As we go to press, the church enters the final quarter of the Year of Mercy, an opportune time to consider what it would mean for the church itself to receive the transformative power of God’s mercy. For, as the Second Vatican Council confessed, the church is called to penance and renewal (Lumen Gentium 8). It is tantalizing to imagine what it might mean for the church not only to offer mercy, but to receive it within every sector of the church’s life. This seems especially true in a time when, for various reasons, the church is struggling internally with the role of women. Pope Francis has affirmed the need for a commission to study women and the diaconate, and earlier he called for a theology of women. And recently he opined that the church should apologize not only to “mistreated women” but also to gay people, among others. But let us pause for a moment, and consider how grappling with these matters might be an occasion for God’s bold and powerful mercy, understood as a divine summons to ecclesial conversion.

Thomas Mann captured the boldness of mercy in his relatively obscure novel, The Holy Sinner (Knopf, 1951). Written in the wake of World War II, it is a modern recasting of a medieval tale about a young man, Gregor, who was born into a tangle of incestuous relationships, representing the web of sin and guilt into which we are all born. In his case, he unwittingly enters upon an oedipal nightmare by marrying his mother, an action representing the full circle of his being caught up in “the sin of Adam.” Upon learning of this, he is horrified, leaves his marriage, and undertakes a life of solitary 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 a new pope will be found not in Rome, but on a rocky ledge in a far corner of the world. There Gregor is found, and whisked to Rome, where, amidst great celebration, he assumes the chair of Peter. Yet, “scarcely had he . . . laid off the superfluous of his ceremonial garb, when he began to govern Christendom, to feed his flocks and dispense blessings upon the motely necessities of the earth.” And this extended to a show of mercy that stirred both consternation and gratitude:

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 decisions 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 it 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? (306–12)

In the end, Gregor was a sensation not only because he profligately dispensed the medicine of mercy, but also because, through the mercy shown him, he brought about a deeper reconciliation of what seemed irreconcilable—the fractured parts of himself, the 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 parts are brought together into a moment of future hope. His life was not complete without that reconciliation, and, symbolically, neither was the life of the church he led. In his reconciliation of the inner parts, male and female, he brought about a season of new life for the church in which all eyes were opened to the power of God’s mercy to bring about profound conversion in human hearts and in the church itself. The bells of churches all over the world pealed with joy over the dawning of a new era.

In the spirit of the reconciling power of God’s bold mercy, Theological Studies wishes to take up the invitation of Pope Francis to explore what a “theology of women” might mean for us today. This is an intriguing invitation that suggests that what theologians have already written is only the beginning. We might ask what have we been missing in biblical, fundamental, systematic, philosophical, historical, and pastoral theology over the past 50 years? Or what have we come up with that we have not; perhaps yet seen? How might contextual, constructive, and comparative theologies contribute to our collective wisdom? What might theologies from Orthodox and Protestant scholars offer us? And what roles might the social and natural sciences play? Above all, what might the experiences of women, not only women theologians, but women in many other situations of life and variant cultures—particularly in the majority world of the poor—offer to the church’s reflection? Could it be that we need a theological anthropology that moves beyond gender complementarity to other models that might free the church from current impasses? The pope’s call could signal a kairos for the Catholic Church. And theologians worldwide can help the church face these issues.

This editorial, therefore, is an invitation—a call—to theologians to help the church open itself to the power of God’s mercy, to bring about a meeting of the parts that remain so fundamentally unreconciled, to address a problematic situation that remains so unresolved. We would like to provide a forum for many voices, not least those of women theologians, to advance this conversation.

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