

Pope Francis, Mercy, and the Meaning of Marriage

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Abstract. Pope Francis has called for the Church to be a sign of mercy and hope to the world. Mercy stands at the center of the Gospel, and the family is a fundamental seat of mercy within the culture, responsible for bestowing the most valuable of God’s gifts, human life. Because of its mission to bestow life, marriage is necessarily a “lifelong covenant of love and fidelity between a man and a woman” (Francis). As the Church upholds the view of marriage exclusively as the union of a man and a woman who are capable of reaching the deepest kind of unity, she also affirms that persons of the same sex can achieve unity in meaningful ways. Upholding the traditional, comprehensive view of marriage does not belittle the dignity of homosexual persons, because all are our brothers and sisters. *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 16.1 (Spring 2016): 29–38.

A major focus of the pontificate of Pope Francis is his call for the Church to be a sign of mercy and hope. “Being the Church, to be the People of God, in accordance with the Father’s great design of love,” Francis explains, “means to be the leaven of God in this humanity of ours. It means to proclaim and to bring God’s salvation to the world of ours. . . . May the Church be a place of God’s mercy and hope, where all feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live according to the good life of the Gospel. . . . The Church must be with doors wide open so that all may enter.”¹

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The views expressed in the *NCBQ* do not necessarily represent those of the editor, the editorial board, the Ethicists, or the staff of The National Catholic Bioethics Center.

1. Francis, General Audience (June 12, 2013), n. 5, cited in Michael R. Panicola and Ron Hamel, “Catholic Identity and the Reshaping of Health Care in the United States,” *Health Care Ethics USA* 23.3 (Summer 2015): 11.

To accomplish this task, Francis teaches that “the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle.”² We are all “blessedly incomplete” and in need of mercy, hope, love, and forgiveness.³ This vision of Francis’s is rooted in the belief that every man, woman, and child has great dignity and worth, which can never be taken away. Every person must be treated with respect, sensitivity, and love.

Pope Francis and Mercy

Mercy stands in the center of the Gospel. As Walter Cardinal Kasper says, God leaves “no one in the lurch. Divine mercy gives everyone a new chance and grants everyone a new beginning, if he or she is eager for conversion and asks for it. Mercy is God’s own justice.”⁴ Citing St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas insists that mercy wills that we all be free of oppressive burdens. At the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII taught that the Church today must no longer make use of weapons of severity, but must rather apply the medicine of mercy.⁵

Cardinal Kasper believes that many find Francis’s focus on mercy “suspect” and “superficial,” a way “of being Christian at a reduced cost.”⁶ Mercy does not, however, abolish justice, but rather surpasses it. Interpreting Francis, Kasper concludes that mercy “wants us to open our hands and, above all, open our hearts. For *miserericordia* means having a heart for the poor, the poor in the widest and most comprehensive sense.”⁷ Mercy is “no cheap grace or a kind of clearance sale. Pastoral care and mercy are not contradictory to justice, but are . . . the higher righteousness, because behind every individual legal appeal stands not only a case that can be viewed through the lens of a general rule but a human person, . . . a being who possesses unique personal dignity.”⁸

In September 2015, Ignatius Press published *Eleven Cardinals Speak on Marriage and the Family: Essays from a Pastoral Viewpoint*. The authors express reservations regarding the understanding of mercy set forth by Francis and Kasper. True mercy, according to Carlo Cardinal Caffarra, Archbishop of Bologna, means to tell the sinner that he is living in sin and that he needs to convert. “In other words:

2. Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God,” interview by Antonio Spadaro, *America* 209.8 (September 30, 2013), cited in Panicola and Hamel, “Catholic Identity and the Reshaping of Health Care,” 12.

3. See Paul N. Check, “The Face of the Other,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 15.2 (Summer 2015): 224.

4. Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 31, 33; see esp. all of ch. 5, “Mercy—The Key to His Pontificate,” 31–36.

5. John XXIII, Address on the Opening of the Most Holy Council (October 12, 1962), in Richard McBrien, “Pope John XXIII’s Opening Address to the Second Vatican Council,” *National Catholic Reporter*, November 5, 2012, <http://ncronline.org/>.

6. Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution*, 34.

7. *Ibid.*, 36.

8. Walter Kasper, *The Gospel of the Family* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 29.

it must be said that man must convert, and from what actions and attitudes, that is, vices, he must turn away. [Therefore,] mercy without [any requirement for] conversion is not divine mercy.”⁹

Francis’s appeal to mercy is best interpreted as Christocentric.¹⁰ In the Galilean society in which Jesus lived, indigents and sinners were condemned to live without honor or dignity. Their fate was to live in degradation. Those who were disapproved of and devalued were seen as “impure.” But this is not how Jesus saw it: “Be merciful,” He said, “just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36, NRSV throughout). It is God’s compassion that we are to imitate. Compassion is God’s way of being. Jesus proposed a kind of compassion code, a welcoming and inclusivity for the dishonored and disreputable. As José Pagola puts it, “In God’s reign no one should be humiliated, excluded, or separated from the community.”¹¹ When Jesus touched the leper, Jesus did not become impure: the leper became pure.

The Gospel of the Family

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis teaches that “the family is the fundamental cell of society,”¹² which today faces enormous challenges, including migration, forced displacement, and countless degrading situations of misery. In all cultures throughout human history, the family has always been the normal path for human beings. Kasper explains in *The Gospel of the Family* “that the order of creation” understands the family as “a life partnership of man and woman together with their children.”¹³ This belief is set forth in three fundamental Old Testament statements: “In the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” “Be fruitful and multiply.” And “Fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:27, 28).

This scriptural vision places the future and the continuing existence of humankind in the hands of man and woman. God hands over to the responsibility of man and woman the most valuable thing He can bestow—human life. Without family, there is no future. The family is not a private community with significance only for its members. Rather, the family is open to a mission for the world.

Pope Francis and Marriage

In his first encyclical, *Lumen fidei*, a collaborative effort with Pope Benedict XVI, Francis insists that marriage should be a “stable union of man and woman. . . . This

9. Mike Hickson, “Eleven Cardinals Defend Catholic Moral Teaching on Marriage and Family,” *LifeSiteNews.com*, August 25, 2015, <http://www.lifesitenews.com/>, quoting from Carlo Cardinal Caffarra, “Mercy and Conversion,” in *Eleven Cardinals Speak on Marriage and the Family*, ed. Winfried Aymans (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 7. See also “Cardinal Caffarra Expresses Serious Concerns about Family Synod Debates,” *Zenit*, March 24, 2014, <http://www.zenit.org/>.

10. See José A. Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*, 5th ed. (Miami, FL: Convivium Press, 2014), 192–195, 195–201.

11. *Ibid.*, 195.

12. Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), n. 66.

13. Kaspar, *Gospel of the Family*, 5.

union is born of their love, as a sign and presence of God's own love, and of the acknowledgment and acceptance of the goodness of sexual differentiation."¹⁴ In *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis also stresses the "indispensable contribution of marriage to society, a contribution that 'transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple.'"¹⁵ For this reason he has described homosexual marriage as a "negative value and an anthropological reversal."¹⁶

In 2010, when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis wrote a letter to several monasteries requesting prayers for those who were debating a bill to legalize same-sex marriage. In that letter he wrote that same-sex marriage discriminates against children "in advance," depriving them of "their human development given by a father and a mother and willed by God."¹⁷ In Manila in 2015, Francis again condemned movements that attempt to recognize same-sex unions as marriage and thereby confuse "sexuality, marriage and the family."¹⁸ He also warned against "powerful forces which threaten to disfigure God's plan for creation and betray the very values which have inspired and shaped all that is best in your culture."¹⁹ In his August 2015 letter to the Knights of Columbus on the occasion of their 133rd Supreme Convention, Francis urged American Catholics to "bear witness" to marriage as a "lifelong covenant of love and fidelity between a man and a woman," especially now "when the institution of marriage is under attack from powerful cultural forces."²⁰ In January 2016, he warned against increasing efforts "to redefine the very institution of marriage, by relativism, by the culture of the ephemeral, by a lack of openness to life."²¹

The *Obergefell* Supreme Court Decision

In *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the US Supreme Court struck down as unconstitutional state bans on same-sex marriage, making same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states.²² Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the five-to-four majority, said that marriage is a fundamental right that all couples are entitled to under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, which provides for equal protection to all citizens under

14. Francis, *Lumen fidei* (June 29, 2013), n. 52. See also *Catechism*, n. 1603.

15. Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 66.

16. Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Image, 2003), 18.

17. Edward Pentin, "Cardinal Bergoglio Hits Out at Same-Sex Marriage," *National Catholic Register*, July 8, 2010, <http://www.ncregister.com/>.

18. Francis, Homily in Manila (January 16, 2015).

19. *Ibid.*

20. "Pope Francis Highlights Religious Freedom and Marriage in Message to K of C," *Vatican Radio*, August 5, 2015, <http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/>.

21. Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See (January 11, 2016).

22. *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 US __ (2015). The United States is now the twenty-first country to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide, including territories. Married same-sex couples will now enjoy the same legal rights and benefits as married heterosexual couples and will be recognized on official documents such as birth and death certificates.

the law.²³ Denying same-sex couples this right, he wrote, deprives them of the “equal dignity” they deserve. “No union is more profound than marriage . . . for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family.” Same-sex couples, Kennedy continued, should not “be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.”²⁴

In his dissent, Chief Justice John Roberts countered that it was not the Court’s role to redefine an institution that has remained unchanged “for millennia.”²⁵ He further wrote that the next court cases will push for polyamorous relationships.²⁶ As polygamist Nathan Collier recently claimed, “It’s only a matter of time.”²⁷

An editorial in the *New York Times* hailed the decision as “the coda of the gay rights movement,” but warned that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans still do not enjoy full equality under the law.²⁸ Currently, thirty-one states lack comprehensive laws that protect gay and transgender people from being fired, evicted, or denied lines of credit.²⁹

23. *Obergefell*, slip op. at 5.

24. *Ibid.* at 28. In his dissent, Chief Justice John Roberts, with Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas concurring, wrote, “If you are among the many Americans—of whatever sexual orientation—who favor expanding same-sex marriage, by all means celebrate today’s decision. . . . Celebrate the availability of new benefits. But do not celebrate the Constitution. It had nothing to do with it” (slip op. at 29 [Roberts, C. J., dissenting]). The *Obergefell* ruling was deplored by Catholic bishops around the country. Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, President of the USCCB, called the decision a “tragic error.”

25. *Obergefell*, slip op at 3 (Roberts, C. J., dissenting).

26. *Ibid.* at 21.

27. Cheryl Wetzstein, “‘Sister Wives’ Polygamist Nathan Collier Cites Gay Marriage Ruling in Legal Fight,” *Washington Times*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/>. Collier claims that “marriage equality” has no meaning “without polygamy.” He is seeking a license to marry his second concubine. He plans to sue if his application is denied.

28. “The Challenges That Remain after Marriage Equality,” editorial, *New York Times*, July 29, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

29. On July 23, 2015, lawmakers in the House and Senate introduced the Equality Act, a bill that would broaden legal protections by amending the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fair Housing Act, and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act to explicitly cover sexual orientation and gender identity. This act has a growing list of corporate supporters, including Google, Amazon, Apple, General Mills, American Airlines, Dow Chemicals, and Levi Strauss. Nothing in the act changes exemptions that religious organization and schools already have to make hiring and other decisions on the basis of religious identity. It does, however, specify that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) cannot be invoked in an attempt to justify discrimination that would otherwise be covered. This would ensure that religion could not be used to refuse service on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, natural origin, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Marriage: Two Views

Marriage as a union between a man and a woman has been called the comprehensive or conjugal view, while marriage between persons of the same sex has been labeled the revisionist view.³⁰ Francis has characterized the revisionist view not as marriage but as “an association.” The conjugal view understands marriage as a “comprehensive union” of will (consent) and body (by sexual union) inherently ordered toward procreation and the sharing of family life, which calls for permanent and exclusive commitment. This viewpoint defines marriage as uniting persons in their bodies and minds, creating a unity by sexual intercourse that only the bodies of a man and a woman can accomplish, and this bodily union inherently sustains a generative significance.

This “argument from tradition” maintains that the only way human beings can truly unite biologically is in conjugal acts (that is, heterosexual intercourse). Because same-sex partners cannot engage in such acts, they cannot achieve the comprehensive union that is marriage. Maggie Gallagher observes that “incarnated over and over again in diverse human societies [is the idea that] marriage is a sexual union of male and female oriented toward connecting fathers to mothers and their children.”³¹ Until *Obergefell v. Hodges*, nearly all US Supreme Court decisions declared marriage to be a fundamental right that expressly links marriage to procreation, childbirth, and child-rearing.

The comprehensive view of marriage is substantially rooted in the biblical tradition: “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’” (Gen. 1:27–28). After the creation of the woman, “the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . .’ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:23–24). These texts form the background for New Testament affirmations: “From the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:6–9).

These scriptural affirmations form the basis of the Catholic Church’s teaching on marriage. Christopher Kaczor puts it this way: “Only couples of the opposite sex can do acts that unite them in a bodily way, in an organic way, so only opposite-sex

30. See, for example, Sherif Girgis, Robert P. George, and Ryan T. Anderson, “What Is Marriage?,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 34.1 (Winter 2010): 246–247; and Emily R. Gill, *An Argument for Same-Sex Marriage: Religious Freedom, Sexual Freedom, and Public Expressions of Civic Equality* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 120. The essay by Girgis et al. was later expanded and published as a book: *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012).

31. Maggie Gallagher, “The Case against Same-Sex Marriage,” in *Debating Same-Sex Marriage*, ed. John Corvino and Maggie Gallagher (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 92.

couples can achieve a comprehensive union of spirit and body.”³² Other kinds of relationships, he indicates, can achieve unity on a wide variety of levels, but “only a man and a woman can achieve the deepest kind of unity, on not just a spiritual but also a bodily level.”³³ Sherif Girgis, Robert George, and Ryan Anderson add that upholding the comprehensive view of marriage does not in any way denigrate same-sex attracted people or ignore their needs.³⁴ In other words, the human dignity of same-sex persons is upheld even if they are unable to form a comprehensive marriage.³⁵

The revisionist view, sometimes called “soul mate” marriage, understands marriage as “the union of two people (whether of the same sex or of opposite sexes) who commit to romantically loving and caring for each other and to sharing the burdens and benefits of domestic life. It is essentially a union of hearts and minds, enhanced by whatever forms of sexual intimacy both partners find agreeable.”³⁶

This revisionist view is captured clearly in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: “Marriage is, without dispute, one of the most significant forms of personal relationships. . . . Through the institution of marriage, individuals can publicly express their love and commitment to each other. Through this institution, society publicly recognizes expressions of love and commitment between individuals, granting them respect and legitimacy as a couple. This public recognition and sanction of marital relationships reflect society’s approbation of personal hopes, desires and aspirations. . . . This can only enhance an individual’s sense of self-worth and dignity.”³⁷

The Catechism teaches that “the dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God.”³⁸ As the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* affirms, “The root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God.”³⁹ The Church’s anthropology holds further that human dignity is not limited to a person’s soul but “the human body shares in the dignity of

32. Christopher Kaczor, *The Seven Myths about the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 135.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Girgis et al., “What Is Marriage?,” 281–284.

35. In *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), Margaret Farley expands what is meant by being procreative: “For those who object to same-sex relationships because they cannot be procreative, their objections represent either a failure of imagination or a narrowness of experience that disallows an appreciation of all the ways in which humans bring life into the world, and all the ways that the world needs new life from those to whom the gift of love has been given” (290). See also “Procreation” (ch. 6) in James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 110–126.

36. Girgis et al., “What Is Marriage?,” 246.

37. *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, part I of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, ch. 11; cited in Corvino and Gallagher, *Debating Same-Sex Marriage*, 158–159.

38. *Catechism*, n. 1700.

39. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (December 7, 1965), n. 19.

‘the image of God.’”⁴⁰ Human dignity is the possession of every human being, and therefore every individual sustains intrinsic worth. For this reason, Benedict XVI asks us to “look at the face of the other and to discover that he has a soul, a history and a life, that he is a person and that God loves this person.”⁴¹

Marriage and the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church did not invent marriage as an institution limited to heterosexual couples. Neither did the state. According to Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, “Marriage is a pre-political and natural phenomenon that arises out of the nature of human beings. The Catholic Church, along with virtually every religion and culture in the world, recognizes and supports this natural institution because without it, no society will exist or flourish.”⁴²

Paprocki argues that marriage is a natural outgrowth of human nature, capacities, and needs. Marriage grows out of a natural affinity and complementarity of male and female, that is, the ways in which one gender completes the other emotionally, spiritually, and physically. The inclination, natural desire, and capacity toward procreation and creation of a family can be fulfilled only through the union of a man and a woman. While same-sex couples can experience complementarity on the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual levels, they lack the capacity to bring offspring into the world (the good of *prolis*) and thus do not achieve complementarity in the fullest sense.⁴³

In *Love and Responsibility* and *The Theology of the Body*, Pope St. John Paul II taught that marriage is an institution with a distinctive interpersonal nature.⁴⁴ He wrote that the institution of marriage “is necessary to signify the maturity of the union between a man and a woman, to testify that theirs is a love on which a lasting union and community can be based” physically, materially, morally, and spiritually.⁴⁵ John Paul II affirmed that what sets the sexual union between a man and a woman apart from any other union is the potential to bring forth new human life.

Gerald Bradley points out that “consummation has traditionally (though perhaps not universally) been recognized as an essential element of marriage.”⁴⁶ Marriage is importantly a spiritual and emotional union, a union that can be achieved by

40. *Catechism*, n. 364.

41. Benedict XVI, *Angelus* (January 10, 2010).

42. Thomas J. Paprocki, “Marriage, Same-Sex Relationships and the Catholic Church,” *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 38.2 (Winter 2007): 247–264, <http://lawcommons.luc.edu/>.

43. *Ibid.*, 249–250.

44. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (New York: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997); and Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).

45. John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 220.

46. Gerald V. Bradley, “Same-Sex Marriage: Our Final Answer?,” in *Same-Sex Attraction: A Parents’ Guide*, ed. John F. Harvey and Gerard V. Bradley (New York: St. Augustine’s Press, 2003), 119, quoted in Paprocki, “Marriage, Same-Sex Relationships and the Catholic Church,” 253.

same-sex couples. However, marriage is also a bodily union that is actualized in reproductive-type sexual acts.

Reflecting on Genesis 1:27, “God created humankind in his image . . . male and female he created them,” Francis calls for a rediscovery of the beauty of the creative design that “inscribes the image of God in the alliance between man and woman.”⁴⁷ Helen Alvaré notes that this alliance “images God in an irreplaceable way,” expressed in the intrinsic and unique union of husband and wife in marriage.⁴⁸ Other kinds of relationships and unions can achieve unity on a wide variety of levels, but only a man and a woman can achieve the deepest kind of unity on the bodily level.⁴⁹

Mercy and the Face of Christ

America magazine’s Rome correspondent Gerard O’Connell succinctly summarizes Francis’s embrace of the centrality of mercy: “Francis wants a church that is on mission, reaching out to others, . . . especially those on the peripheries; a merciful church that is a field hospital for the many wounded of this world; a church that builds bridges, not walls. He wants a church that is poor and for the poor, one that rejects careerism; a church that is committed to encounter, inclusion and reconciliation, not one that is confrontational, self-referential or judgmental. He wants a synodal church, in which the bishops and faithful people walk together and authority is understood as service.”⁵⁰

On December 8, 2015, Francis opened the Extraordinary Year of Mercy by calling for a church that “always puts mercy before judgment.”⁵¹ He further exhorts us that we do wrong to God “when we affirm that sins are punished by his judgment before putting first that they are forgiven by his mercy. . . . Let us abandon all fear and dread, for these do not befit men and women who are loved.” Mercy is, he says, the “fundamental trait of the face of Christ: that face that we recognize in the diverse aspects of his existence: when he goes out to meet all, when he heals the sick, when he sits at table with sinners, and most of all when, nailed to the cross, he pardons; there we see the face of divine mercy.”

47. Francis, General Audience (April 15, 2015), quoted in Helen Alvaré, “Man and Woman Together,” *America* 212.12 (June 22, 2015): 12.

48. Alvaré, “Man and Woman Together,” 12.

49. As of March 2016, more than eight hundred thousand people, including 104 cardinals, archbishops, and bishops, have signed a petition being circulated by the Filial Appeal Association, which asks Pope Francis to clarify the Church’s teachings on marriage, divorce, and homosexual unions. In May 2015, the association released a booklet about the 2014 Synod on the Family. Titled *Preferential Option for the Family: One Hundred Questions and One Hundred Answers regarding the Synod*, the booklet’s authors are Bishops Aldo de Cillo Pagotto, Robert F. Vasa, and Athanasius Schneider (Rome: Edizioni Supplica Filiale, 2015).

50. Gerard O’Connell, “A Church of Encounter,” *America* 213.17 (November 30, 2015): 27.

51. Francis, Homily on Opening the Holy Door (December 8, 2015), quoted in Joshua J. McElwee, “Francis Opens Jubilee Year with Call for Church That Puts Mercy before Judgment,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 8, 2015, <http://ncronline.org/>.

As the Church continues to uphold the comprehensive view of marriage as a union of a man and a woman who are capable of reaching the deepest kind of unity on the spiritual, emotional, and bodily levels, she also affirms that same-sex unions can achieve levels of unity in a variety of meaningful ways. Francis insists that the very credibility of the Church rests on how she demonstrates merciful and compassionate love. In a merciful Church, upholding the comprehensive view of marriage does not belittle the dignity of gay or lesbian persons, because all are our brothers and sisters.

Mercy calls the Church to be the house of the Father, and for this reason Francis insists that “our church doors should always be open. . . . Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community.”⁵² In other words, a church without charity and without mercy would no longer be the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Pope’s insistence on the centrality of mercy has deep biblical roots. In the Scriptures, there are three descriptions of mercy. First, mercy is *hesed*, essentially a covenant love, particularly between God and His chosen people. Second, mercy is *rahamim*, a nurturing womb. Third, mercy is *hen/hanan*, a grace and favor.⁵³

Kasper affirms, with Aquinas, that “justice without mercy is cruelty; mercy without justice is the mother of disintegration; therefore, both must be bound together. . . . 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.”⁵⁴

Mercy is central to Francis’s theological and pastoral outlook because he does not see the world as a static place but as an ever-changing landscape. For Francis, a merciful church goes forth with doors open in order to reach all of humanity.⁵⁵

52. Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 47.

53. Howard Gray, “Mercy: Another Name for God,” *Human Development* 36.1 (2015): 6–17.

54. Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), 67, quoted in Gray, “Mercy,” 16.

55. See Jeffrey A. Krames, *Lead with Humility: Twelve Leadership Lessons from Pope Francis* (New York: American Management Association, 2015).