



A Heart for Those in Misery

BY SR. PATRICIA TALONE, RSM, PhD

Some have labeled Pope Francis’ governance as the papacy of mercy, one grounded in that virtue. The Latin word for mercy is *miserericordia*, a term with two root words: *miseria*, meaning wretchedness or misery, and *cor*, meaning heart. Thus, *miserericordia* denotes “having a heart for those in misery.” It describes a habit of the heart, a way of being, that continually directs one to reach out to people who are suffering.

Closely related to compassion, its sister virtue, mercy indicates an individual who is moved at the deepest level of his or her being, recognizes a profound relationship with all people and acts out of that benevolent and tender heart to alleviate the anguish of others.

What an apt description of Pope Francis.

But what does that emphasis on mercy mean for the church, and even more, what might it mean to those of us who continue the healing ministry of Jesus within Catholic health care? How do we measure up to Pope Francis’ words and deeds? Are there opportunities for improvement? In the rapidly changing face of health care in the United States, what might it mean if we were to fully apply the words of our “Shared Statement of Identity,” highlighting “special attention to our neighbors who are poor, underserved, and most vulnerable?”¹

Francis’s evident passion for those

at the edges of society was something I witnessed personally, one short month after he was elected to succeed Pope Benedict XVI to the throne of St. Peter. On the morning of April 24, 2013, a group of Catholic Health Association pilgrims — attendees of CHA’s annual ecclesiology and spiritual renewal program — went to the Vatican’s regularly scheduled, Wednesday papal audience.

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Having attended other papal audiences, I knew what to expect. Exactly as the clock struck 10, the popemobile would exit the southwest corner of St. Peter’s Square and proceed along carefully circumscribed and highly guarded pathways to an elevated platform. The pope would exit the popemobile, ascend to the platform and speak to and bless the gathered thousands.

Francis surprised us. Eschewing punctuality and precision, the new pontiff entered the square about 10 minutes early and quickly adjusted the path of the popemobile. He directed his intrepid chauffeur to proceed through the crowds toward barriers located at the Via della Conciliazione, the main thoroughfare that lies just beyond St. Peter’s Square. Passing the ticketed and seated pilgrims, the new pope headed toward those who had no tickets and were unable to enter the square.

As his vehicle progressed, he often directed the driver to stop so he could reach out to people in the crowd. Not content with a celebrity wave, Pope Francis stretched and touched, most often connecting with infants, children and those who were sick or suffering. Francis passed close to the CHA pilgrims, and it was easy for us to see the electric connection he made with peo-

Illustration by Jon Lezinsky



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Pope Francis kneels at the confessional in St. Peter's Basilica.

ple among the throngs — like the good shepherd in the parable, his eyes seemed to search out and latch onto those in need. A member of our group noted later that the expression on the pope's face was one of intense joy and displayed a quality that “can only come from God.”

The universality of the church and the power and witness of ordinary people's faith always are in evidence during a papal audience. But this audience especially impressed upon me, even more poignantly, that our church is one that always reaches out to those most in need.

CONTEMPORARY REALITY

When he resigned as pontiff, Pope Benedict grounded his reasoning and action in contemporary reality. He stated, “In today's world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary.”²

Independent secular groups have echoed Benedict's concern for the state of the world. That May, Amnesty International, a nongovernmental organization focused on human rights, issued its 2013 World Report, noting that the world has

become more and more dangerous for migrants and refugees. While it mentioned tremendous acts of courage by individuals and nations, it also acknowledged that indifference to human rights remains endemic in many parts of the world.³ In today's world, the wealthy few continue to grow rich while others, even persons once in the middle class, struggle to secure housing and food, not to mention a future for their children.⁴

The Catholic Church itself faces violent persecution and hostility in many parts of the world.⁵ While the number of Catholics throughout the world has more than tripled over the past century, the number of Catholics in what had once been largely Catholic countries has diminished alarmingly.⁶ Add to this the consequences of the sexual abuse scandals in many parts of the world, the diminishing credibility of the hierarchy and the Curia due to mishandling of finances and the abuse crisis, and one can recognize that Pope Benedict was beset by troubles on every side.

Pope Francis stepped into this reality, reaching out in mercy. In an interview for *America* magazine, fellow Jesuit Antonio Spadaro asked Francis, “What does the church need at this historic moment?” After praising the humility and courage of his predecessor's resignation, Francis



responded, “I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle.”

He continued, “The ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all ... I dream of a church that is a mother and a shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the Good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor.”⁷

ROOTED IN SPIRITUALITY

What’s the source of the tender mercy that Francis so readily voices and displays? Obviously it comes from God, and it is deeply ingrained in Francis’ nature and personality. The pope’s motto gives us an indication. Upon their ordination, bishops adopt a distinctive coat of arms with a motto emblazoned upon it. In June 1992, when Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ, was consecrated as bishop, he took the motto, “*miserando atque eligendo*,” meaning “by having mercy and by choosing.” Adapted from a homily of St. Bede, the phrase recollects Matthew 9:9-13, an account of Jesus’ call of Matthew, the tax collector. St. Bede asserts that Jesus chose Matthew as an apostle not in spite of his sins, but because he was a sinner. It is significant that Francis decided to retain that motto after he was elected pope.

The call of Matthew is deeply etched upon Pope Francis’ religious imagination as well. In the Spadaro interview, the pope described often visiting the church of St. Louis of France, located in Rome, to reflect upon a celebrated painting there, “The Calling of St. Matthew” by Caravaggio. Observing that he identified with St. Matthew, Francis said, “Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze ... I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord”⁸

On March 28, 2014, Francis demonstrated his realization of personal sinfulness, as well as his deep faith in the Sacrament of Penance, when he knelt at one of the confessionals in St. Peter’s Basilica and received the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Someone took a photograph that quickly went viral on the Internet — it was the first time such a papal picture had ever been seen. While analysts opined about the photo’s effect on the practice of confession throughout the Catholic world, the image reinforced Francis’ admission that he is a sinner.

In a sense, Francis was living out what he preached; he was walking the talk. That same day, in the Vatican Hall of Blessings, he had encouraged priest confessors attending a course at the Vatican to warmly welcome penitents. He reminded them that “a priest’s heart is a heart that is able to be touched.”⁹

His ready disclosure of sinfulness comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with Jesuit spirituality. While he may now be the pope, Fr. Bergoglio is first a Jesuit. Furthermore, during his long years in the Society of Jesus, he served his congregation first as novice director and then as provincial of the Argentine province. Therefore, this is a man steeped in Ignatian spirituality. As a novice himself, and many times afterward as a spiritual director, Francis entered into the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, in which one contemplates the themes of God’s boundless personal love, the call to follow Christ in a personal ministry, one’s own sinfulness and its connection to Christ’s suffering and death, and, lastly, the Resurrection of Jesus and God’s promise to be with each one of us always.

In the third segment of the exercises, one comes face to face with one’s own sinfulness and asks God for a sense of sorrow for personal sin, as well as a deep sense of God’s merciful love. Critics have challenged Fr. Bergoglio’s 1973-1979 leadership of the Jesuits as provincial. His tenure was partially concurrent with the Argentine “Dirty War” that followed a military junta’s government takeover in 1976. The ensuing dictatorship rounded up its perceived opponents, children were taken from parents, people were tortured. Thousands were “disappeared.”

Much has been written about this period of the pope’s life and his actions as provincial during those brutal and violent times.¹⁰ In an interview, Francis stated, “I had to learn from my errors along the way, because to tell you the truth, I made hundreds of errors. Errors and sins. It would be wrong of me to say that these days I ask forgiveness for the sins and offenses that I might have committed. Today I ask forgiveness for the sins and offenses that I did indeed commit.”¹¹

Thus, Francis’ commitment to mercy originates in the deep assurance that he, personally, has been blessed with God’s abundant mercy. German theologians have an expression for this: *Gabe und Aufgabe*, “gift and task,” a phrase that means we are only able to give what we have first received from the hand of a bountiful God.

ROOTED IN PASTORAL EXPERIENCE

While Fr. Bergoglio spent many years in Jesuit administration, first as a formation director and then as a provincial, for more than two decades he served as a bishop and later as cardinal in his home city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. During these years, he ministered in a huge Catholic diocese, celebrating liturgies, conferring the Sacrament of Confirmation upon youth, riding public transportation and often visiting his city's slums, unpaved streets where thousands live in shacks with no running water or sewage systems. It is from these daily encounters with real people that Francis calls upon the church to be rooted in a deep and real pastoral experience.

On Holy Thursday, 2013, the new pope surprised (and, for some, scandalized) the faithful when he washed the feet of inmates in a Roman juvenile detention center. The recipients of his humble service included females and one non-Christian. The ritual echoes Christ's words in John 13:14, "if I therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet."¹²

Francis conveys to all Christians that real and authentic power lies in service to others, especially to those in need. On that same Holy Thursday, he called upon priests throughout the world to a ministry requiring stretching oneself, continually going out to those in need to put our "own skin and heart on the line."

He reminded all followers of Christ that "we need to 'go out,' then ... to the outskirts where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight and prisoners in thrall to many evil masters."¹³

ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

Pope Francis has acknowledged the impression that Cardinal Walter Kasper's book, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, made upon him.¹⁴ (See review, page 76). It would seem that Cardinal Kasper's text confirmed and articulated the pope's own convictions that our suffering world needs mercy more than condemnation and presence more than detachment.

At his Mass for the Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome, on April 7, 2013, less than a month after his election, Pope Francis delivered a homily entitled, "The Embrace of God's Mercy." In it, Francis highlighted the stories of doubting Thomas (John 20:19-28), the denial of Peter (described in all four Gospels), and the account of

the unknowing disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32). In each case, Francis noted Jesus's patience, understanding, forgiveness and love toward those whom he encountered.

The pope then eloquently described the parable of the prodigal son, calling it "the parable of the merciful father."¹⁵ He described the great hope that this parable gives to him personally, remarking that the father in the story, like our tender God, never ceases to wait for his son, "waiting for him

If Catholic health care takes the words and deeds of Pope Francis seriously, how can we live this spirit of mercy he proclaims?

every hour of every day." The pope assures us that "God is always waiting for us; he never grows tired."¹⁶

Pope Francis has highlighted the fact that our weakness or sinfulness draws forth God's infinite patience. Quoting the German theologian Romano Guardini, he pointed out that "God responds to our weakness by his patience, and this is the reason for our confidence, our hope."¹⁷ The pontiff closed his homily emphasizing how personal is God's mercy. "For God," he emphasized, "we are not numbers, we are important; indeed we are the most important thing to him. Even if we are sinners, we are what is closest to his heart."

Francis is not the only pope in recent memory to highlight the virtue of mercy. In 1980, Pope John Paul II issued his second encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, focusing on many of the themes that Francis has reiterated in the current pontificate. John Paul II, like his successor, grounded his teaching in Scripture, took account of the state of the world and called the church to justice and care of the poor. The words of this acclaimed encyclical are as relevant today as they were almost 35 years ago. The difference between the two pontiffs may lie in the fact that John Paul II was a consummate philosopher; Francis is, first and foremost, a pastor.

CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE

Pope Francis' iterative teachings about mercy, tenderness and compassion call the contemporary church and world to reconnect to the fact that we must possess a "heart for those in misery" (*misericordia*). One would be hard pressed to con-



ceive of a ministry as well-positioned to respond to this call as is Catholic health care.

If Catholic health care takes seriously the words and deeds of Pope Francis, how can we live this spirit of mercy he proclaims? Certainly, facilities and systems must authentically follow the pope's example by seeking out those who are poor, suffering and disenfranchised, by offering them the tender care that Jesus brought to the sick.

In papal audiences, one witnesses Pope Francis locking eyes with or touching the most vulnerable pilgrims. So, too, mercy compels Catholic health care to always acknowledge human dignity by gazing at each individual patient and touching him or her with reverence and compassion.

Similarly, if the ministry takes seriously Francis's call for a poor church for the poor, trustees and executives must scrupulously and transparently examine internal financial and human resource policies to ensure justice and equity for the community of persons who serve in Catholic health care, as well as for those we serve. If we truly believe that God's mercy is for all of God's people, then surely the Catholic health ministry must redouble its advocacy efforts on behalf of those women, men and children who are still unserved and underserved in health care.

If we in Catholic health care are to be ministers of mercy, we must, like Francis, be solidly grounded lest we lose our bearings. We must be rooted in and knowledgeable of contemporary reality, supported by Catholic health care's long and august assistance to all people, formed in theology and deeply immersed in a personal and lived spirituality.¹⁸ With this grounding, Catholic health care positions itself to address the needs of a continually changing environment as it remains faithful to its long-held commitment to have a "heart for those in misery."

The words of the ministry's Catholic identity statement, "every person is a treasure, every life a sacred gift, every human being a unity of body, mind and spirit ... with special attention to our neighbors who are poor, underserved and most vulnerable," echo the spirit of Pope Francis and his commitment to mercy.¹⁹

SR. PATRICIA TALONE, RSM, is vice president, mission services, the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

NOTES

1. Catholic Health Association, "Shared Statement of Identity for the Catholic Health Ministry," Jan. 1, 2001.
2. Benedict XVI, speech, Feb. 10, 2013. www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130211_declaratio_en.html.
3. Amnesty International, 2013 *World Report*, www.amnesty.org/en/annual-report/2013/press-release.
4. See Oxfam International's report, "Working for the Few: Political Capture and Economic Inequality," Jan. 20, 2014.
5. John L. Allen, "After Hobby Lobby, Time to Face the Real War on Religion," *Boston Globe*, July 6, 2014. www.bostonglobe.com/news/world/2014/07/05/after-hobby-lobby-time-face-real-war-religion/9kJVpa1aebOp5AX26V4v5J/story.html.
6. Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, "The Global Catholic Population," Feb. 13, 2013. www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/.
7. Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," *America*, Sept. 30, 2013. www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview.
8. Spadaro.
9. Quoted in Vatican Information Service, March 28, 2014.
10. Paul Vallely, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). In this book Vallely, a journalist, objectively examines the period in question in chapter 4, "What Really Happened in the Dirty War."
11. Vallely.
12. *New American Bible*.
13. Francis, homily at the Chrism Mass, March 28, 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html.
14. Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014). This book was published in Europe in 2013.
15. Francis, *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014): Part 1.1, electronic version.
16. *The Church of Mercy*, electronic version.
17. *The Church of Mercy*, electronic version. Although Fr. Bergoglio did not complete a dissertation in theology, he had chosen German theologian Romano Guardini as the subject of his study.
18. The excellent leadership formation programs provided by many Catholics systems form the basis for such grounding.
19. Catholic Health Association, "Shared Statement of Identity for the Catholic Health Ministry."

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