

Mercy Interview Part 2

The pope's personal encounters with mercy



Pope Francis opens the Holy Door of the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome Dec. 13. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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At the beginning of a new book-length interview, Pope Francis reveals just how deeply the notion of mercy has touched his own life and how he first came up with the idea of calling a Jubilee year focused on the subject.

In the book, *The Name of God is Mercy* to be released Tuesday, Francis says he can "read my life" in the light of a story from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, where Jerusalem is portrayed as a woman who was blessed by God but then became a harlot but is still honored and forgiven for what she has done.

"I read those pages and I say: everything here seems written just for me," says the pope. "The prophet speaks of shame, and shame is a grace: when one feels the mercy of God, he feels a great shame for himself and for his sin."

The Name of God is Mercy is the result of an interview between the pope and Andrea Tornielli, an Italian journalist and the coordinator for the Vatican Insider news website. The book is being published in 86 countries and about 20 languages on Tuesday. *NCR* received an advance copy of the English-language version of the text.

Francis tells Tornielli that he first came upon the idea of a year for mercy before he was pope, during a roundtable meeting with theologians as the archbishop of Buenos Aires.

"The topic was what the pope could do to bring people closer together; we were faced with so many problems that there seemed to be no solution," says the Argentine pontiff. "One of the participants suggested 'a Holy Year of forgiveness.' This idea stayed with me."

"Humanity needs mercy and compassion," Francis states later. "Pius XII, more than half a century ago, said that the tragedy of our age was that it had lost its sense of sin, the awareness of sin." "Today we add further to the tragedy by considering our illness, our sins, to be incurable, things that cannot be healed or forgiven," he continues. "We lack the actual concrete experience of mercy."

"The fragility of our era is this, too: we don't believe that there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet," he states. "We need mercy."

Speaking of the role of the confessor, Francis says that even when a priest cannot absolve a person of a particular sin he needs to be compassionate with them.

"If the confessor cannot absolve a person, he needs to explain why, he needs to give them a blessing, even without the holy sacrament," states the pope.

"The love of God exists even for those who are not disposed to receive it: that man, that woman, that boy, or that girl -- they are all loved by God, they are sought out by God, they are in need of blessing," he continues. "Be tender with these people. Do not push them away. People are suffering."

"If we don't show them the love and mercy of God, we push them away and perhaps they will never come back," the pontiff advises. "So embrace them and be compassionate, even if you can't absolve them. Give them a blessing anyway."

Francis then speaks about having a niece who married a man in a civil wedding who had previously been married and had not obtained an annulment.

"This man was so religious that every Sunday, when he went to Mass, he went to the confessional and said to the priest, 'I know you can't absolve me but I have sinned by doing this and that, please give me a blessing,'" says the pope, adding: "This is a religiously mature man."

'Look for the smallest opening'

One of the most poignant moments of the book comes when Tornielli asks Francis if there is anything a person has to do to obtain God's mercy. The journalist references Scottish writer Bruce Marshall's novel *To Every Man a Penny*, in which a priest wants to offer absolution to a soldier sentenced to death.

When the soldier says he is not repentant for his sins, the priest asks: "But are you sorry that you are not sorry?" When the soldier replies yes, the priest offers the absolution.

"That's how it is," Francis replies. "It's a good example of the lengths to which God goes to enter the heart of man, to find that small opening that will permit him to grant grace. He does not want anyone to be lost. His mercy is infinitely greater than our sins, his medicine is infinitely stronger than our illnesses that he has to heal."

"God waits; he waits for us to concede him only the smallest glimmer of space so that he can enact his forgiveness and his charity within us," says the pope.

"Only he who has been touched and caressed by the tenderness of his mercy really knows the Lord," he continues. "For this reason I have often said that the place where my encounter with the mercy of Jesus takes place is my sin."

"When you feel his merciful embrace, when you let yourself be embraced, when you are moved -- that's when life can change, because that's when we try to respond to the immense and unexpected gift of grace, a gift that is so overabundant it may even seem 'unfair' in our eyes," he says. Francis also says confessors should consider the legal maxim *in dubio pro reo* -- "when in doubt, for the accused" -- and the very gesture of someone coming to make a confession.

"The very fact that someone goes to the confessional indicates an initiation of repentance, even if it is not conscious," states the pope.

"Without that initial impulse, the person would not be there," he says. "His being there is testimony to the desire for change. Words are important, but the gesture is explicit."

"And the gesture itself is important; sometimes the awkward and humble presence of a penitent

who has difficulty expressing himself is worth more than another person's wordy account of their repentance," he says.

Asked what advice he would give a confessor, Francis states: "A priest needs to think of his own sins, to listen with tenderness, to pray to the Lord for a heart as merciful as his, and not to cast the first stone because he, too, is a sinner who needs to be forgiven. He needs to try to resemble God in all his mercy."

Francis speaks about indirectly but pointedly about criticisms he has faced for his focus on mercy in response to questions about whether there can be too much mercy and why he speaks so strongly and frequently asked so-called scholars of the law.

"The church condemns sin because it has to relay the truth: 'This is a sin,'" states the pontiff. "But at the same time, it embraces the sinner who recognizes himself as such, it welcomes him, it speaks to him of the infinite mercy of God. Jesus forgave even those who crucified and scorned him."

"We must go back to the Gospel," Francis says, referencing both the parable of the prodigal son and Luke's description of the joy in Heaven for one sinner who repents.

"It does not say: and if he should then relapse and go back to his ways and commit more sins, that's his problem!" exhorts the pope. "No, when Peter asked how many times he should forgive someone, Jesus said, not seven times but seventy times seven, or in other words, always."

"To follow the way of the Lord, the church is called on to pour its mercy over all those who recognize themselves as sinners, who assume responsibility for the evil they have committed, and who feel in need of forgiveness," Francis states later. "The church does not exist to condemn people but to bring about an encounter with the visceral love of God's mercy."