in the west an over-bureaucratization of

the church, all demand renewal if the Church is to be a Church that preaches and lives mercy credibly.

5. Mercy in Canon Law

Kasper devotes a significant section of this chapter to what seems on first reading an unusual digression, the role of canon law and the breakdown of discipline within the church. This might even appear at odds with the theme of mercy. Here we are reminded that Kasper is a churchman, indeed a bishop and a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church and the internal function of the Church has long been his responsibility. He contextualizes his discussion of Canon Law within the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's conception of cheap grace: *"Cheap grace means the justification of the sinner and not the sinner."* *"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance; baptism without church discipline; communion without acknowledging sin; absolution without personal confession."*

Kasper asserts that the scandal of the sexual abuse crisis (and one might add the financial crisis) facing the church is an indication of this breakdown of discipline. He traces the history of church discipline in the New Testament including exclusion from the Eucharist and the community.

With this biblical background very much in mind, he applies teachings of Thomas Aquinas to the actual task of interpreting a church law in a specific situation. A truth must be articulated "clearly and unambiguously, without subtraction or addition" and

its application applied prudently, sensitive to the unique factors of an individual circumstance. According to Thomas, mercy and justice are bound together so that *“Mercy wants to do justice to the other in his or her unique personal dignity; it is a person-oriented, not a thing-oriented justice.”* The application of law is must be conducted within the virtue of prudence, which according to Thomas, *“is concerned with the application of the objective norm in a manner appropriate to the facts, the reality, and, therefore, also the situation; it presupposes human discernment and experience.”*

Under the influence of prudence an objective law is not relativized, nor is justice diluted, but is applied with a mercy that allows for a new beginning and a deepening of conversion.

Discussion Questions

1. “We must, however, be clear about one thing: A church without charity and without mercy would no longer be the church of Jesus Christ.” In your own experience, or in the experience of people that you know, are there times when the Church has acted without mercy?
 2. How do we help someone, especially someone who life is filled with hardship, discover the merciful God in their life story? Has someone helped you do that in your own life, and what was that like?
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3. Cardinal Kasper calls the neglect of the sacrament of reconciliation, a sacrament in which people personally encounter the mercy of God, a deep wound in the Church. Why do you think other people do not go the sacrament of reconciliation and what influences your decision to go or not go?

4. Can an affluent Church be a credible witness to mercy in a world which experiences the four fold poverty Kasper described? What changes do individual Christians need to make to be witnesses of mercy to the poor?

5. Cardinal Kasper cites the challenging words of the Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Cheap grace means the justification of the sin and not the sinner.” “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance; baptism without church discipline; communion without acknowledging sin; absolution without personal confession.” What do you make of these words?

Chapter VIII: For a Culture of Mercy

1. The Size and Parameters of the Modern Welfare State

The church does not live in the sacristy, it lives in the world. Because of its concern for human beings it has a voice in the fundamental ethical questions concerning the economy and society, particularly in the realm of justice where each person must be given their due. But what is the role of mercy in the secular administration of justice? Free market liberalism in the person of Adam Smith and 19th century Marxism has no role for mercy in their systems of governance.

Social market economies, as understood by Kasper, offer a viable alternative. Protecting the dignity of the individual, buffering the effects of age, illness and promoting human solidarity, free market economies establish the circumstances in which a free market economy is possible.

The social market economy has been challenged by changes in demography, technology and above all, globalization. Globalized economic forces are blind to the values of social market economies, embrace only profit and loss as values, and have produced worldwide economic disparities among nations and individuals. Kasper's question simply put is: *“What can Christians in this situation do for a social-minded and merciful society?”*

2. The Continuation of the Church's Social Teaching.

Kasper presents Catholic Social teaching since the 19th century as resting on this principle: the dignity and freedom of the human being as an individual and in solidarity with other human beings. This principle is established by God in the very act of creation. Consequently, the Church has promoted the idea of the modern social welfare state where each human being is responsible for him or herself, but must “have the chance of assuming this responsibility.” While the church has not one particular social, political or economic program, economics and politics are ethical issues inasmuch as they affect human beings. The church must encourage government that defends human freedom, solidarity and responsibility. Additionally, the environment is not simply a tool to be used, but a gift to be conserved.

Within Catholic Social Ethics, from the time of Leo XIII, the governing principles of subsidiarity and solidarity are given pride of place. Subsidiarity means that the smallest unit possible must have the freedom to assume responsibility for their own self-governance and development. Solidarity acknowledges that the individual does not exist or act in isolation but in concert with fellow human beings in a commonweal.

The reality is that centralized bureaucratic governments have evolved which limit human freedom and the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. To this development John Paul II and Benedict XVI have advocated mercy, “a culture of love”, as a corrective development and the central principle of Catholic social teaching. For Benedict XVI, *“love is the normative principle, not only in*

micro-relationships—in friendships, the family, and small groups—but also in macro-relationships, that is, in social, economic, and political contexts.”

3. The Political Dimension of Love and Mercy

Kasper lists a range of activities that are excluded by love as an operative social principle: killing in all forms, torture, physical and sexual abuse of every kind, unlawful detention and slavery, drug trafficking, lying—especially in propaganda. He addresses the vexed question of war and the just war theory, and the prospect of nuclear war. He concludes that political action must be directed towards: *“a preventative politics of peace, which includes the removal of injustices, development aid (Paul VI: Development as the new norm for peace), advocacy for the enforcement and protection of fundamental human rights, rights and protection for minorities, procedures for finding justice that balances legitimate interests, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, sanctions for potential assailants, and other things.”*

4. Love and Mercy as the Source of Inspiration and Motivation

With the Second Vatican Council and especially with Benedict XVI, Kasper holds forth love as a motivating principle of governance. While the state cannot be expected to provide for every human situation without becoming suffocating, love must be the motivation for justice. An additional reason why mercy must be part of the motivation of governance is that change produces unexpected consequences and unforeseen needs. Mercy functions as the remedial action that arises to care for these unforeseen circumstances. As specific examples Kasper cites political asylum,

immigration as multifaceted poverty, and the commercialization of charity—particularly health care—as modern developments where the application of the principle of mercy is needed.

5. Societal Significance of the Works of Mercy

Kasper returns to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in light of the needs present in modern society. He urges us to take the ancient insights that produced each of these works of mercy and apply them to needs just discussed—not in hope of forming a complete solution, but as a motivation to engage the needs of the modern world from the heart of the Church’s teaching on mercy.

6. Mercy and the Question of God

The book began acknowledging that concrete human suffering challenges the question of God. In this section Kasper flips the question around, suggesting that the existence of a merciful God demands human beings respond to the suffering that confronts humanity. Kasper works backwards from the principles of Catholic social teaching. If the first principle is the freedom of the individual and society, one must ask: what is freedom? Individual freedom must always be seen in light of the freedom of other individuals. Thus one must exercise personal freedom with justice towards others. But then we must ask what is justice, a question which has been debated since Aristotle; and one with no universally agreed upon answer. “Justice” has often been the tool that establishes totalitarianism. Addressing these questions we are confronted with the problem of relativism that has appeared with the death of

metaphysics. What exactly is the basis of truth, and is not contemporary “truth” simply a tool in the hands of the powerful to manipulate public approval?

Again we return to the question, “What does a human being need?” If metaphysics does not supply an unconditional answer, Kasper states interpersonal encounter does: (1) human dignity (2) personal respect (3) personal acceptance (4) personal care. He writes: *“In the interpersonal encounter, something absolute is revealed that excludes every strict form of relativism. Concretely, this means that the demand for justice, which in concrete situations cannot be made in a totally unambiguous way, is to be interpreted in light of love and its unconditional claim. Practically, the demand for justice must be surpassed in loving and merciful care for the other.”* Because we and our relationships come from a “damaged mold” of personal and historical injustice only forgiveness reconciliation and mercy can break the cycle of violence and create the possibility of new future. In this world, perfect justice evades us, and in some way demands mercy. Kasper’s answer is: *“We should and we must curb injustice and evil, as far as humanly possible. As far as possible, we must help justice and mercy achieve a breakthrough in society and in the church. Everywhere we can, in situations of physical or spiritual need, we should let the warm rays of mercy shine and thereby ignite a hope-bestowing light of love.”*

The reality is that human beings cannot administer perfect justice and we are often incapable of the required mercy. This places us in continual need of the mercy of God: *“Therefore, the cry of “Kyrie eleison” in this world will never be silenced, but will continually grow louder. That this cry can and may be voiced publicly belongs to the cultural legacy of the human race; it belongs to a culture of justice and mercy and to the humanitarianism of a truly free society.”*

Discussion Questions

1. What concrete role does the Church play in creating a merciful society?
 2. Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have advocated a “culture of love” in social, economic and political contexts. Is this at all practical? Would anyone pay attention?
 3. Does mercy have a role in secular governance? If it does, how can the Church promote and support it?
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Chapter IX: Mary, Mother of Mercy

1. Mary in the Gospels

Mary is an important figure for the Catholic tradition, serving as a model of Christian belief, and as a model of the Church. Kasper states that she is also a model of God's mercy and turns to the New Testament witness to make his point. In Luke's Annunciation, Mary sings the Magnificat, describing history as a tale of God's merciful interaction with his people. Mary claims her place in this history as one graced by God, and makes herself the servant, the slave of God's merciful intention, thus allowing the coming of God into the world. In this she shows herself to be a model of the church: chosen by the mercy of God to be a servant of God's universal mercy. When in the Gospel of John, John takes Mary "into his own," at the foot of the cross, Kasper (with Augustine) believes that Mary is permanently taken into the life of the Church as model of mercy.

2. Mary in the Faith of the Church

Mary has had a prominent place in the history of the church: in its theology (*Theotokos*) and in its prayers, hymns, and devotions, many of which refer to her a "mother of mercy" and refuge for those in need. Artistic representations abound in every culture, perhaps none more famous than Michelangelo's *Pieta*, in which "Mary is presented as the mother of all who are suffering, who are sorrowful, who are beleaguered, and who are in need of consolation." Kasper vividly

remembers an icon of Mary from his youth in Germany, “Mary of the Sheltering Cloak” and how poignant this appeal was for a young boy undergoing the bombing of the Second World War.

3. Mary as Archetype of Mercy

Ambrose described Mary as the archetype of the Church, the Second Vatican Council describes her as the archetype of all who are redeemed, the Eastern Orthodox describe her as a special creature of divine mercy—the Creator’s original plan for human being and the Creator’s goal: the redeemed human being. Acknowledging that this religious language does not find much purchase in the modern world, Kasper states that Mary “as a mirror of and realization of divine mercy” still has a place. He sees her as the “archetype and exemplar of a renewed Christian culture and spirituality of mercy.” Even more she is an advocate of mercy as she intercedes for us with Christ the mediator of salvation. That Mary prays for us “now and at the hour of our death” indicates that she points to the mercy of Jesus Christ, and does what all Christians should do: be advocates of mercy for others. Kasper offers his closing words on mercy through the image and icon of Mary:

“Mary says to us and shows us: The good news of God’s mercy in Jesus Christ is the best thing that can ever be said to us and the best thing that we can ever hear. At the same time, it is the most beautiful thing there can be because it can transform us and our world by means of God’s glory, expressed in his gracious mercy. This mercy is God’s gift

and, simultaneously, our task as Christians. We are supposed to enact mercy. We should live it in word and deed and give witness to it. In this way, our often dark and cold world can become somewhat warmer, lighter, more endearing, and more worth living because of a ray of mercy. Mercy is the reflection of God's glory in this world and the epitome of the message of Jesus Christ, which was given to us as a gift and which we are to further bestow on others.”

Discussion Questions

1. Kasper describes Mary as a model of mercy for the Church, the mother of mercy. Is this just another spiritual title or does Mary have real traction as a teacher and source of mercy for others?
2. In a church where the language and images are primarily masculine, is there an advantage to having a feminine model of mercy in the Church?
3. Mary is described as an advocate for mercy for others. Is this how you see her or how you have heard her preached?
4. If you had the assignment of telling a non-Catholic about the relationship of Mary and the mercy of God, how would you do it?

ⁱ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, V, 1, 1.
