

# A MEDITATION ON GOD AND MERCY

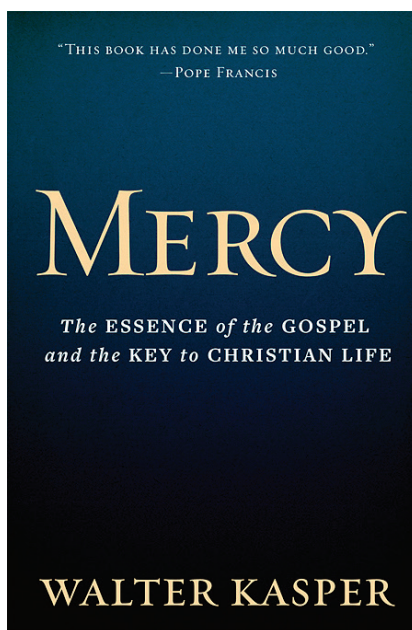
REVIEWED BY SR. COLLEEN MARY MALLON, OP, PhD

Divine mercy is not cheap, sentimental or easy. Neither is divine mercy limited, exhausted or made exclusive. In his latest book, *Mercy*, Cardinal Walter Kasper offers a comprehensive study that reads as a scholarly meditation in service of rescuing mercy from the edges of reflection on the very mystery of God. “Forgetting mercy is, therefore, not some kind of secondary marginal problem for the doctrine of God; rather, it confronts us with the fundamental problem of determining God’s essence ... It makes new thinking about the doctrine of God necessary.” New thinking on the mystery of God is precisely what Cardinal Kasper offers in this 218-page text (with just over 50 pages of supporting endnotes). Originally published in German as *Barmherzigkeit* (2012), the English language edition is translated by William Madges.

In the scope of nine chapters, Cardinal Kasper works to reclaim mercy as the central manifestation of God’s historical self-revelation (self-gift) to humanity. Cardinal Kasper is adamant that both Jewish and Christian claims for a merciful God derive not from philosophical conjecture, nor from manuals of theology; these claims derive from the historical encounter of peoples with God who reveals Godself as merciful love.

“According to the testimony of all of scripture, the Old as well as the New Testament, God’s mercy ... is the attribute, in God’s self-revelation in the history of salvation, that assumes first place,” he writes.

However, this is not a matter of understanding mercy “as one attribute of God alongside others ... Instead, mercy



**MERCY: THE ESSENCE OF THE GOSPEL  
AND THE KEY TO CHRISTIAN LIFE**

BY WALTER KASPER  
Paulist Press, 2014  
288 pages, \$29.95

is the externally visible and effectively active aspect of the essence of God, which graciously attends to and devotes itself to the world and to humanity in ever new ways in history. In short, mercy expresses God’s own goodness and love,” he says.

What emerges in this extended meditation on God is Cardinal Kasper’s consummate theological exposition of how the “externally visible and effectively active” divine mercy functions in the lives of real people. Readers will note Cardinal Kasper’s critical attention to Christianity’s contribution towards casting a “dark shadow ... on the biblical

understanding of divine mercy.” They also will note Cardinal Kasper’s commitment to reclaiming divine mercy from a culturally dominant “bourgeois optimism, which downplays the seriousness of human responsibility and human guilt, excuses evildoers and commits a new injustice against victims.”

Throughout the text, readers are warned against any construal of the divine as a sentimental, feel-good, buddy-buddy God: divine mercy does not, indeed, cannot ignore evil and sin.

“Thus from the beginning of history, God’s counteraction is at work against disaster,” Cardinal Kasper says. “From the very beginning, God’s merciful action is powerfully effective. His mercy is how God provides resistance to evil, which is getting the upper hand. He does not do this forcibly and violently; he doesn’t simply do battle; rather, in his mercy God repeatedly creates new space for life and for blessing.”

Mercy is the root, the very condition of the possibility of justice. God’s mercy “makes space” in God and in human beings (despite sin) for new life and for the exercise of a new freedom that has been graciously restored. Thus, within the space that divine mercy creates, human freedom finds its fulfillment through conversion to the good.

“In his mercy, God ... holds back his justified wrath: indeed, he holds himself back. He does this in order to provide people with the opportunity for conversion. Divine mercy grants sinners a period of grace and desires their conversion. Mercy is ultimately grace for conversion,” he says.

As a work of contemporary theology, *Mercy* is a demanding read, espe-

cially for those who have little or no theological education. For those with the background, however, the text is accessible and offers some important points of nuance for application to our contemporary situation. While Cardinal Kasper's discussion of universal salvation or substitutionary atonement are not immediately relevant to those serving in the healing ministry,

his initial chapters introducing mercy and, later, chapters 7 and 8, are engaging and thought-provoking. Whether or not one agrees with his assertions that the church need not "be big and powerful" or that "the church can and should draw on the ... highly motivated engagement of volunteers," Cardinal Kasper has done the church a great service by placing mercy at the center

of theological reflection on the divine mystery. He invites deeper reflection of our own mystery as beings made for right relationship and the service of love.

**SR. COLLEEN MARY MALLON, OP**, is associate professor of systematic theology at Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis.

FOLLOW THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

## Get the latest ministry news and information

CHA is now using social media to help share news and information about the ministry. Our goal is to provide information about the association and the news, programs and stories of our members. We invite you to visit these pages and follow CHA!

Please note that you do not need to have an account with each of the social media sites to see the information on our pages.



### Twitter

View news, articles and other resources shared by CHA. We also follow and re-tweet news stories shared by our member systems and facilities.

[twitter.com/thechausa](https://twitter.com/thechausa)



### Facebook

Find information on CHA, articles, ministry news, photos and videos.

[facebook.com/catholichealthassociation](https://facebook.com/catholichealthassociation)



### LinkedIn

See news, resources and postings from our online job board. Coming soon — a members-only discussion group to connect and share with your colleagues.

[linkedin.com/company/catholic-health-association](https://linkedin.com/company/catholic-health-association)



### YouTube

View a full library of CHA videos, including educational videos, reflections, award winners and more.

[youtube.com/catholichealthassoc](https://youtube.com/catholichealthassoc)



Catholic Health Association of the United States

*A Passionate Voice for Compassionate Care®*

[chausa.org/social](https://chausa.org/social)

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

[www.chausa.org](http://www.chausa.org)

# HEALTH PROGRESS®

---

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, September - October 2014  
Copyright © 2014 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States

---