

BOLD MERCY: GOD'S SUMMONS TO ECCLESIAL CONVERSION

PAUL G. CROWLEY, S.J.

Thomas Mann captured the boldness of mercy in his relatively obscure novel, *The Holy Sinner*. It tells the story of a young man, Gregor, who was caught up in an entangled web of incestuous relationships representing the sin and guilt into which we are all born. He unwittingly stumbles into an oedipal nightmare by marrying his mother, whom he encounters later in life. Horrified upon learning the truth, he undertakes a life of severe penance, certain that the enormity of his defilement is beyond his own powers to rectify. Meanwhile, the old pope in Rome has died and a conclave has been called. By the power of the Holy Spirit it is vouchsafed to some members of the conclave that the new pope will be found not in Rome, but on a rocky ledge in a faraway land. There Gregor is discovered, and whisked to Rome, where, amidst great celebration, he assumes the chair of Peter. Yet, "scarcely had he . . . laid off the superfluity of his ceremonial garb, when he began to govern Christendom, to feed his flocks and dispense blessings upon the motely necessities of the earth."¹

His tolerance and compassion equaled the fixed purpose to which when needful he held; yes, his bold way of enforcing the divine mercy, in cases where the Deity would scarcely have come on it by Itself, aroused attention throughout Christendom. . . . Gregor's leaning to loose was all his life greater than that to bind and from this disposition flowed decision and judgments which issued from his judgment seat, arousing at first, often in the Church itself as likewise among the people, an amazed hesitation, but in the end an inevitable admiration. . . . With [mercy] he either struck down or anticipated the grumbling about [his] slackness. . . . [Yet he knew that] too rash a penance laid upon a seeker for grace may make him lose heart, not bear it and again renounce God. . . . Accordingly it is statesmanlike to make mercy go before justice, since it creates the right measure in the life of the spirit, by which means the sinner is saved and the good is constantly preserved. . . . Whom should not such teachings have rejoiced?²

Writing in the wake of World War II while living in exile in Los Angeles, Mann knew personally of the world's need for a bold mercy—a world where mercy seemed so bleakly absent.³ Is it not the felt absence of mercy on the part of so many that stirred Pope Francis to recover the reality of God's mercy as the powerful force that it is, and can be, in human life and in the life of the church?

This Year of Mercy invites us to consider the degree to which the church itself is in need of God's mercy, of the grace of conversion, especially in those parts of the church's life where the gift of mercy is occluded by mercy's seeming absence. If we

¹ Thomas Mann, *The Holy Sinner*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1951), 306.

² *Ibid.*, 308–12.

³ For an account of Mann's wartime struggles, see Hermann Kurske, *Thomas Mann: Life As a Work of Art*, trans. Leslie Willison (Princeton, 2002), esp. chap. 14, 363–87. For an analysis of *The Holy Sinner* with a focus on the working of God's grace in the story, see Maria Dobozy, "Thomas Mann's *The Holy Sinner*: A Translation for Modern Times?" in *Literature and Belief* 24 (2004): 254–66.

allow the power of this divine mercy into the life of the church, as well as into our own lives, we may witness the beginning of the end to regimes of mercilessness—the very cause for which Jesus lived, died, and was raised from the dead. But admitting this mercy into the life of the church will necessitate an ecclesial conversion that may change the way we consider many of the major questions before us. God's bold mercy is a summons to that kind of conversion.

I wish to speak today of mercy as a bold thing, as a name for the very nature of the God who is disclosed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What is revealed in the Christ event is a *kenosis* so bold that it upends the established order of things and signals a new Reign of God that casts our most cherished assumptions, even about mercy itself, under the rectifying judgment of God's love. Mercy here will be seen as the very boldness of God's love, of God operating *as* the love that God is. It is a boldness shown, not as a force, but in and through the disarming subversion of fear—as a perfect love that casts out fear (1 John 4:18), with power to disturb and disrupt the ways of life, and of religion, that we take for granted.

Further, this bold outpouring of Godself continues to be made to a human reality where this very self-gift, God's mercy, seems bleakly absent because it has been rejected: to a world of sin, both personal and structural, and in dire need of healing. And what is true of the world is, *mutatis mutandis*, true as well of the church. In fact, the Year of Mercy declared by the pope invites us to consider the degree to which the church itself is in need of God's mercy, the grace of conversion. The Year of Mercy invites us as well to consider the ways in which we, as a church, have not seen the offer of the grace of conversion because, for various reasons, we have been locked into the structures of sin—in the form of the certainties issuing from human judgment, which we too readily confuse with divine judgment. One result of this sin and the priority given to human judgments is that, for some people, the message of mercy is occluded by mercy's seeming absence, even in some precincts of the church itself.

Before we go further, though, we need to specify what we mean and do not mean by mercy. Mercy is a bold thing, a name for the very God given in an unending *kenosis* and made incarnate in Jesus—a mercy that is the power of God's love to free and transform human existence. But this is more than a pious sentiment. Its pedigree is long in the history of Israel.⁴ Yet I want to claim at the outset that mercy is much underestimated.

⁴ This view of mercy must be seen in the context of the rich heritage of mercy in Christian theology, which emerges out of the Hebraic tradition, and has several senses. These include the abiding love and fidelity of God, the *hesed w^e emeth* of the Lord, God's loving kindness and abiding love. This idea is reflected later, in 2 Tim 2:13: "If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, since he cannot deny himself." God's self-gift is an offer made in constancy. It is the power of God constantly being poured upon us. Another and more common sense of mercy is of compassion toward those in need. It is linked closely to the first sense, for if God has been faithful to his people, then it is only fitting that they should show the same kind of love, in human form, toward others. As John puts it: "If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:17–18). But this is a compassion that confounds limited human understanding, and which moves beyond formal notions of charity. As Jon Sobrino observes: "True, the practice of mercy can and ought to include [the works of mercy]. But mercy itself is something far more radical. Mercy is a basic

First, there is a tendency by some to sentimentalize mercy, to reduce it to a bourgeois notion of charity devoid of the rich theological lineage that we find in the biblical, patristic and scholastic literature. It is true that mercy, taken from one perspective, is a virtue to be practiced, and that the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are a hallmark of the lived Christian faith.⁵ But this noble and central part of our heritage can be trivialized if we do not see it as an expression of something far bolder: our response to the power of God's love that not only treats the wounds, but also exposes the sources and even structural causes of the ills which works of mercy aim to remedy. This very exposure of the sources and causes of suffering is the means by which mercy is simultaneously a balm, but also a judgment, a work of God's love. Of course, it does not rectify without our cooperation and, indeed, engaging in the works of mercy, without which faith is dead (Jas 2:17). But the works of mercy are, as Jon Sobrino has pointed out, works of liberating praxis not only salving the wounds of the afflicted, but declaring that the causes of these injuries must be removed.⁶

Second, there is the danger that mercy can be reified as a possession of the church, used as a category of juridical decision, however softly packaged: a concession meted out to those outside the good graces of the church's otherwise wide embrace. This understanding of mercy has a long lineage, reflected, for example, in a superficial understanding of indulgences divorced from a theology of grace and of the church as the communion of saints.⁷ But, more generally, this can become a problem

attitude toward the suffering of another, whereby one reacts to eradicate that suffering for the sole reason that it exists, and in the conviction that, in this reaction to the ought-not-be of another's suffering, one's own being, without any possibility of subterfuge, hangs in the balance. "The Samaritan Church and the Principle of Mercy," in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 15–26 at 18. More than mere pity or alms (*eleimosune*), mercy is a moving toward the other in need, in an act of kenotic generosity: "The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (1 John 3:16). There is a radical kenotic core to this second sense, to the nature of compassion. A third sense of mercy is found in forgiveness, the reconciliation of all the parts into the whole of God's love, so that where the catastrophe of sin once abounded, there grace abounds yet more (Rom 5:20). This sense of mercy includes the call of sinners to the transformative grace of God's love, which renders sin non-existent in God's eyes. But it is also a call to truthfulness and honesty so that such power can work its effect, which includes setting things right through the rectifying justice that is the effect of God's mercy. Its prime analogue is the repentant sinner, but it extends to and includes the structural and institutionalized forms that sin assumes—and the need even for institutions, including the church, to ask for God's forgiving mercy, which is the very power of God to transform all things, to make all things new, to bring about a new creation. For further background see Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist, 2014), chaps. 3 and 4; Irene Nowell, O.S.B., "Mercy," in Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, O.S.B., and Dermot A. Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1987), 65–62; and Adolf Darlap, "Mercy," in Karl Rahner, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 954–55.

⁵ For a good presentation of the works of mercy James F. Keenan, S.J., *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

⁶ Jon Sobrino, "The Samaritan Church and the Principle of Mercy," 16.

⁷ See Karl Rahner, "Remarks on the Theology of Indulgences," *Theological Investigations* (hereafter TI) 2 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969) 175–202.

when a year of mercy is imagined as a time of welcoming back sinners, which it is, but not also as an invitation to something more radical: a time in which the church as whole comes to its knees and asks for God's mercy. A merciful welcome of the sinner was indeed central to the ministry of Jesus. But this merciful welcome subverted the priority given categories of human judgment upon which the religious establishment had built its power, including those categories of judgment that led to the condemnation and execution of Jesus. Mercy is divine, the fundamental self-gift of God, and not the possession of the sin-laced mechanisms that have themselves not always shown mercy. Religious institutions can be the source of so much good, as the holy church most surely is; but they can also be the source of so much suffering and even violence, and as such, are themselves in need of mercy. Pope John Paul II implied as much in his year of apologies for the sins of the church—a series of gestures that was an admission that the church itself, as an institution, had sinned and indeed been the cause of much suffering.⁸

Third, mercy is often pitted against justice, as if, in a realistic view, we all know that mercy can seem too soft, diverting our attention from the real tragedy of sin that pocks human life and that the demands divine punishment. A mercy without any sense of justice can indeed lead to a diminished sense of what mercy entails. For, as Thomas urged, mercy entails the justice of God, which, with mercy, is itself an expression of God's incalculable love.⁹ As Walter Kasper, Steven Pope, and so many others have shown, for Thomas, mercy, as a form of charity, belongs to the essence of God, and precedes and makes ready the way for justice.¹⁰ God's mercy "justices," to

⁸ For Pope John Paul II's homily requesting forgiveness for the church, see John Paul II, "Day of Pardon," March 12, 2000, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000312_pardon.html. In his homily, he cited the 1999 International Theological Commission document "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past," which includes acknowledgement of previous and current shortcomings on the part of the church, including both personal and social dimensions of sin, and shortcomings in relationships with other Christian denominations as well as with non-Christians. International Theological Commission, "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past," December 1999, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-ite_en.html

For popular news sources that capture some of the reception of Pope John Paul II's pleas for forgiveness, see Alessandra Stanley, "Pope Asks Forgiveness for Errors of the Church Over 2,000 Years," *New York Times*, March 13, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/13/world/pope-asks-forgiveness-for-errors-of-the-church-over-2000-years.html?pagewanted=all> and "Pope Apologises for Church Sins," *BBC News*, March 12, 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/674246.stm>. For another analysis of his apologies see Michael R. Marrus, "Papal Apologies of Pope John Paul II," in Mark Gibney, et al., eds., *The Age of Apology: Facing up to the Past*, Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 259–70. (All URLs in this note were accessed May 13, 2016.)

⁹ *ST I*, q. 21, a. 3.

¹⁰ For further discussion, see Kasper, *Mercy* 88–89; see also Todd Walatka, "The Principle of Mercy: Jon Sobrino and the Catholic Theological Tradition," in *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 96–117, and Stephen J. Pope, "Aquinas on Almsgiving, Justice and Charity: An Interpretation and Reassessment," in *Heythrop Journal* 32 (1991): 167–91.

borrow from Hopkins.¹¹ A mercy divorced from the justicing of God can indeed seem soft. Yet the boldness of mercy lies in part in the fact that it is given, as Pope Francis put it, “without any intermediary stages.”¹² Mercy is not simply an attribute of God, working in relation to the divine judgment, but is the very essence of God as gratuitous self-giving love, poured out in the creation, in the revelation of Godself in the history of Israel and of Jesus, and in the ongoing raining down of God’s love in the life of the Spirit. Such a bold mercy might indeed seem soft for those given to making mercy contingent upon a prior decision of justice or the threat of punishment. Yet divine mercy is the ambit within which judgment finds its ownmost nature and legitimacy.

And so we ask: What would it mean if the church herself were to welcome such a bold mercy?

I will explore this question in four brief steps. First, I will describe in greater detail what I mean by the absence of mercy, turning to the Jewish philosopher-mystic Simone Weil for some insight. It is important to understand that the seeming absence of mercy is the result of the loss of our own selves in sin, and hence of any sense of God. But it is equally important to expand our understanding of sin, and of our need for mercy, to an inclusion of structural sin, indeed of institutional sin. Institutions, including the church, are in need of God’s mercy, and of effectuating the justice that mercy requires. Second, I will suggest that it was this very absence of mercy that drove the program of the Reign of God, and indeed, the revelation of the God of Jesus Christ as mercy itself poured out onto the world. Jesus saw the results of mercy’s absence in the lives of the people of his time, but his response was to break through their misery with the liberating mercy of God—a mercy that rectified unjust situations and that signaled that the Reign of God was a call to the complete transformation of human life, including the structures of religion. Third, I will suggest that the power of mercy as a name for God makes sense and is given its revelatory foundation in the Paschal Mystery. In the cross and resurrection we find the definitive upending of all mechanisms of mercilessness, the absolute triumph of God as mercy over sin and death, and the final judgment of God upon the world, including the church. Finally, I will suggest that this theological foundation for a bold mercy has implications for the life of the church and for the transformation of structures that continue to weaken the power of God’s mercy for some, women in particular. I wish to suggest that a church that welcomes the conversion necessitated by God’s mercy may understand its own practices in a new light.

¹¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame,” in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 90.

¹² Pope Francis, Homily, “Holy Chrism Mass,” Rome, March 24, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160324_omelia-crisma.html

I. The Absence of Mercy

In the midst of the apocalyptic carnage of the Second World War, Simone Weil wrote:

There are four evidences of divine mercy here below. The favors of God to beings capable of contemplation. . . The radiance of these beings, and their compassion, which is the divine compassion in them. The beauty of the world. The fourth evidence is the complete absence of mercy here below.¹³

The first three evidences are unusual in that they we do not usually imagine them as gifts of mercy: divine favors of contemplation, the compassion that radiates from those gifted with contemplation, and the sheer beauty of the world. So we are already pulled up short. But the fourth is the most puzzling: “the complete absence of mercy here below.” Yet recent events in human affairs raise for us in stark relief what human life looks like where mercy is absent. The ruthless beheading of defenseless lines of men in orange jump suits, or turning nine year-old girls into sex slaves, or crucifying people of a different religious persuasion—all express inhuman mercilessness. So, too, does the shooter who takes out a semi-automatic, and slays nine African-American parishioners in cold blood, and more recently, forty-nine young patrons of an LGBT club. So, too, does the recent call by a presidential candidate to round up undocumented immigrants—11 million of them and mostly Latinos—and deport them. So, too, are those U.S. and European politicians and citizens who turn a blind eye toward Syrian and other refugees seeking safe haven, even as these refugees drown on the high seas or die in the desert. So, too, do the young women who are raped and murdered not only along the U.S. border, but also in many parts of the world where women are viewed as non-persons. The list of such examples of inhumane mercilessness is endless. And what makes them particularly cruel is that there is no room in any of these situations for the victims to have any voice, to raise a question, to enter into any kind of rational dialogue, to have any recourse. That possibility is cut off at the beginning.

But how, following Simone Weil, might such an absence of mercy prove to be an evidence *for* mercy? How might unmitigated evil, horrendous evil, in some way demonstrate that mercy is in fact a desideratum that is not some foolish hope against hope, but in fact a bold counter-stroke by God against these and other forms of human sinfulness?

We start with the fact that this reign of mercilessness appalls us, for in these and countless other events we are witnessing nothing less than a cruelty so grotesque that it leaves us gasping for the words to convey our incredulousness at the lack of any trace of compassion, or any sense of the transcendent and holy in human nature. How far is this from what Weil describes as “radiance” and that “compassion which is the divine compassion.” For in these events we are witnessing a situation where the human expression of divine mercy is utterly absent, in fact sometimes suppressed *in the name of God*. And all of us, collectively, feel the need for that which would undo this reign of anti-mercy.

¹³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), 111.

Apart from the pictures of mercilessness that we can find in Dostoevsky, or the agony of war painted by a Goya, perhaps the exemplar par excellence in the Western canon is the *Iliad*, that epic poem that recalls the gruesome warring between Atticus and Sparta. Homer's poem is the spur for one of the most important essays Simone Weil wrote, *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*.¹⁴ Like Mann's *Holy Sinner*, this is an essay that reflects upon the cruel world of the mid-twentieth century, using the Trojan War epic as a foil for a deeper philosophical reflection upon the human condition that was unmasked in that most violent of centuries. Although the essay scarcely mentions mercy, it does describe a world without any sense of mercy—a world instead marked by what she calls “force”—“that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. . . . while [one] is still alive”¹⁵:

A man stands disarmed and naked with a weapon pointing at him; this person becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him. Just a minute ago, he was thinking, acting, hoping. . . . Soon, however, he grasps the fact that the weapon which is pointing at him will not be diverted; and now, still breathing, he is simply matter; still thinking, he can think no longer.¹⁶

Weil is describing here a general sense of terror that reigns when there is no sense of a possibility of mercy, resulting in the eclipse of the human into the non-human, at the “mercy” of inhuman mercilessness.

“Force” (she writes), “in the hands of another, exercises over the soul the same tyranny that extreme hunger does; for it possesses, and *in perpetuo*, the power of life and death. Its rule, moreover, is as cold and hard as the rule of inert matter.”¹⁷

Weil offers the example of Achilles and Priam. Priam is the old man of Troy, and Achilles has killed his son, Hector. Priam, on his knees, pleads for mercy, and for the body of his son, but Achilles, although grieving himself, at first pushes Priam away. Weil says that it was not insensibility that led Achilles to spurn the old man; for Achilles, Priam was “not a suppliant but an inert object.”¹⁸ Insensibility alone would have presumed the humanity of Priam; it was the inhuman mercilessness of war that had reduced Priam to a thing forced to bow to the commands of the more powerful young warrior before him: “*He spoke; the old man trembled and obeyed.*”¹⁹

Force deprives another human being of his or her human dignity by objectifying them, making it impossible for the objectified to attain to the dignity that is their inherent gift. Such occurs in the lives of those who, despite all their deepest longings, and even vocations, know that fulfillment is an impossibility because they have been objectified or otherwise categorized and not taken seriously as complete human persons. Their entreaties are met with a definitive no:

The idea of a person's being a thing is a logical contradiction. Yet what is impossible in logic becomes true in life, and the contradiction lodged with the soul tears it to shreds. This thing is constantly aspiring to be a man or a

¹⁴ Simone Weil, *The Iliad or The Poem of Force* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1956), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7. The reference is to *Iliad*, Book 24. But, as she points out, in reference to the fact that Achilles relents: “At least a suppliant [like Priam], once his prayer is answered, becomes a human being again, like everybody else. But there are other, more unfortunate creatures who have become things for the rest of their lives” (8).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, (Italics original).

woman, and never achieving it—here, surely, is death but death strung out over a whole lifetime.²⁰

The ultimate exemplar is the slave. The only one to whom the slave might show a shred of compassion, of gratitude, or even of love, is the very one who has reduced him or her to an object.²¹ Extrapolating from Weil's essay, we may speak of those victims of mercilessness who are the preferentially loved of God, yet who, in human eyes, are rejected as unworthy of full human consideration by the powers, be they political or, in some cases, religious—people considered so ontologically different as to be unable to stand equally as human beings in the sight of God.

The power of this mercilessness is a form of human sinfulness, and it generates what Weil terms affliction²²—a synergy of suffering on the physical, psychological, existential, and spiritual planes—that the afflicted themselves cannot undo, and which, tragically, the wielders of force themselves cannot undo because they are so locked into the machinery of force itself. They are, in a sense, victims of the very force they wield, having become deformed and contorted by the mercilessness they inflict. The oppressors are themselves in need of mercy.

If, for Simone Weil, the *Iliad* marks the first expression of what she calls “the Greek genius,”²³ the Gospel for her marks the last. For in it, “human suffering is laid bare and we see it in a being who is at once divine and human.” Yet this incarnate one “trembles before suffering and death, feels itself, in the depths of its agony, to be cut off from man and God.”²⁴ It is only in this way that we can begin, in Weil's eyes, to understand why the absence of mercy is evidence for mercy, understood now as the presence of God in the midst of human suffering. “For the sense of human misery is a pre-condition of justice and love. . . Only [the person] who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice.”²⁵ And this, she says, is what takes place in the God-Man Jesus Christ. The incarnate one is himself subject to the very force he came to meet. For only the one who has been wounded by sin but not seduced by it can meet the reign of anti-mercy. If we see the outcome of Jesus's life as the victory of mercilessness, then faith is in vain. If we see it, however, as the end to the cycles of mercilessness, of the dehumanization of persons, and a liberation from all that that process implies, then we are looking at a different kind of force, the definitive revelation of God as a mercy that vanquishes the forces of mercilessness. In this sense, then, the absence of mercy becomes the evidence of a mercy rejected, for mercy is not simply an attribute of God; it is rather the very nature of the God whom Jesus knew intimately and proclaimed with his life, even to the point of his own rejection.

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹ Ibid., 9.

²² On affliction, see Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, [1951] 1973), 117–36.

²³ Weil, *The Iliad*, 22.

²⁴ Ibid., 34.

²⁵ Ibid.

II. The Program of the Reign of God

We are all familiar with the compassion that moved Jesus to want to help the afflicted—an emotion coming from his innermost parts.²⁶ He meets the paralytic or the leper, and he is moved to help them. He takes pity on the crowds, weeping over Jerusalem. Jesus mirrors in a human way the compassion shown by the God of Israel toward those mired in the dregs of oppression, having been reduced to mere things. It was the sight of this inhumanity—the merciless imposition of alien force upon them—that moved *Adonai* to liberate the Hebrews from slavery, and to accompany them in their migration to the Promised Land. This is an image of the God of Israel that is further elaborated by the prophets: “You are precious in my sight, you are honored, and I love you” (Isa 43:3).

This biography of a merciful God who seeks justice and flourishing for the beloved people is of course only one strand within a complex bundle of sometimes contrasting and discordant “biographies of God” in the Bible.²⁷ Through the eyes of our own time, we have come to highlight this merciful strand and to let it speak powerfully to us. But this selection does stand in contrast to darker ones especially evident in the historical books that tend toward a dualistic view of the world and of history and of how God works within it. In these darker biographical strands, God is a jealous God, a God of violence and militarism, of conquest and destruction, and at times abetting and encouraging cruelty and carnage. The rule here is often one of retributive justice—punishment—put before mercy. The Jesus of the canonical Gospels has himself made a selection. Rather than lock people in a human calculus of mercy as subordinate to or conditional upon the exercise of retributive justice, the Reign of God stresses the present inbreaking of God’s mercy, along with its finalization in a transcendent time where a higher form of justice will have been realized.

Pope Francis speaks of mercy in an active way as a gerund, mercying (*miseri cordiando*) rather than as a noun.²⁸ Elsewhere he speaks of it as expanding, an “‘ever greater’ mercy, a mercy in motion, a mercy that each day seeks to make progress, taking small steps forward and advancing in that wasteland where indifference and violence have predominated.”²⁹ Mercy is not a static thing—not simply a divine attribute, but an ever-active power of God’s love (God’s *esse*), and, taken in that sense, it has the power to bring about transformative change. It is as bold as creation itself, for it brings about a new creation (“a new heaven and a new earth” [Rev 21:1]). As Kasper puts it, “God’s mercy is the power of God that sustains, protects, promotes, builds up, and creates life anew. It bursts the logic of human justice. . . .”³⁰ This bold power of mercy makes it clear that we must understand the ministry of Jesus not simply as a series of compassionate responses to human needs,

²⁶ Kasper, *Mercy*, 67.

²⁷ See Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

²⁸ See Antonio Spadaro, S.J., “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” *America*, September 30, 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview> (accessed on July 26, 2016).

²⁹ Pope Francis, Homily, “Holy Chrism Mass,” Rome, March 24, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160324_omelia-crisma.html (all Vatican URLs accessed on July 26, 2016).

³⁰ Kasper, *Mercy*, 56.

but as the proclamation of the inversion of reality as people know it. To borrow from Simone Weil's insight: the mercilessness of Jesus's time—with religious and political powers growing ever more defensive in the face of his mission—pointed to and was evidence of a mercy, a divine power, that was in fact already rendering anti-mercy powerless. The forgotten of history, the poor of the earth, those excluded from the inner circles, were now standing at the center of God's revelation. Kasper relates this insight to the very origins of Jesus in the virginal conception: "This story," he writes, "subverts human categories; it represents a transvaluation of the usually operative human rules: a barren woman like Elizabeth and a virgin like Mary become pregnant (Luke 1:7), the powerful are toppled from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled with good gifts while the rich depart empty (Luke 1:52f)."³¹

This transvaluation of the norm lies at the heart of the message of the Reign, the infusion of God's mercy into human life. Jesus conveys this message not only by merciful deeds, but also words. John Donahue has shown how the great parables turn on an element of dramatic surprise, upending the expectations of the listeners, with an ability, he says, "to disorient and reorient our lives."³² In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he notes, the "neighbor" to the suffering man is an outsider; God's mercy is not the possession of Israel alone, but as an expression of the God who knows no boundaries, can be bestowed even by an apostate—a most unsettling proposition. In the Prodigal Son, for example, the justice of God is shown in the rush of mercy toward the wayward son; love is not withheld or in any way qualified, even as the observant son loses none of the father's affection. Here, too, divine mercy subverts the established order of justice, absorbing justice into itself. In Kasper's words, "Mercy is the most perfect realization of justice."³³ And this coalescence of mercy and justice is reflected in the deeds of Jesus, where healing and forgiveness are offered in a single compassionate act.

III. The Paschal Event as Disclosure of Mercy

The ministry of Jesus does not exhaust the story of mercy. His mission generates fierce opposition because it is a scandal to those who cling to a safe model that would keep the boundaries between mercy and judgment clear and distinct. For as the parables and mighty deeds illustrate, mercy is divine power that upends the given order of things and is the cause of existential disruption. Mercy comes at a cost; in the meeting of mercy with the suffering of the world—the suffering caused by sin—Jesus himself suffers: first, by entering compassionately into the "chaos" of the other,³⁴ and second, by enduring a rejection so definitive as to lead to his own merciless death. In an exercise of theodicy through the violence of the cross, mercy itself is cast under human judgment, and it is judged too dangerous to tolerate. Thus the suffering and

³¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

³² John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1988), 16.

³³ Kasper, *Mercy*, 72. Kasper amplifies: "Talk of the compassionate Samaritan has, in fact, transcended the Christian and ecclesial realm and has become a name for diverse aid organizations and emergency services" such as Samaritan International e.V., (<http://www.samaritan-international.eu/>) (accessed on July 26, 2017).

³⁴ Keenan, *The Works of Mercy*, 4.

misery to which Jesus responds with the whole of his being, as a *kenosis* of the divine mercy, is a world of sin, of “the total alienation and complete loss of well-being.”³⁵ And the merciful one is made to be this sin (2 Cor 5:21) as the most radical expression of divine mercy. But there is a revolutionary twist. For in his “substitutionary atonement” mercy now becomes an expression of divine justice, justice understood not as punishment for transgression of boundaries, but as the absolute forgiveness of sin. Hence, his death is not simply the consequence of the sinfulness of limited human judgment, but, as an expression of divine mercy, it is the upending of death itself. And that divine judgment is a judgment of love: of healing and of re-creation. And so, Kasper can say, in tones that could have come from René Girard: “His death is the death of death. In this way, he has become for us the place where life breaks in. In him God has once again and definitively proved to be a God full of mercy (Eph 2:4ff.), who makes possible for us a new beginning and gives us a new birth by his great mercy (1 Pet 1:3).”³⁶

And this is disclosed in what we call the resurrection, which directly addresses the darkness and chaos of a world that had proved itself to be so merciless as to have “murdered God.”³⁷ In his second encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, John Paul II describes the resurrection as the foundational revelation of God’s mercy:

In His resurrection Christ has revealed the God of merciful love. . . . In His resurrection [the Son of God] experienced in a radical way mercy shown to Himself, that is to say the love of the Father which is more powerful than death. And it is also the same Christ, the Son of God, who at the end of His messianic mission—and, in a certain sense, even beyond the end—reveals Himself as the inexhaustible source of mercy, of the same love that, in a subsequent perspective of the history of salvation in the Church, is to be everlastingly confirmed as more powerful than sin. The paschal Christ is the definitive incarnation of mercy, its living sign in salvation history and in eschatology. In the same spirit, the liturgy of Eastertide places on our lips the words of the Psalm: *Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo*.³⁸

What is theologically noteworthy about this passage is that the pope is saying that Jesus himself was the recipient of the divine mercy, understood as the power of God’s love over sin and death, to which Jesus had been subjected. He who was sinless had taken on sin, and death, only to become the one in whom the power over sin and death, the power of the resurrection, would be vested. But what is clear is that the resurrection is the revelation of this divine mercy, this power of God’s love that would bring an end to the unjust regimes of mercilessness.

These brief comments on the resurrection can hardly do justice to this topic, and so much of what I would want to share here has already been said, with enormous

³⁵ Kasper, *Mercy*, 74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 75. For an understanding of the cross as the upending of mechanisms of violence and, with the resurrection, the definitive revelation of the superior power of God’s love, see René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 130–43, 189–91.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 181–82.

³⁸ *Dives in Misericordia* 8, November 30, 1980, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html.

depth and subtlety by Brian Robinette in *Grammars of Resurrection*³⁹—which deals with the excess of meaning which the resurrection, both as reality and as symbol of divine mercy, holds forth for us. One of the key contributions of this book is its retrieval of the category of the “apocalyptic” as a framework that is indispensable for understanding what is going on in the New Testament texts. Substantially agreeing with Johannes Metz, Robinette argues that the Catholic tendency to dismiss the apocalyptic as a category of understanding that has been superseded by the eschatological reality of the resurrection is to miss something crucial: that the resurrection is not only a trans-historical eschatological event in which God’s saving work has already been accomplished; it is also an event that punctuates history—one that has a defining impact on the way history ultimately plays out, and particularly, on whether the cries of the poor and oppressed will be heard. The resurrection carries with it a “dangerous memory” (Metz’s phrase) of the historical circumstances that populated the pre-paschal imagination—an imagination that reaches even into the post-paschal world. Rather than dismiss apocalyptic, it must be placed at the service of a more complete understanding of resurrection, lest we emerge with an ahistorical, possibly mythic construal.

As one illustration, we can turn to the Johannine account of the appearance of Jesus in the Upper Room, when he breathes upon the apostles the *ruach elohim*, bestowing upon them the *shalom* of the Spirit, and identifying that Spirit with a new life, one in which the power of sin has been dissolved. The forgiven are now instruments of the power of this bold mercy, which has its origins in the stirring of the waters at the dawn of creation, now become the waters of baptism. Where hope had been absent after the Crucifixion, and where there had been no sense of mercy extended by human beings toward Jesus himself (or to his followers), now mercy was abounding, in the loving-kindness and creative new life of God—in an act of divine love that upended all expectations and brought a definitive end to the old order, including the old order of religion.

Similarly, when the risen Jesus walks with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he transforms their vision of how things stand with God and the world. They are still locked in a pre-paschal imaginary, and only gradually, through encounter with word and sacrament, are their eyes opened to the paschal reality of Jesus impacting them in their very present historical moment. They become disciples in a radical sense for the first time. Likewise, when Jesus encounters Mary in the garden, she, too, is still locked in a pre-paschal imaginary, but, upon hearing his voice uttering her name, suddenly comes to realization that he is not a gardener; she must refrain from her pre-paschal urge to touch him, to cling to him, for she is now freed to proclaim him as Risen Lord to those who, according to the standard reading of structures of authority, would be the insiders. Only after she announces the fact that Jesus is risen do they race to the tomb.

What we see happening here is the meeting of an apocalyptic view of the world with an eschatological realization of what God has accomplished. And this becomes a message of great hope for a people cast in darkness. In the apocalyptic view, the reign of sin has to lead, and does lead, to the conclusion that history as we know it, and life as we have constructed it, are moving toward their inexorable and chaotic dissolution.

³⁹ Brian Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (New York: Crossroad, 2009).

In a theologian like Jon Sobrino, this view takes on the imagery of the crucified peoples of history, the victims of mercilessness, or of what he calls “anti-mercy.”⁴⁰ The apocalyptic view is, in a certain sense, pre-resurrectional, focusing on the suffering unleashed on the cross—coming before the full realization that God has already accomplished his saving work in Jesus, and that the end is not located in a point in the chronological future, but rather is the *kairos*, the *caesura*, that has already been realized in the Christ event. God’s mercy has broken through and into the impasses of human existence and redeemed humanity from itself, forgiven sin and rendered a judgment that the old way is finished: “Behold a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 1:16). But God’s mercy, realized on the ground and in the circumstances of human history, is also an eschatological reality—the already-but-not-yet-fulfilled accomplishment of God’s saving work. In the frame of the resurrection, mercy is recognized as the explosion of God’s love meeting and undoing all forms of anti-mercy. And it can only be thus understood within the ambit of the resurrection, which is the event of God’s salvation that is not an event addressing the past, locked into an apocalyptic mechanism, but an event of the eschatological future. Thus, in the midst of suffering, loss, tragedy and apocalyptic calamity, the resurrection opens up the future, drawing all of God’s creation to himself, the way a magnet ineluctably and powerfully draws to itself so many charged particles.⁴¹

This understanding of mercy has implications for the church today, and how God’s mercy summons us to an ecclesial conversion. How can the church as a whole enter into this world of mercy, rooted in the power of the resurrection?

IV. Calling the Church to Conversion

Great hopes have been invested by some in this papacy, turning Francis himself into something of a Gregor-like figure straight out of Thomas Mann. For a moment, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that this papacy does mark a turning point, and that the church—all of us—open ourselves to the power of God’s mercy. We turn here again to the Principle

of mercy that ought to be operative in Jesus’ church. And it is the *pathos* of mercy that ought to “inform” that church—give it its specificity, shape and mold it. In other words, the church, too, even *qua* church, should reread the parable of the good Samaritan and listen to it with the same rapt attention, and the same fear and trembling, with which Jesus’ hearers first heard it.⁴²

Sobrino suggests that this cannot happen until the church places itself squarely with the suffering. “The most important thing,” Sobrino says, “is that the church begin to ‘think itself’ from without, from ‘along the road,’ where the wounded neighbor lies.”⁴³ The result is that the church “genuinely de-centers itself and thereby comes to resemble Jesus in something absolutely fundamental: Jesus did not preach himself, but offered the poor the hope of the Reign of God. . . It is the re-action of

⁴⁰ Sobrino, “The Samaritan Church and the Principle of Mercy,” 19

⁴¹ The magnet metaphor comes from a private conversation with Michael J. Buckley, S.J.

⁴² “The Samaritan Church and the Principle of Mercy,” 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

mercy that verifies whether the church has de-centered itself, and to what extent it has done so."⁴⁴

However, the church cannot hear the urgency of the parable of the Good Samaritan without conversion from within. Yes, the church must go out into the world of the wounded and suffering, but simultaneously, and not in a secondary ordering of values, see its own need for mercy. But in order to do this, we must first recognize that the church is itself the bearer of sin, not only through its members, but as a body, and has even been at times and in various ways the locus even of anti-mercy—the absence of mercy—a force.

The notion of social or structural sin has become ever more firmly established and accepted, not only in the work of ethicists and ecclesial theologians, but, with tentative steps, as Kristin Heyer has shown, in church teaching itself.⁴⁵ "In its broadest sense," she writes, "social sin encompasses the unjust structures, distorted consciousness, and collective actions and inaction that facilitate injustice and dehumanization."⁴⁶ Such a broad understanding of social sin can surely be applied to the church.⁴⁷ The days when the church could be described, rather seductively, as the spotless bride of Christ can seem distant, not only by dint of unspeakable scandals, but also because of a refined understanding of sin, especially since the Council,⁴⁸ and of the deep reach and interconnectedness of the guilt borne by the members of the body of Christ.⁴⁹ As Karl Rahner pointed out, in reference to nos. 8 and 9 of *Lumen Gentium*, "... the Church cannot be the subject of her *own* renewal and purification if she was or is not also in the first place and in a certain sense the subject of sin and guilt. It would be a most arbitrary form of hermeneutics to maintain that 'Church' here signifies all of a sudden merely the average mass of individual believers."⁵⁰ It follows, then, that if structural

⁴⁴ Ibid., 21–22.

⁴⁵ See Kristin E. Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration*, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 35–52 and Heyer, "Social Sin, Economic Inequality, and the Common Good," in *The Lane Center Series, vol. 3, Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism in the United States: The Challenge of Becoming a Church for the Poor*, Erin Brigham, David E. DeCosse, and Michael Duffy, eds. (San Francisco: The Joan and Ralph Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought, 2015), 71–75; and Daniel K. Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?," *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 136–64,

⁴⁶ Kristin Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders*, 37.

⁴⁷ Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?," 136–64.

⁴⁸ James F. Kennan, S.J., "Raising Expectations on Sin," *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 165–80.

⁴⁹ See Karl Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," TI 6, 253–69. Rahner concludes his essay thus: "At the end the Lord will be alone with the woman. And then he will stand erect and look upon this prostitute, his bride, and ask her, 'Woman, where are our accusers? Has no one condemned you?' And she will answer in inexpressible repentance and humility, 'No one, Lord.' And she will be astonished and almost dismayed that no one has done so. But the Lord will come close to her and say, 'Then neither shall I condemn you.' He will kiss her forehead and murmur, 'My bride, holy Church.'"

⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," TI 6, 270–94 at 285. Rahner speaks of two ways by which we can speak of the church as sinful. The first is that sinfulness marks the church because of the fact that the church is comprised of frail and sinful human beings. Each of us sinners brings that condition into the heart of the church, and so the institution reflects it. The second, though, is that the church itself is in some sense sinful; for

or institutional sin can be validly applied to the church as a whole, then the church stands in need of God's mercy, and, held within that mercy, of God's rectifying justice.

The question emerges: what might this conversion mean with respect to some of the difficult matters that have emerged in recent years? The objective moral matter for the church is rather obvious: the deeper implications of the fact that so many children have been the victims of sexual abuse by clerics; the fact that rigid interpretations of church teachings have driven young people away from the Gospel; the fact that the Catholic Church is still a place where same-gender couples, parents, and families are too often not welcome; and the fact that we still face the challenge of understanding how it is that women are excluded from the reception of all the sacraments. I wish it were not necessary to mention these concerns, but the fact is that today, in 2016, these are matters that call not for a political solution, but for something more, an ecclesial conversion: to examine together how we as church are in need of God's mercy, and to allow the power of mercy, the power of the resurrection, to make a new creation of the church. For the church as a whole to ask for God's bold mercy calls for a process of deep listening to the appeals of those who suffer within the church itself, a process of honest truth-telling, and a creative reconciliation that will run the risk of changing much, and of losing something in the process.

I turn here briefly to the situation of women in the church, for this is one matter that should certainly be of concern to us all. For sheer reasons of history, it has become impossible for increasing numbers of members of the body of Christ to see how we can continue to live with so crucial a matter fundamentally unresolved. It seems that the tides of history are surging against the bulwarks. Here, arguably, is a matter calling for some degree of conversion on the part of the whole church, at various levels and in different dimensions—but a conversion nonetheless.

This is not the place to rehearse the mountain of scholarship—feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, Asian, African, second- and third-wave, etc.—that has already been completed over the years, much of it accomplished by members of this Society. Several have noted that, in the face of all this scholarship, for which some have paid heavy price, the call by Francis for a “theology of women” may seem curious. What more needs to be said? we might well ask. Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov offers some proposals about how we might approach the entire question of the standing of women *and men* in the church. While ordination is not for him the issue, the issue is that “woman” has become subordinated to the male in a process of excessive masculinization of the monotheistic traditions; woman have been turned into doctrinal objects by virtue of the force of a static understanding of ecclesiastical traditions and practices, calcified as virtually untouchable dogma:

each of us sinners conditions the other not only in grace, but also in the limitations to freedom that are the consequence of sin. As a consequence, ecclesial structures may have a certain blindness in that the workings of the institution becomes the matrix within which people live and breathe and have their ecclesial being. The resultant myopia, for example in failing to comprehend the pain that some women, LGBT persons, or divorced-and-remarried persons experience, is not an evil in itself, but it does explain in part how institutions can injure persons with little internal protest because it does not occur to members of the body that any need for renewal might exist.

At one time, serious theologians discussed whether or not woman had a soul; and they questioned woman's direct relationship with God. They praised the *Theotokos* but instructed woman to ascend to God through the intermediary of a man. Such a Mariology deprives the *Theotokos* of the feminine, and places every woman at the break between ontological levels. Reduced to biological functions only, the handmaid of the Lord becomes merely a handmaid, given over to her dangerous instinct to "please" and to serve as entertainment to innumerable warriors.⁵¹

We are back in the world of *The Iliad*.

But what about a theology of women? A new theology of women could conceivably move us beyond an essentialist gender complementarity like that proposed in the "theology of the body" or its offshoots. Instead, a theology of women could become a theological anthropology that would presume an understanding of the parity between male and female that is rooted in the radical vision of Christianity itself and that takes us back to a pre-lapsarian understanding of humanity, before the power imbalance between the genders was assigned as a divine judgment, and before woman was blamed, without mercy, for everything that has ever gone wrong. Such an approach would not deny that the genders are in various ways distinguishable, but would also not countenance the practical subordination of women to men in the name of tradition. Part of the conversion of the church would involve letting go of a gender construction within Catholicism based upon a quasi-essentialist understanding of gender that is rapidly unraveling under critical scrutiny.

An ecclesial conversion under the power of God's mercy could also open us up to what the notion of justice might mean within the world of the church itself. Sobrino validly claims that the church's first call is to "demand the freedom of the millions of human beings who do not have so much as the freedom to survive their poverty, to live in the face of oppression, or even to seek justice, be it so much as a simple investigation into the crimes of which they are the object."⁵² Some might understandably assert with him, that "mercy *within* the church is, in a certain sense, something secondary." Yet, as he points out, "human rights [within the church] are signs of sibling-ship—signs, therefore, of the Reign of God—and. . . without them the church forfeits its credibility in the world today."⁵³ The credibility of the church lies in responding to the cries for justice that we hear from the margins, not only outside, but within the church.

The failure to admit of this mercy in regard to the impasses we face over the role of women has led in recent times to a type of anti-mercy, in documents and actions, a resistance in many quarters against even opening these questions. There may be a Gregor-like exception to this habit in the recent approval by Francis of a commission to study the question of women deacons; we shall see. We know, though, that stifling of the spirit only breeds anger and cynicism, alienation and abandonment. Yet what Lonergan calls intellectual, moral religious, and psychic conversion⁵⁴ of the church

⁵¹ Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1994), 253.

⁵² Sobrino, "The Samaritan Church and the Principle of Mercy," 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ "Psychic conversion" is the distinctive contribution to Lonergan studies of Robert Doran. See Robert M. Doran, S.J., *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations: Toward*

will be impossible apart from an ecclesial acceptance of God's mercy. The discovery of synodality for the Roman Church is in its infant days but, fully developed, could provide the vehicle for a process, initiated by the pope and bishops in synod, and extending over time to the whole of the church, to find a way beyond present impasses. Because mercy itself is bold, the response of the church to God's mercy must be correlatively bold, in both humility and in the courage to go where God may wish to take us.

Conclusion

This brings us back to the fictional Pope Gregor in *The Holy Sinner*. Gregor was a sensation not only because he profligately dispensed the medicine of mercy, but because he brought about a deeper reconciliation of opposing forces in the church—he brought the church to a point of inner conversion. This was symbolized by his reconciliation within himself of those parts he had lost: the women from whom he had exiled himself for so long. The book concludes with a tearful reunion, in which all of the members are brought together into a new reality. His life was not complete without that reconciliation, and, symbolically, neither was the church he led. In his reconciliation of the inner parts, male and female, he brought about a season of new life in which all eyes were opened to the power of God's mercy. Thomas Mann opens and closes the book with the tolling of church bells throughout Christendom. May those bells toll in this Year of Mercy, announcing the dawn in our hearts and minds of the reign of God's bold mercy and transformative justice in the church for women and men alike. For I propose that it is to such a radical conversion, extending to all parts of our lives, that we as a church are being summoned today by the mercy of God.