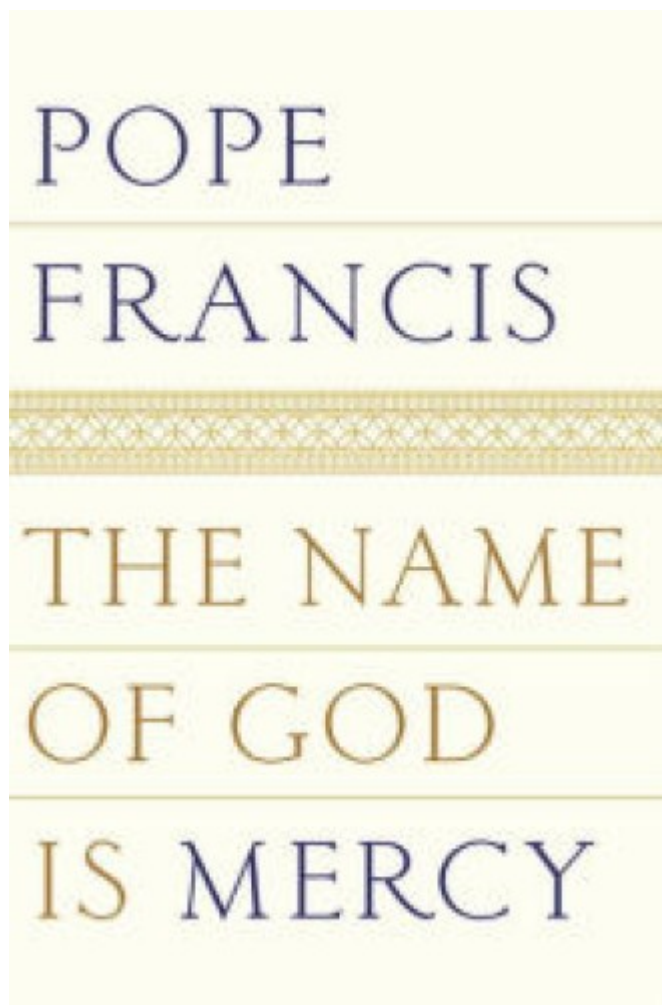


Merciful within limits

Pope Francis's theology of mercy has political implications.

by [Rosemary P. Carbine](#) in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue

In Review



The Name of God Is Mercy

By Pope Francis
Random House

Dear Pope Francis

the Pope Answers Letters from Children Around the World



By Pope Francis

Dear Pope Francis

By Pope Francis

Loyola Press

As an auxiliary bishop in Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio learned from an *abuela* that “if the Lord did not forgive everything, our world would not exist.” From the celebration of his first mass after his selection as pope in March 2013 to the April 2015 papal bull *Misericordiae Vultus* which announced a jubilee year of mercy, Francis has framed his papacy by a theology and practice of mercy.

Mercy, he says, is “the name of God” and “God’s identity card.” Francis frequently draws on embodied and experiential metaphors to elaborate mercy as grounded in God’s creative and redemptive attributes. Quoting Pope John XXIII’s opening of Vatican II, he writes that God applies the “medicine of mercy” as a healing balm for the seemingly irreparably shattered heart and incurable wounds of sin—whether

original, personal, social, or structural. The divine caress of forgiveness acts as a salvific and sanctifying embrace for which contemporary society fails to recognize its need. “The fragility of our era is this too: we don’t believe that there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet. We need mercy.” Both divine and human desire initiate and cooperate in this embrace.

The Name of God Is Mercy, rooted in Francis’s lifework as a priest and a confessor, cites and interprets New Testament stories to illustrate divine mercy. The woman caught in adultery (John 8) and Peter’s forgiveness (John 21) teach us to reform past ways and begin a new life. Other examples include Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, and the good thief. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) exemplifies the profligate grace of God’s love and mercy rather than human standards of fairness. Surprisingly, in good feminist fashion, Francis resists Luke’s androcentrism (which subordinates and silences women leaders in the early Jesus movement) and instead highlights the example of contemporary mothers and wives who bring food to imprisoned relatives. Like the so-called missing mother of the parable, they bring the nurturing embrace of family and food in acts of mercy.

Francis also uses biblical images of a wayward Jerusalem portrayed as an ashamed and repentant wife (e.g., Ezek. 16), stressing God’s fidelity even to the point of forgiving apparently unforgivable sins. He construes these and other stories, such as the legendary calling of the former tax collector Matthew as an apostle, via his Jesuit vocation: “I can read my life in light of chapter 16 of the book of the prophet Ezekiel. I read those pages and I say: everything here seems written just for me. The prophet speaks of shame, and shame is a grace. . . . Shame is one of the graces that St. Ignatius asks for during his confession of his sins before Christ crucified.”

If one reads Francis’s theology and practice of mercy alongside prior papal statements, particularly from Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, a new ecclesiology emerges. “The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love.” Resisting clericalist and legalistic models, Francis proposes that the church best shows the mercy of divine creative and redemptive love when it acts as a “field hospital” treating the wounded in triage style. He recounts models of merciful priests “who knew how to be close to people and treat their wounds.” To embody mercy rather than judgment, the church must practice “the apostolate of the ear” through listening, patience, tenderness, and being

“involved and wounded by pain, by illness, by poverty.” In so doing, the church simultaneously shows its maternal face and acts *in persona Christi*. This is a “church that goes forth,” with members that “go out from the church and the parishes, go outside and look for people where they live, where they suffer, and where they hope.” Here an extroverted ecclesiology and a realized eschatology merge to form a merciful church, conveyed in both corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Aside from the church, Francis affirms that the family is “the first school of mercy” and “the unwavering reference point for the young.” After global Jesuit institutions and volunteers collected more than 250 letters to Francis from children in over 25 countries, Antonio Spadaro, SJ, compiled 30 of those letters and transcribed the pope’s responses to them in *Dear Pope Francis*. In his responses to these children’s tough questions, Francis touches on theological topics ranging from God, sin and evil, miracles, angels and saints, the Eucharist, and prayer to creation, anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, salvation, and eschatology—a veritable systematic theology for children. Francis’s replies to children’s questions about the injustices of poverty, slavery, refugee crises, and war demonstrate that resistance to global suffering combines mercy (imitating God’s inclusive love) with advocacy (living hope through practices such as distributive justice).

Far from privatized to personal relationships, Francis’s theology of mercy carries political implications. In *The Name of God Is Mercy* he advocates recognizing the religious lives of LGBTQ people, even though his post-synod apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* rejected same-sex unions and parenting as opposed to God’s heteronormative plan. He argues for the abolition of the death penalty, the social reintegration of former prisoners, and solidarity with marginalized peoples that flows from the compassion “to suffer with, to suffer together, to not remain indifferent to the pain and the suffering of others.” Such compassion involves being moved by visceral love to action and advocacy that addresses poverty, homelessness, and anti-immigration attitudes and policies, and in many other ways counteracts “the globalization of indifference.”

Francis’s papacy during the first half of this jubilee year of mercy (which began in early December 2015) has been marked by some steps toward such action and advocacy: recognition of the Armenian genocide as an important part of peace and solidarity; condemnation of global IS attacks as offenses against God and humanity; caution against politically divisive walls of fear and hatred that fueled and accompanied the Brexit vote; memorialization of the migrant dead from Central

America at a border mass in Ciudad Juarez, a Mexican city also structured by multiple intersecting oppressions that lead to femicide; denunciation of Donald Trump's proposed immigration policies as unchristian; and provision of hospitality at the Vatican to three Syrian refugee families. After the nightclub shooting in Orlando, Francis urged the church to apologize for discrimination against LGBTQ people (as well as all marginalized people, including the poor, women, and child laborers). However, he did not go far enough to mandate reform of either the increasingly commonplace Catholic practice of firing LGBTQ employees after their civil unions or the Catholic teachings that refer to LGBTQ people as objectively disordered. With respect to women, Francis has allowed the use of contraception in Latin American countries affected by the Zika virus (for the protection of children, not as an affirmation of women's sexual agency), endorsed the long-standing church practice of including women in the Holy Thursday foot washing ritual, and formed a commission to study the ordination of women to the diaconate. The commission could legitimize a path for women to sacramental ministry but not to the priesthood and thus not to decision-making power and authority in the church.

Francis's writings on mercy stress a sacramental quality bent on building and deepening human-divine love relationships. On my reading, feminist biblical, New Testament, and theological studies raise important questions and issues about the biblical and Gospel stories that Francis chooses to highlight divine mercy. Francis and his papal predecessors frequently invoke marital metaphors to understand divine-human relations, which map the theological landscape for complementary (read unequal) gender relations in the church, family, and society. Ezekiel 16 problematically posits a marital metaphor between God and Jerusalem to justify the husband's/God's violent retaliatory acts against an adulterous wife/Jerusalem for betraying and abandoning the covenant. God's physically violent acts of judgment are intended to fill Jerusalem with shame for its sinfulness and thus heal the broken relationship. From the perspective of domestic violence, this metaphor describes and prescribes dangerous xenophobic norms about hostility to outsiders which are rooted in the patriarchal control, othering, and abuse (and in this case the graphic injury and murder) of women, particularly strange or foreign women. Francis's grappling with sin, shame, and repentance through Ezekiel 16 does not cohere well with a theology of mercy characterized by tenderness, caress, and healing balm for sin's wounds and expressed in the visceral, womblike character of God's love.

By contrast, the pope's use of the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4) aligns well with his model of a church that goes forth, and together they support his theology of mercy from a feminist theological perspective. When combined with the stories of the Syrophoenician and Canaanite women (Mark 7:24-30; Matt. 15:21-28), Jesus' public conversation with unnamed foreign women counters conventional religious, gender, and sexual norms. After challenging Jesus to expand his ministry beyond the Jewish community, the Samaritan woman shows her understanding of his identity through personal experience and testimony (much like Mary Magdalene's first witness to the resurrection in John 20:1-18, which Francis recently elevated to a feast day on the liturgical calendar). Resembling the church that goes forth, Wisdom in the book of Proverbs is personified as a woman who speaks in public at the city's crossroads with divine authority, issuing an inclusive invitation to her life-giving table (Prov. 1, 8-9). While this portrait of Wisdom perpetuates the good woman/bad woman dualism, it also provides rich resources for a feminist logos Christology in which Jesus' life and ministry are considered a prophetic incarnation of Wisdom. These stories, alongside Francis's ecclesiology, afford both women and men a rich performative, rather than limiting biophysical, way of imitating Jesus, of being the public church.

However, Francis's ecclesiology has also run into some critical and creative tension with feminist theology, which he recently called a "trap." For example, the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life have invited 15 U.S. orders of women religious, including the Sisters of Mercy and Loretto, for further conversation and clarification in the wake of the six-year inquiry and investigation into the mission, life, and adherence to church teaching of U.S. women religious.

Given that the U.S. presidential election is occurring during the second half of this jubilee year of mercy (celebrated until late November), and given that the Nuns on the Bus group recently held its fifth annual bus tour across the United States, Catholics in this country wait with mixed expectations about what Pope Francis will do. The gates of justice (which the chant at the start of the jubilee year uses to refer to the holy door in the Vatican) are open. But they could be opened wider.