

“Misericordia et Misera” Section 12 (2016) by Pope Francis of the Catholic Church

Misericordia et Misera (Mercy with Misery) was a letter written by Pope Francis and published in Rome, Italy, on 20 November 2016. Through the letter, Pope Francis gives priests the ability to grant forgiveness for abortion. Before Pope Francis’s letter, priests had some ability to grant forgiveness for the Catholic sin of abortion, but bishops had to grant that ability to the priests individually. Prior to the letter, the official rules of the Catholic Church did not state that priests could forgive abortion-related sins. The extension provided in the letter did not change the status of abortion as a grave sin that could result in excommunication. By extending that ability to priests, Pope Francis made forgiveness through the Catholic Church more accessible for women, doctors, and those who take part in an abortion, which started a discussion about the status of abortion in the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century.

Before Pope Francis’ letter, Catholic doctrine stated that abortion was a grave sin that could result in excommunication from the Catholic Church unless a person was forgiven by a bishop after confession. That applied to women who received abortions, doctors who performed abortions, or any other people who played a role in procuring an abortion. The Catholic Church classifies abortion as a grave sin because the Church supports the idea that human life starts at conception. Conception describes the point at which a woman’s egg is fertilized by a male sperm. Because of that rationale, killing any embryo or fetus is considered immoral and against the teachings of the Catholic Church. In 2016, Pope Francis, the 266th pope of the Catholic Church, changed canon law, or the official rules of the Catholic Church, to also allow priests, who are heads of a single church or congregation, to forgive people for the sin of abortion. Pope Francis made that change in *Misericordia et Misera* in 2016, at the end of the yearlong Jubilee of Mercy, which is a holy year that usually takes place every twenty-five years. *Misericordia et Misera* is an apostolic letter, which is a Catholic document issued by the Pope or in his name that makes doctrinal changes to Catholic churches and clergy around the world.

Pope Francis divides *Misericordia et Misera* into twenty-two numbered sections, with section twelve discussing abortion. In the letter, Pope Francis includes biblical teachings, social commentary, and the announcement of canon change in section twelve. In the first half of the letter, he focuses on mercy as a concept and explores mercy through references to stories in the Catholic Bible. Midway through the letter, in section twelve, Pope Francis grants the ability to absolve abortion to all priests, but maintains that abortion is a grave sin because it ends an innocent life. In the second half of the letter, Pope Francis discusses the holy year, or Jubilee of Mercy, and announces that the Catholic Church will observe the World Day of the Poor annually from that moment forward.

In section twelve of the letter, Pope Francis announces that all priests, not just bishops, now have the ability to forgive individuals who have committed the sin of abortion. Pope Francis stated that there is no sin that God’s mercy cannot reach and wipe away if a repentant heart seeks reconciliation. In other words, no sin is considered too bad for forgiveness if the person seeking forgiveness is open to God and willing to avoid sin in the future. While abortion is still considered a grave sin in the Catholic Church, if the woman, doctor, or person who participated in an abortion seeks forgiveness, they have the chance to be forgiven. Therefore, Pope Francis says, priests must act as guides, supporters, and provide comfort to those who have committed a sin and are looking for forgiveness from the Church.

Throughout the letter, Pope Francis reflects on the concept of mercy and claims that, because he has made forgiveness more accessible, the mercy of the heart remains wide open. Pope Francis

stated that mercy demands the banishment of indifference and hypocrisy in legal policies and plans, which the New York Times interpreted as a critique of Donald Trump, the forty-fifth president of the United States, in a New York Times article titled “Pope Francis Extends Priests’ Ability to Forgive Abortion.”

Misericordia et Misera and Pope Francis’ extension to priests were criticized and praised, as were many of the non-traditional changes Pope Francis made to Catholic doctrine during his papacy. Some of those changes, such as claiming that atheists can also gain access to Catholic heaven if they lead good and honest lives, or his phrase “who am I to judge?” in reference to homosexuality, have been seen as radical. Most of Pope Francis’ statements and changes have reflected his ideal of mercy, in that he believes that God can and will forgive all sins if those who have sinned are willing to repent and try to not sin again. His approach to promoting accessibility to forgiveness by changing canon law to enable all priests to absolve people of the sin of abortion has contributed to a renewed discussion about the status of abortion in the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century.

Sources

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