

Mercy is tops for us, justice our bottom line

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! Thanks to German Cardinal Walter Kasper, sometimes dubbed 'the pope's theologian' these days, mercy is set to be on the top of the church's agenda. His book on the topic, *Mercy: the Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, is likely to be a best-seller, especially after Francis gave it a plug just days after his election as pope.

Admitting that the book "has done me so much good, so much good," the pope said that mercy has the ability to change the world. "A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just. We need to understand properly the mercy of God, this merciful Father who is so patient."

Earlier this year, Cardinal Kasper was invited by the pope to give the opening address at a two-day meeting of the College of Cardinals, in advance of a special Synod of Bishops in October which will look at pastoral challenges related to family life, including the vexed issue of divorced and remarried Catholics receiving Communion.

The cardinal's openness to this possibility strikes a note that accords with the pope's own views in his letter on *The Joy of the Gospel*, where he describes the church as "a mother with an open heart," whose doors are always open, especially when it comes to sharing the sacraments. "The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak," the pope writes. "Frequently we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par 46,47)

These insights into mercy are not too different from those

Mother with an open heart

E Te Atua atawhai ngawari,
God of tender mercy:
you never tire of inviting us,
calling us constantly to accept your love
and to set out once more on your path to life.
Teach us to deal with one another
as you receive us, again and again.

May the doors of each of our ministries
be always open, especially to those
whom the world pushes aside;
may Mercy be known as the house
of the Father, where all are welcome.
Give us tender hearts, to embrace
nga rawakore, the very poor.

Let mercy be the goal we aspire to,
the extra mile that takes us beyond
what is owed in strict justice.
Expand our hearts with your love;
show us where we need to stretch
our resources, to embrace those
who feel forgotten or side-lined.
In mercy's name. Amen.

Imaging Mercy Today



CARDINAL Walter Kasper in the piazza of St Peter's in Rome... mercy "the most central attribute of God, is neglected as a topic in the church."

which Catherine McAuley expressed in her Familiar Instructions, where she wrote that "mercy receives the ungrateful again and again, and is never weary in pardoning them."

Catherine regarded the ongoing bestowal of God's mercy as the principal work of Jesus, says her biographer Mary Sullivan Rasmussen, "and the daily attempt to collaborate in that mercifulness as the principal work of Christians and so of Sisters of Mercy. In the Rule she identifies mercy as 'the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him'."

Catherine would have applauded Cardinal Kasper for describing mercy as God's faithfulness to his love. We see mercy expressed, he says, in the way God gives humans a new chance, and "does not let them fall into a hole with no way out."

Humans are called to be mediators of God's mercy, says Cardinal Kasper. "Mercy is not opposed to justice. Mercy is the maximum we can do. Justice is the minimum." Mercy opens our eyes to situations where we can engage the rules of justice. "There is no choice between justice and mercy. It would be a very cheap mercy which was not also justice."

As our nation gears for another general election, and politicians woo us with promises of tougher penalties for criminals and tighter curbs on migrants, asylum seekers and beneficiaries, we need to reflect on the place in our own lives for what Catherine McAuley recognised as tender mercy. Where in our society would she be encouraging us to work, with her sage advice, "We can never say, 'it is enough'?"

— Dennis Horton