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THE THEOLOGY OF MERCY IN THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF POPE FRANCIS

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Since the beginning, Pope Francis has made it known through his words and actions that the theme of mercy would be the guiding principle of his exercise of ministry. His earliest addresses and homilies invoked divine mercy as the most important attribute of God to which he wants to lead the Church back. In 2015, Francis proclaimed an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, accompanied by his own reflections on how to understand, appreciate, and live this theme in the Church and in the world.[1] Mercy had a personal importance for this pope, evidenced by his episcopal and later papal motto, *Miserando atque Eligendo*.[2]

This essay will concentrate on the influences that contributed to Francis's choice of a personal and pastoral ideal—divine mercy. It will look into the maturation of his interest in the subject by delving into his personal testimony as a Christian, Jesuit, priest, and bishop. It will also present the gist of his teachings on mercy as Vicar of Christ and

[1]On April 11, 2015, Pope Francis promulgated the bull of indiction *Misericordiae Vultus* (cited in-text as MV) in which he expressed what he hoped the Jubilee Year of Mercy would accomplish.

[2]W. Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 31.

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leave behind his Scriptural catechesis during the Jubilee Year of Mercy which, by its extensiveness, deserves a separate article.

Mercy in the Vision of a Shepherd

Exhilaration and Expectations for Newness

D. Dorr considered the papal resignation of Pope Benedict XVI as one of just two "*kairos*" moments in modern Church history, comparable only to the resolve of Pope John XXIII in leading the Church toward a new direction through the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). Benedict XVI's decision also presaged the blossoming of new possibilities for the Church in our age.[3] It was time for a dedicated but enervated servant of God to turn over the reins of ministry to a vigorous successor. In Buenos Aires, the unsuspecting Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio later "praised the decision as a 'revolutionary act' that had been carefully thought out in the presence of God."[4]

When expressions of sympathetic paeans for the resigning Pope were over, the spotlight was turned on to the popular celebrity cardinals who could well fill in the "ideal type" of candidate who had "Pope Pius XII or Paul VI's instincts for governance, John XXIII's warmth, John Paul II's evangelical charisma, coupled with Benedict XVI's intellectual qualities"[5] impossibly contained in just one person. Management experts opined that the time was ripe for a pope who possessed the quality of "global fluency" or cultural intelligence—a leader who could "engage comfortably with a great range of cultural experiences."[6]

In his 2009 book *The Future Church*, J. Allen argued for an increasing relevance of the global South in the future of World Catholicism and

[3]D. Dorr, *The Pope Francis Agenda* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2018), 10.

[4]A. Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 350.

[5]B. McCarthy, "The Best Fit for Office?" *The Tablet* 267:8988 (March 9, 2013): 10.

[6]McCarthy, "The Best Fit for Office?" 10.

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already presaged a "third-world" pope, one with either a black or a brown face, or from Latin America, sitting on St. Peter's throne.[7] While Bergoglio's crucial role as runner-up to Cardinal Ratzinger in the 2005 conclave was mentioned in the book, the media paid scant attention to this elderly former contender who was no longer perceived as a frontrunner in the 2013 conclave, perhaps due to his age.

Veering away from the sensationalism of the moment, theologians contributed to serious reflections on the qualities and priorities the next pontiff must bring to his office.[8] Fordham theologian C. Camosy came closest to a prophetic rendering of the next pope's character and mission:

> Like Jesus, the next pope should be able to get out of his comfort zone and meet with his people—especially on the margins—and minister to them on a regular basis. He should choose to dress in simple robes, and avoid ostentatious dress which separates him from the lives and experience of his flock. He should listen first, but when it is time to speak he must be a skilled communicator who, like Jesus, should address his people in a language they can understand.[9]

Modern popes have indeed shown acute sensitivity to the signs of the times, as Vatican II envisioned for the whole Church,[10] in the way they exercised their pastorate in a gradual crescendo of sincerity and simplicity. Pope Paul VI surrendered his tiara and started international pastoral visits to be close to the people. Pope John Paul II's more than a quarter-century of service made the universal shepherd more visible, humble, and accessible to people through his myriads of creative

[7]J. Allen, *The Future Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 47.

[8]Cf. E. Conway, T. Beattie et al., "A Humble Heart and a Thick Skin," *The Tablet* 267:8989 (March 16, 2013): 10–11.

[9]Conway, Beattie et al., "A Humble Heart and a Thick Skin," 11.

[10]J. Kroeger, "Always Alert to God's Signs," in K. Krämer & K. Vellguth, eds., *Evangelii Gaudium: Voices of the Universal Church* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc. 2015), 85–96.

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initiatives. Benedict XVI removed the tiara from the papal crest, replacing it with the more pastoral image of the mitre.[11]

A towering concern was the quality of administration the new pope must exercise, first over the Curia and then the rest of the Catholic world. While the last two popes were, as brilliant scholars, "supreme teachers of the faith in word and deed," they both grappled with an institution that had complex, controlling, clashing, and self-serving tendencies. Such a situation called for simplification and better supervision in the hands of their successor.[12] The next pope was expected to "show a greater interest in administration than his predecessor did. That includes carrying out an internal bureaucratic reform at the Vatican."[13]

Finally, when, on the rainy evening of March 13, 2013, the conclave adjourned after only a swift process of five ballots, Catholics met their new Vicar of Christ and the world gazed at the new representative face of the Catholic Church for the first time. A stunned silence after the announcement of the name of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio showed how unexpected and unknown was the man finally elected as the 265th successor of St. Peter. Neither included in the shortlist of Vatican watchers' *papabili* nor a known insider in the bureaucracy of the Vatican, little was known internationally of his identity and character.[14]

Emerging from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica was a 76-year-old Pope from the global South, an Argentinian with an Italian surname, a member of the religious family of the Society of Jesus, and the first ever pope in history to take the name Francis. Pope Francis's appearance, his first words, and his disarming gestures immediately elicited a positive reception.

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[11]H. Pabel, "Farewell to an Aura," *The Tablet* 267:8988 (March 9, 2013): 13.

[12]"A Pope for the World," [editorial] *The Tablet* 267:8989 (March 16,2013): 2.

[13]R. Mickens, "A House that Needs Putting in Order," *The Tablet* 267:8989 (March 16, 2013): 6.

[14]C. Lamb, "Five-Ballot Wonder," *The Tablet* 267:8990 (March 23, 2013): 4.

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Some observers saw in that maiden encounter between people and Pope the dawning of a new springtime for the Church while others called it a "Vatican II" moment, a resurgence of the spirit of renewal or *aggiornamento*.[15] *The Tablet* writer R. Mickens described it as a Pentecost coming early for the Catholic Church.[16] That publication's other columnist, P. Stanford, sounded convinced when he wrote that the choice was truly divine, an act orchestrated by the Holy Spirit.[17]

Francis appeared in a simple white cassock and addressed the crowds "with an open heart—and ear."[18] He joked a little and he begged for a moment of prayer for the pope emeritus Benedict XVI. He spoke of brotherhood, love, and trust.[19] R. Mickens capsulized the moment the earliest image of the new pope surfaced:

> Shunning the red shoes and *mozetta* (shoulder cape) worn for the occasion by his predecessors, he was dressed only in the white papal cassock with a pewter pectoral cross around his neck. He did not gesticulate with outstretched hands as almost all previous popes had done. Instead, he asked the tens of thousands of people gathered in the square below to "pray over" him silently before he gave his first *Urbi et Orbi* blessing to the city and the world. Many in the crowd wept. Then in a break with custom, he recited the special blessing rather than sang it.[20]

The impression he imprinted in the minds of the ebullient crowd that evening was that of a man of "humility, gentleness, and prayerfulness, tinged with humour."[21]

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[15]"A Pope for the World," 2.

[16]R. Mickens, "Francesco di Roma," *The Tablet* 267:8990 (March 23, 2013): 6.

[17]P. Stanford, "If I Had Ever Needed Irrefutable Evidence of the Holy Spirit at Work, Here It Was," *The Tablet* 267:8990 (March 23, 2013): 9.

[18]A. Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn, "Signs of a New Beginning," *The Tablet* 267:8991 (March 30, 2013): 26.

[19]Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 365.

[20]Mickens, "Francesco di Roma," 6.

[21]F. McDonagh, "Pontiff of a Different Order," *The Tablet* 267:8989 (March 16, 2013): 5.

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Acute observers were quick to notice the prophetic nuances of his early actions. Mickens writes: "Given this emphasis on being Bishop of Rome, and judging by the handful of addresses and few ceremonies he's had, one might deduce that the new Pope is taking steps to purify the papacy of its monarchical trappings and court-like ambience."[22] It was enthralling to see a pope who declined the offer of opulent cars in favor of simple vehicles and demonstrated, on the evening of his election, just how comfortably he could sit with his cardinals in a coach to catch dinner. Returning to the priest hostel he checked into prior to the conclave, he packed his scant possessions in a suitcase and paid the bills at the counter.[23]

Naturally, of course, all this external gesture was symbolic, albeit holding so much promise.[24] Was he really the leader who would bring about the shift not just in tone but in theology?[25] Would he be committing himself to work for more collegiality among bishops and sincere reform of the Church's governing structures?[26]

Mercy, the New Papacy's Central Theme

In the days following his election, the Catholic faithful and both religious and secular media did not merely observe the outward gestures and actions of Francis. They also awaited and analyzed the first words that came from his lips, hoping to catch glimpses of what might be the novel thrust of this ministry to the Church and to the world. Being in awe of his simplicity and humility was not enough to decipher the catchphrase of this man from "the ends of the earth."[27] It did not take long for this message to emerge as the Pope started speaking about it in

[22]Mickens, "Francesco di Roma," 6.

[23]Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 366.

[24]Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 366.

[25]"Pope of Good Promise," *The Tablet* 267:8990 (March 23, 2013), 2.

[26]"Pope of Good Promise," 2.

[27]Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 365.

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the first instances of his preaching and public speaking appointments. A. Tornielli has traced the chronology of the unfolding new papal vision for the Church.[28]

On March 17, 2013, the first Sunday after his election, Francis celebrated his first community Mass at the church of St. Anne, Vatican City's only parish, a few steps away from the eponymous entrance gate to the city state along Rome's Borgo Pio. The Pope preached on the Gospel of John centering on the Lord Jesus's encounter with the adulteress brought to him by the people (Jn. 8:1–11). It was his second homily as pope, following the one at the Mass with the cardinals.

Francis started by recalling Jesus's time alone on the mountain in prayer to the Father—the solitude of prayer. Then he dwelt on Jesus's return to the Temple where the scribes and Pharisees brought him the woman to be judged and condemned. Eventually, the woman was left alone with Jesus and she experienced "the solitude of his mercy."[29] The Pope identified a double tendency among Christians—the desire to listen to the Lord and the desire to "find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others."[30]

However, Jesus has a singular message and challenge for us: "I think—and I say it with humility—that this is the Lord's most powerful message: mercy."[31] Francis then returned to another Gospel passage where he imagined Jesus responding to the call to stone the woman: "'I did not come for the righteous.' The righteous justify themselves. Go on, then, even if you can do it, I cannot! But they believe they can. 'I came for sinners'."[32]

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[28]A. Tornielli, "Francis' Vision," in Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, trans. O. Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016), ix–xx.

[29]Francis, homily at the parish of St. Anna, Vatican City (March 17, 2013), available at https://bit.ly/39dxjcR (accessed January 2, 2020).

[30]Francis, homily at the parish of St. Anna, Vatican City.

[31]Francis, homily at the parish of St. Anna, Vatican City.

[32]Francis, homily at the parish of St. Anna, Vatican City.

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Then Francis quoted snippets from other passages—one to recall the gossipers' murmurings against the Lord after the call of Matthew (Mk. 2:16) and another to describe the arrogance of the Pharisee, in prayer before God, comparing himself to the lowly publican (Lk. 18:11–12). He insisted that while it is not easy to surrender oneself to God's mercy, there can be no experience of joy without doing so. It is difficult but it is an imperative.[33]

Some people, Francis said, find their sense of sinfulness a barrier to approaching God. He assures them that all the more does Jesus want such people to unburden their hearts to him. He forgets, kisses, embraces, and forgives sinners by simply saying, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more" (Jn. 8:11), the climactic statement at the end of that day's Gospel. Francis said something at the end that he would eventually repeat many times in written or verbal form: "The Lord never tires of forgiving: never! It is we who tire of asking his forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace not to tire of asking forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving."[34]

On the same day, at his Angelus address, Francis greeted the people from the window of the papal apartment where he echoed Jesus's striking attitude to the adulterous woman: "We do not hear words of scorn, we do not hear words of condemnation, but only words of love, of mercy, which are an invitation to conversion."[35] He further ascribed mercy to God:

> God's face is the face of a merciful father who is always patient. Have you thought of God's patience, the patience he has with each one of us? That is his mercy. He always has patience, patience with us, he understands us, he waits for us, he does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to him with a contrite heart. "Great is God's mercy," says the Psalm.[36]

[33]Francis, homily at the parish of St. Anna, Vatican City.

[34]Francis, homily at the parish of St. Anna, Vatican City.

[35]Francis, Angelus address (March 17, 2013), available at https://bit.ly/3tN7Gcl.

[36]Francis, Angelus address.

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Francis shared two anecdotes with the jubilant, appreciative crowd: one, about an interesting book he just read, and another, about an unforgettable human encounter. First, he spoke of a book that he found personally beneficial. Given to him prior to the conclave by the author himself, he readily pored over the material, gaining insight into its surprising theme which, providentially, was mercy. The author was the scholarly German theologian and cardinal Walter Kasper,[37] former president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. While the Pope joked that he was not in the business of promoting his cardinals' books, his comment, working as "the mother of all endorsements," actually helped catapult the book to immense popularity in Church circles.[38]

Francis summarized Kasper's book by saying that the cardinal

> said that feeling mercy, that this word changes everything. This is the best thing we can feel: it changes the world. A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just. We need to understand properly this mercy of God, this merciful Father who is so patient.… Let us remember the Prophet Isaiah who says that even if our sins were scarlet, God's love would make them white as snow. This mercy is beautiful![39]

Second, Francis recounted his encounter with a humble, elderly woman, who was over eighty years old, when he was still an archbishop. In a conversation with her about Confession, the woman inspired then-Cardinal Bergoglio with her strong conviction about God's steadfast mercy through forgiveness. The old woman said that "if the Lord did not forgive everything, the world would not exist."[40] Francis adopted a jovial mood, adding that he wondered whether the woman learned this from the Gregorian University. However, he was certain that the

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[37]W. Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. W. Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2013).

[38]W. Kasper & D. Moloney, "Cardinal Kasper Responds to First Things Review of 'Mercy'," *First Things* (March 23, 2015), available at https://bit.ly/3lyawhR (accessed on June 26, 2019).

[39]Francis, Angelus address.

[40]Francis, Angelus address.

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woman's conviction was "wisdom which the Holy Spirit gives: inner wisdom focused on God's mercy."[41] In closing, the Pope echoed his teaching on forgiveness given earlier at Sunday Mass, asking the people,

> Let us not tire, let us never tire! He is the loving Father who always pardons, who has the heart of mercy for us all. And let us too learn to be merciful to everyone. Let us invoke the intercession of Our Lady who held in her arms the Mercy of God made [human].[42]

From the foregoing instances of preaching on mercy, it became clear that Francis developed the theme of mercy not by expounding exclusively on the topic but in connection with related themes and motifs. Thus, he found a connection between mercy and joy, forgiveness, patience, justice, conversion, Mary, and wisdom from the Holy Spirit. From this point alone, it seems that Francis equated mercy with the goodness of God in general and that he would continue to find a link between mercy and other attributes of God that denote a predilection toward his children.

The inaugural Mass for the start of Francis's Petrine ministry was held on March 19, 2013, on the liturgical celebration of the Solemnity of St. Joseph, the husband of Mary. Here, too, he used the occasion to focus attention on mercy and compassion especially for children, the elderly, the needy, and those ignored in society.[43] Describing the saint of the day, he said that

> Saint Joseph appears as a strong and courageous man, a working man, yet in his heart we see great tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love. We must not be afraid of goodness, of tenderness.[44]

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[41]Francis, Angelus address.

[42]Francis, Angelus address.

[43]W. Madges, translator's preface, in Kasper, *Mercy*, ix.

[44]Francis, homily at inaugural Mass (March 19, 2013), available at https://bit.ly/3hCwyyE (accessed January 2, 2020).

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Although his predecessors resided in the papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace, it was widely known that Francis had foregone such living arrangements. Having stayed instead at Casa Santa Marta, the Vatican guesthouse, during the conclave, he preferred to live there permanently. The move was motivated primarily not by a spirit of poverty but by his strong need for a community. He told Fr. A. Spadaro in their first interview together that the former papal lodging is

> not luxurious. It is old, tastefully decorated and large, but not luxurious. But in the end it is like an inverted funnel. It is big and spacious, but the entrance is really tight. People can come only in dribs and drabs, and I cannot live without people. I need to live my life with others.[45]

Accounts of Francis's daily homilies appeared daily in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper. The new pope started the practice of inviting Vatican workers, such as gardeners, garbage collectors, greenhouse workers, telephone operators, photographers, and people in various offices, to participate in his daily Eucharist. The short homilies, later published as a book series, stood out for their originality of content, simplicity of development, and interactive, dynamic, and distinctly pastoral applications of the Gospel message.[46]

In his brief Scriptural reflections, Francis held fast to his favorite theme—God's mercy, patience, and forgiveness. Referring to a woman's anointing of Jesus's feet in Bethany (Jn. 12:1–11), the Pope extolled the mysterious patience of God seen in the behavior of the Lord. Then he linked the topic to the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11–31) where the father waited patiently every day for the return of his wayward son.[47] Comparing the "night" of Judas's betrayal to the "sweetness" of Jesus's forgiveness, the Pope recalled another night, a "temporary

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[45]A. Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis," *America* 209:8 (September 30, 2013): 17.

[46]I. Biffi, Introduction, in Francis, *Morning Homilies*, trans. D. Livingstone (Bengaluru, India: Theological Publications in India, 2018), x.

[47]Francis, *Morning Homilies*, 5.

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night" where, in the midst of darkness, any sinner can still hope to experience the Lord's kindness, "the Lord's tendernesss."[48]

A careful analysis of the daily homilies at the chapel of the Pope's residence will show that given almost any topic he discusses, the Pope almost always delivers his messages without veering too far from the certitude of God's infinite love and palpable mercy for God's children. When he speaks of the evangelist Matthew's account of personal conversion (Mt. 9:9–13), he stresses that the fact that God is merciful is not at all a parable but a historical reality that happened to the evangelist. When Jesus looked at Matthew, the former tax collector was filled with joy. He consented to follow the Lord in an instant because it was "a moment of mercy received and accepted."[49]

Francis entrusted the message of mercy and its diffusion to the entire Church to the members of his Curia. On October 14, 2013, he delivered an address to the participants of a plenary gathering of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. To this body, newly created by his predecessor and charged with the spread of the Gospel to contemporary cultures, Francis expressed his desire that their efforts be done with mercy. He said:

> We need Christians who make God's mercy and tenderness for every creature visible to the[people] of our day. We all know that the crisis of modern [humanity] is not superficial but profound. That is why the New Evangelization, while it calls us to have the courage to swim against the tide and to be converted to the true God, cannot but use a language of mercy which is expressed in gestures and attitudes even before words.[50]

Furthermore, he stressed that the goal of the New Evangelization is a new focus on what is essential, "which is the encounter with Christ,

[48]Francis, *Morning Homilies*, 6.

[49]Francis, "Mercy, Feast and Memory," in *Morning Homilies*, 192–193.

[50]Francis, address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization (October 14, 2013), available at https://bit.ly/3zgs5HO (accessed January, 2, 2020).

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with his mercy and his love, and to love our brothers and sisters as he has loved us."[51]

Francis's consistent adherence to a discernibly favorite topic, his persistent development of this subject, and his habit of finding ways to connect this theme to other areas in his early homilies, talks, and addresses discretely unfurled the focal point and central theme of his ministry. Keen observers noticed an important detail very early on in Francis's ministry. Mickens writes: "Emphasizing the inexhaustible mercy of God has emerged as an early theme of his pontificate. His episcopal motto, which he has kept as Pope, emphasizes God's mercy.…"[52] What the motto in the Pope's coat of arms subtly reveals his teaching would soon more substantially express, expound, and explain. Tornielli, after both a distant observation of Francis's early days and a close encounter with him in a comprehensive interview, wrote that the message of mercy might as well have been the new pope's "unwritten encyclical."[53] The Church is now ready for the pope of mercy.

Mercy in the Testimony of a Christian

Mercy as Mark of Personal Spirituality

Popes of recent memory have each displayed a unique personal style and spirituality. A spirituality is a distinctive way of living the faith, much like revealing a spiritual "fingerprint."[54] The papal spiritual style is usually imbedded in the pontiff's coat of arms and inscribed in his personal motto for service, like the *Miserando atque Eligendo* of Francis.

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[51]Francis, address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization.

[52]Mickens, "Francesco di Roma," 6.

[53]Tornielli, "Francis' Vision," xii.

[54]C. Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor: Pope Francis and the Transformation of Orthodoxy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 174.

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John Paul II placed the words *Totus Tuus* or "totally yours" on his heraldry to show his outstanding devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, in whose honor he wrote an impressive encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater*.[55] Benedict XVI was a stellar teacher of fundamental theology,[56] *peritus* or expert in Vatican II,[57] and professor at Regensburg before being elected Archbishop of Munich and Freising. His motto, *Cooperatores Veritatis* (3 John 1:8), signified his past life as a professor and his ministry as a teacher-bishop and, soon after, as pope.[58]

Francis has also given a hint of his own spiritual fingerprint. Called to episcopal ministry, then-Fr. Bergoglio remembered the Latin words from the homily of Venerable Bede in the Office of Readings for the Feast of St. Matthew: *"Vidit ergo Jesus publicanum, et quia miserando atque eligendo vidit, ait illi, 'Sequere me'"* (Jesus therefore sees the tax collector, and since he sees by having mercy and by choosing, he says to him, "Follow me").[59] His three-word episcopal slogan then became *Miserando atque eligendo*, a choice that can be traced to a milestone in his spiritual development.

As a youth just a few weeks shy of his seventeenth birthday, Francis had a powerful experience of divine love and mercy in a church confessional on the feast of St. Matthew in 1953.[60] His vocation to the priesthood was born there, and two years later he would take leave of his family and friends to enter the diocesan seminary. He would later transfer to join the Jesuits.

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[55]A. Dulles, *The Splendor of Faith* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 39.

[56]G. Weigel, *God's Choice: Pope Benedict XVI and the Future of the Catholic Church* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 168.

[57]Weigel, *God's Choice*, 169.

[58]Weigel, *God's Choice*, 177.

[59]Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor,* 175.

[60]Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor,* 175.

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Speaking to A. Spadaro, Francis presented his self-identity as, first and foremost, "a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon … a sinner who is looked upon by the Lord."[61] This makes the motto "very true for me," he insisted.[62] The Pope explained further: "I think the Latin gerund *miserando* is impossible to translate in both Italian and Spanish. I like to translate it with another gerund that does not exist: *misericordiando* ('mercy-ing')."[63] In another *bergoglismo*,[64] the Pope believed that God took mercy on him that day; he was "mercy'd" by God in a humble confessional in his hometown of Flores.[65] When offered to take on the daunting mission of pope, he said (in Latin): "I am a sinner but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance."[66]

In one of his earliest homilies at the chapel of Casa Santa Marta, Francis again stressed the overflowing presence of mercy in the encounter between Jesus and Matthew. Jesus's merciful look revealed that the heavenly Father was indeed a God of mercy. Matthew's experience was personal and real; in fact, "it wasn't a parable: it's a historical fact; it happened."[67] The most natural reaction happened in an instant. "Matthew says yes; he leaves everything and goes off with the Lord. It's the moment of mercy received and accepted: I am coming with you."[68]

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[61]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 16.

[62]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 16.

[63]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 16.

[64]This is the term writers use to refer to the puns Bergoglio was fond of creatively coining and using.

[65]Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 222.

[66]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 16.

[67]Francis, "Mercy, Feast and Memory," 192.

[68]Francis, "Mercy, Feast and Memory," 193.

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Francis concluded by saying that this Scriptural episode must remind us of "two moments and a time" in our own lives. The first moment is the *moment of meeting Jesus*, so full of mercy, so full of kindness, that causes a change in a person's life. The second moment is the *moment of feasting, partying*, or celebrating that resonates with the joy mentioned in Luke 15 when the lost are found again. The party includes, among the invited, other sinners, the poor, and the sick—people Jesus longed to meet and associate with. Then comes the *time to remember*. The party cannot go on forever but the fire of the encounter must be kept alive. One has to remember constantly the two moments until one's life ends.[69]

M. Hebblethwaite observed how September 21 is also the first day of spring in the southern hemisphere: "'Spring' is *primavera*, and 'first' is *primero* and so Bergoglio says in a beautiful pun that '*Dios primerea*'—God is the spring in us, the first in us, loving us first—in a way that is reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins' phrase about God '*eastering*' in us."[70] Bergoglio humbly accepted the primacy of God over his life, a fact that eclipsed the instant worldwide attention and adulation at his election. In response to the cheering, adoring crowd in Rome, he once said, "All of you in the square shouted out 'Francis, Francis, Pope Francis,' but where was Jesus?… From now on enough of Francis; just Jesus!"[71]

Mercy as Mark of Jesuit or Ignatian Spirituality

Having first entered the diocesan seminary of Villa Devoto in his native Buenos Aires in 1956, the young Bergoglio, who observed and admired his Jesuit formators, later sought admission into and was allowed to enter the Society of Jesus in 1958.[72] "Bergoglio was, by his

[69]Francis, "Mercy, Feast and Memory," 193–194.

[70]M. Hebblethwaite, "From Dark Days to Spring," *The Tablet* 267:8990 (March 23, 2013): 12.

[71]J. Carr, "The Francis Factor," *America* 209:11 (October 21, 2013): 11.

[72]S. von Kempis & P. Lawler, *A Call to Serve* (Macau: Claret, 2013), 157.

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own admission, attracted to join the Jesuits because of their character as 'an advance force of the Church, speaking military language, developed with obedience and discipline.'"[73] To Fr. Spadaro, he confided that there were three traits that struck him the most about the Jesuits: "the missionary spirit, community and discipline."[74]

Jorge Bergoglio started his novitiate in 1958, took his first vows in 1960, was ordained a priest in 1969, and took his final vows in the Society in 1973.[75] As a Jesuit, he served as a teacher of literature and psychology, as a novice master and advisor to the provincial superior, as provincial superior of the Argentine Jesuit Province, as Rector of the Colegio Maximo San Jose, and as a pastor in several parishes or communities entrusted to the Society.[76]

The Jesuits follow Ignatian or Jesuit spirituality, a distinctive way of living the Christian life based on the teachings and practice of St. Ignatius of Loyola and of the community he founded.

According to J. Martin, Ignatian spirituality is marked above all by its practicality since St. Ignatius intended it to be shared with as many people as possible, not just with Jesuits.[77] Modras identifies six major hallmarks of Ignatian spirituality (centeredness on Christ with a mission, Trinitarian sweep, liberality of grace, faith as trust, service in the world, and praying with discernment)[78] as well as minor traits such as the emphasis on respect for freedom or for God's mercy in the

[73]von Kempis & Lawler, *A Call to Serve*, 157.

[74]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 17.

[75]C. Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads* (Quezon City, Philippines: Jesuit Communications Foundation Inc., 2013), appendix.

[76]von Kempis & Lawler, *A Call to Serve*, 157.

[77]J. Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* [Kindle edition] (HarperCollins e-books, 2010), loc. 72 of 7379.

[78]R. Modras, *Ignatian Humanism* (Quezon City, Philippines: Jesuit Communications Foundation, Inc., 2005), 38–49.

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sacrament of Confession.[79] Martin condenses the Ignatian spirituality into four primary components: finding God in all things, becoming a contemplative in action, looking at the world in an incarnational way, and seeking freedom and detachment.[80]

One of the main repositories for imbibing Ignatian spirituality is the book of St. Ignatius called *Spiritual Exercises*. Written by St. Ignatius over nearly 20 years—between 1522 and 1548, the book's main goal was to guide people in making a proper discernment or in deciding freely to make good decisions, particularly within the context of a spiritual retreat that is adapted today to the various needs and situations of those taking part.

The *Exercises* follows a structure of four "weeks" patterned after a process of Christian conversion based on the personal experience of the saint. The first week's reflections focus intensely on sin although the real underlying theme is love.[81] While the goal of the first week is to invite people to repentance, caution is taken not to lead people into "sadness, discouragement or self-hatred."[82]

Once a person realizes that they have loved wrongly or unwisely, "the point is not to look at oneself and wallow in self-recrimination or shame but to look at God and realize that one is loved and graced despite all failures and offenses."[83] Although a sense of repentance may ensue, it should not lead to crushing sadness; otherwise, it will not be a sense of sorrow that comes from the Holy Spirit. Repentance in the

[79]Modras, *Ignatian Humanism*, 49.

[80]Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, loc. 197 of 7379.

[81]Modras, *Ignatian Humanism,* 26.

[82]A. de Mello, *Seek God Everywhere: Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (New York: Image/ Doubleday, 2010), 16.

[83]Modras, *Ignatian Humanism,* 27.

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Spiritual Exercises bears the characteristic grace of peace and joy that the Holy Spirit brings.[84]

De Mello explains that although repentance is viewed in the first week as a means of encountering Christ, this is only a partially accurate statement. It is the encounter with Christ that is the basis of a true grace of repentance.

> There is, no doubt some initial repentance that helps us to experience Christ more deeply, but it is only after we have met him that we understand what sin is and what love is. It is only after [one] has come out into the light from a dark dungeon that [one] understands how dark it was down there and what a precious, lovely thing light is.[85]

In other words, the first week actually leads a retreatant to experience her/his sinfulness so that she/he can more authentically meet the God of love, the God of mercy. In Ignatian spirituality, being a sinner has a deeper meaning. It "does not mean 'having done things wrong' (although that is true). It doesn't even mean that we will always do things wrong in the future (also true). It means that humans are—at root, ontologically—always in need of the living mercy of God."[86]

In the landmark exclusive interview with Fr. A. Spadaro, who represented major Jesuit journals around the world, Francis made a stunning statement when asked, "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" The reply came unhesitatingly: "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner."[87]

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[84]A. de Mello, *Contact with God: Retreat Conferences* (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1990), 122–123.

[85]de Mello, *Contact with God*, 122–123.

[86]P. Gilger, "In Need of Mercy," in B. Cupich, S. White et al., "Francis in 'America'," *America* 209:11 (October 21, 2013): 24–25.

[87]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 16.

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While some writers attributed this comment to Francis's innate humility,[88] Jesuit commentators easily saw a connection to Ignatian spirituality's strong emphasis on God's mercy for sinners. Jesuit P. Gilger explains that those who live the Ignatian life deeply know that

> God's mercy reframes our interpretation of everything, institutions included. It does so because having understood the joy of being wrong, we have learned to hold our own plans loosely so as to be better led by God. This is what St. Ignatius means by another famous spiritual term, "indifference"—the freedom to be led by God into the previously unimaginable.[89]

Francis knew himself to be a sinner who has received mercy and so, therefore, a "loved sinner"[90] who confidently entrusts his whole life to God. It is without doubt, then, that the Jesuit Bergoglio grew in his relationship with God through his religious formation and apostolic life in the all-encompassing context of merciful love. This conviction that God is ever faithful in spite of human infidelity elicited the response of a grateful heart that Francis carried with him all through his life.

A. Ivereigh shows how Ignatian spirituality's preference for the theme of mercy colored the way Bergoglio lived his ministry from priest to pope. In all these roles, Bergoglio "always insisted that the Church should offer people what he called this 'primary proclamation'—the experience of God's merciful love—prior to (in the sense both of precedence and importance) the rest of Christian teaching."[91] Francis always insisted that the Church should avoid being fixated on minute, self-serving issues, whether moral or doctrinal, and open up instead to the freshness of the Gospel message.[92]

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[88]S. Bullivant, "I Am a Sinner," in Cupich, White et al., "Francis in 'America'," 24.

[89]Gilger, "In Need of Mercy," 24.

[90]Gilger, "In Need of Mercy," 24.

[91]Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer,* 53.

[92]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 24.

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Francis also views the Church as a field hospital right after the battle. Instead of asking useless questions, the Church must first turn her attention to healing. "You have to heal [their] wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.… And you have to start from the ground up."[93] To disclose and impart fully the mercy of God, the most important reform to undertake is that of attitude. "The ministers of the Gospel must be people … who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue, and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost."[94]

In Ignatian retreat, a person is introduced to a *theologia crucis* and the first week is a "purgative and preparatory 'hell of self-knowledge' (*Theologia Germanica*), which strips the sinner as [she/he] stands before the cross of Christ, of any consciousness of [her/his] own goodness."[95] Francis's spiritual encounter with Christ on the cross explains both his passion for God and his compassion for the poor. Borghesi writes:

> Here we find the source of his embrace of the poor, the suffering, the humiliated: the hard wood of the cross. Cross and *realism* are the two poles of an agonic, tensioned way of thinking that deeply and tenderly loves the ephemeral and particular reality of the world but that, at the same time, does not wish to possess it.[96]

Mercy in the Teachings of a Pope

Francis presented his most substantial teachings on mercy, both in its conceptual and practical aspects, during the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, from December 8, 2015 to November 20, 2016. Tumeinski reflects:

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[93]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 24.

[94]Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," 24.

[95]M. Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis*, trans. B. Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2017), 232.

[96]Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis*, 233.

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> In light of Pope Francis' declaration, the church is being called upon once more—in a formal and prayerful manner—to celebrate a jubilee as a way of growing together and being built up as a people of peace. Proclaiming and practicing the jubilee calls for deeply trusting the Lord who continually shows us his mercy and who provides us what we need.[97]

The Expediency of the Message of Mercy

Francis believes that our time is "a time for mercy."[98] This is the most appropriate moment to reveal the maternal side of the Church. The world is badly wounded and looking, therefore, to the Church above all as mother. The Church cannot afford to settle merely as an observer and must find ways to encounter her children in gestures of gathering, embracing, and caring. Our age is the opportune time to proclaim and live mercy; it is "a *kairos of mercy*."[99]

Francis does not identify a defining moment or tipping point that prompted him to proclaim the jubilee year since he never trusts first reactions. The centrality of mercy was nevertheless always something of a conviction that he kept in his mind and heart. He admits that this cornerstone, this personal discovery of mercy as Jesus's most important message, has slowly evolved over the years in his ministry as a priest, in his work as a confessor, and in his encounter with many inspiring and encouraging stories of people's lives.[100]

Francis, however, also allows his discernment to be influenced by others. The firm resolve to proffer mercy vigorously to the world, he says, came "through prayer, through reflection on the teachings and declarations of the Popes who preceded me, and by thinking of the Church as a field hospital, where treatment is given above all to those

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[97]M. Tumeinski, "Proclaim the Jubilee," *America* 213:18 (December 7–14, 2015), 14–16.

[98]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 6.

[99]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 6.

[100]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 5–6.

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who are most wounded."[101] This formula of prayer, reflection, and challenge imparts the way of Francis, an inductive method based on the steps "see-judge-act" preferred in Latin America.[102]

Mercy in the Witnessing of the Church

In *Misericordiae Vultus*, Francis states that "we need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it" (MV 2). Witnessing hinges on mercy, for "we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives" (MV 3). Christians are called primarily to be witnesses of the Father, not of an institution or a community. Contemplating on and exercising mercy, they become "certain and effective witnesses."[103] The Pope believes that focusing on mercy is not only good but also necessary for the Church: "In this era of profound changes, the Church is called to offer her particular contribution, rendering visible the signs of the presence and closeness of God."[104]

The Pope emphasizes the deep link between witnessing and mission: "This is a time for the Church to rediscover the meaning of the mission entrusted to her by the Lord and on the day of Easter: to be a sign and instrument of the Father's mercy (cf. Jn 20:21–23)."[105] Thus, the whole Church needs to be acquainted with the value of tenderness. The Church has to "know how to welcome the numerous

[101]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 8.

[102]G. Whelan, "Theological Method in *Evangelii Gaudium*: A Dialogue with Bernard Lonergan and Robert Doran," *Gregorianum* 96:1 (2015): 51–75.

[103]Francis, "Why Have a Jubilee of Mercy?" (December 9, 2015), available at https://bit.ly/3FKvlPp (accessed August 3, 2020).

[104]Francis, "Why Have a Jubilee of Mercy?"

[105]Francis, homily for the First Vespers of Divine Mercy Sunday (April 11, 2015), available at https://bit.ly/3AjUUon (accessed June 4, 2020).

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signs of the tenderness which God offers to the whole world, and above all, to those who suffer, who are alone and abandoned, without hope of being pardoned or feeling the Father's love."[106] A person who is touched and transformed by the Lord's mercy becomes a witness of mercy to others. They can heal other people's wounds, showing them that God is close, always offering to everyone God's forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.[107]

In the Church, there is always an awareness of sin, and people, in their own lives, too, feel a constant temptation to disobedience. The Pope, however, relies on a superior power. He trusts in "the love of God which precedes, anticipates and saves."[108] Even the history of sin "can only be understood in the light of God's love and forgiveness.… Were sin the only thing that mattered, we would be the most desperate of creatures. But the promised triumph of Christ's love enfolds everything in the Father's mercy."[109]

Francis recalls the event of the Second Vatican Council which for him is more than just a collection of documents; it was, above all, an encounter between the Church and people. It was also an encounter between the power of the Spirit and the Church that resulted in the transition from self-enclosure to a new missionary journey.[110] In this new sense of mission, going where people are, the Church brings "the joy of the Gospel, and the mercy and forgiveness of God."[111]

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[106]Francis, homily for the First Vespers of Divine Mercy Sunday.

[107]Francis, homily for the First Vespers of Divine Mercy Sunday.

[108]Francis, homily for the opening of the Holy Door of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (December 8, 2015), available at https://bit.ly/3nR9orK (accessed June 4, 2020).

[109]Francis, homily for the opening of the Holy Door of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

[110]Francis, homily for the opening of the Holy Door of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

[111]Francis, homily for the opening of the Holy Door of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

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Mercy in the Teachings of the Popes

Kasper recalls that there exists a tradition of mercy in the lives of many great saints of the Church.[112] Francis traces this same tradition in the magisterial emphasis of previous popes, some of them also canonized saints. He admits that he derives inspiration from their teachings on mercy and from their challenge to the Church to promote and exercise mercy. He discusses in particular how mercy was made manifest in the pontificates of the Vatican II popes: John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI.

John XXIII. Francis openly expresses his admiration for the pope who convened the Second Vatican Council. The spirit and style adopted by the Council Fathers owed a lot to the direction vigorously initiated by John XXIII. *Misericordiae Vultus* recalls the impressive vision of this pope at his opening speech for the Council:

> Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up the arms of severity.… The Catholic Church, as she holds high the torch of Catholic truth at this Ecumenical Council, wants to show herself a loving mother to all; patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness toward her separated children.[113]

In these select sentences, some of Francis's favorite themes appear: mercy, the Church as mother, and compassion.

Paul VI. Francis then turns his attention to the pope who concluded the Second Vatican Council in 1965. In his closing address, Paul VI upheld Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10), a parable of mercy, as the paradigm for the spirituality of the Council.[114] It is uncommon knowledge that in his controversial encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI, far from advocating stern rigorism, encouraged pastors to exercise mercy in guiding the consciences of Christian couples.

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[112]Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 33.

[113]John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 2–3, as cited in MV 4.

[114]Paul VI, speech at the final public session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (December 7, 1965), as cited in MV 4.

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The pope also taught that the Holy Spirit is active not only in the magisterium but in the hearts of the faithful as well.[115]

John Paul II. The documents on mercy from Francis benefit from the "great teaching offered by Saint John Paul II in his encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*,[116] which at the time of publication came unexpectedly, its theme catching many by surprise" (MV 11). Francis alludes to two passages in that encyclical which he finds of lasting relevance. In the first passage, John Paul II laments that mercy has travelled the path of oblivion in today's milieu (DM 2).

In the second passage, John Paul II enthusiastically endorses the proclamation of mercy to the world (DM 15). However, while *Dives in Misericordia* brought the theme of mercy to the fore, it remained part of the theoretical pedagogy of his papacy since it did not translate into official programs or concrete measures in spite of its papal tribute to mercy as the most amazing attribute of God and the encouragement for the Church to proclaim, live, and lead people to the font of mercy.[117]

John Paul II, however, instituted a permanent liturgical feast of Divine Mercy on the Sunday after Easter (*Domenica in Albis*).[118] He canonized St. Faustina Kowalska (1905–1938), the Polish visionary and Apostle of the Merciful Jesus, as the first saint of the new millennium and made her messages universally recognized.[119] Seen by pious

[115]D. Clemmer, "Seven Things Paul VI Did Before Pope Francis Made It Cool," *USCCBlog* (October 14, 2014), available at https://bit.ly/3tOwssw (accessed June 4, 2020).

[116]John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*. Cited in-text as DM.

[117]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 7.

[118]Benedict XVI, Regina Caeli address (March 30, 2008), available at https://bit.ly/3nCxBm8 (accessed July 29, 2020).

[119]W. Skowronska, "So You Think You Understand Mercy?" *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (July 31, 2018), available at https://bit.ly/3hYPDvp (accessed June 26, 2019).

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devotees as most auspicious, this pope, a true apostle of mercy, died in 2005 on the vigil of the feast he established.[120]

Benedict XVI. Francis remembers his predecessor as an ardent supporter of John Paul II's teaching on divine mercy. The most famous quotation from Benedict XVI regarding the topic comes from his tribute to John Paul II on the first anniversary of his death. Benedict XVI offers his condensed thoughts on mercy and on the witness of the Polish pope:

> Indeed, *mercy is the central nucleus* of the Gospel message; it is *the very name of God, the Face with which he revealed himself* in the Old Covenant and *fully in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of creative and redemptive Love*.… The whole of his *(John Paul II's)* mission at the service of the truth about God and [humankind] and of peace in the world is summed up in this declaration, as he himself said in Krakow-Łagiewniki in 2002 when he inaugurated the large Shrine of Divine Mercy: "Apart from the mercy of God there is no other source of hope for [humankind]." John Paul II's message, like St. Faustina's, thus leads back to *the Face of Christ, a supreme revelation of God's mercy*. Constant contemplation of this Face is the legacy he bequeathed to us which we joyfully welcome and make our own.[121] (emphasis added)

Benedict XVI has repeatedly expressed his admiration for Francis and fully endorsed his vision of mercy for the Church. A. Tornielli recounts the contents of an interview the Pope Emeritus gave in 2016 and which was published in Italian as *Per Mezzo della Fede: Dottrina della Giustificazione ed Esperienza di Dio nella Predicazione della Chiesa e negli Esercizi Spirituali*.[122]

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[120]Kasper, *Mercy*, 8.

[121]Benedict XVI, Regina Caeli address.

[122]Cf. A. Tornielli, "Benedict XVI: 'It's Mercy That Steers Us Towards God'," *Vatican Insider* (March 16, 2016), available at https://bit.ly/3kgKEHE (accessed July 2, 2020).

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Mercy in the Ministry of Merciful Priests

Francis cherished his personal experiences of mercy in the lives of simple and ordinary priests he met in his childhood and in his ministry as priest and bishop. He knew and admired these priests for their outstanding examples of compassion and availability to sinners. Not all of them were famous, but they all cast an influence on the Pope's determination to be a merciful shepherd. In his popular interview-book *The Name of God is Mercy*, Francis speaks of the following ordinary priestly models of mercy: Fr. Carlos Duarte Ibarra, Fr. Enrico Pozzoli, an unnamed Franciscan Capuchin, St. Leopold Mandic, and Fr. Jose Ramon Aristi.

Fr. Carlos Duarte Ibarra was the confessor whose meeting with the teenage Jorge Bergoglio on September 21, 1953 led to an unexpected denouement in the young person's vocational journey. While confessing to Duarte, Bergoglio "felt welcomed by the mercy of God."[123] When the priest lost his battle with leukemia, Bergoglio was inconsolable yet grateful to the man who introduced him to the mercy of God.

Fr. Enrico Pozzoli of the Salesian order was the Bergoglios' family priest. He officiated the wedding of the future pope's parents and played the role of a merciful confessor whom everyone could approach comfortably and to whom penitents could unburden a heavy conscience.[124]

An *unnamed Franciscan Capuchin* priest in Buenos Aires was renowned for compassion in the confessional. This priest felt guilty at times that he forgave too much. Whenever this happened, he would enter the chapel and, before the Blessed Sacrament, say to Jesus, "Lord, forgive me if I have forgiven too much. But you're the one who gave me the bad example!"[125] He gives mercy to himself and so can give it to others.

[123]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 12.

[124]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 12.

[125]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 13.

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St. Leopold Mandic was a Franciscan priest who was beatified by Paul VI and canonized by John Paul II. Francis remembers a homily that Albino Luciani (later Pope John Paul I) gave about St. Leopold. In it, Luciani related how the saint knew that no one could avoid sin for very long, and so he was generous with forgiveness. Chided for this, the saint pointed to the example of the Lord Jesus Christ in his generosity to sinners. He also lived by the advice of St. Francis de Sales, who told confessors to encourage fallen sinners to rise up, "get back on the road, and … pay more attention next time."[126]

A Blessed Sacrament Father known as a great confessor, *Fr. Jose Ramon Aristi* was another priestly model of mercy whom Francis knew when he was an auxiliary bishop. In each Confession, Aristi asked the penitent to hold the cross at the end of his Rosary and kiss it. He gave absolution using the same cross. Francis admits that when Fr. Aristi died, he, seeing himself alone at the wake, took the cross of the dead priest's Rosary and kept it on his person ever since. He fervently prayed at that time: "Give me half of your mercy!"[127]

Conclusion

Mercy had been associated with the ministry of Francis long before he assumed his universal pastoral office, even in his role as archbishop of Buenos Aires. After the sudden resignation of now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, speculations about a successor included, among other things, the people's longing for a pope who would exemplify simplicity, proximity, capability for reforms, prophecy, and mercy. Upon Francis's election, an electrifying euphoria flowed through Church circles, especially as people saw in him the promise of a fresh approach to service and a new momentum for evangelization.

Diverting attention from himself, Francis spoke copiously of the God of mercy who is ready to forgive, unafraid to show tenderness,

[126]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 14.

[127]Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 14.

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and kind and understanding to all God's children but especially to sinners and the suffering. Complementing his earliest words were surprising and delicate actions toward those in the peripheries, actions that exhibited his pedagogy of mercy. He has officially enshrined mercy as the theme of his papacy, the guiding star of his program for the evangelization of the Church and of the world.

Mercy has deep roots in the personal life of Francis. Far from being mere academic speculation, mercy has had an existential meaning for him from the moment he experienced being touched by mercy in his formative teenage years. While mostly reticent about the exact nature of this experience, he was nevertheless surrounded by signs of divine mercy (both through persons and events) as he was maturing and choosing a vocation.

As a Jesuit, Francis's experience of mercy was reinforced through the Spiritual Exercises. Francis firmly recognized, above all, that he was a sinner in need of mercy, a sinner forgiven and loved. Flashes of his Ignatian spirituality have shone through in his actions and in his words. His simplicity, love for the poor, and pastoral orientation have been shaped by his ruminations on mercy as a Jesuit priest and, later on, as bishop and pope.

In the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Francis had multiple opportunities to proclaim his message and to present his nuanced interpretation of this theme. Aside from homilies and speeches, the Pope wrote short documents on mercy which give out condensed but clear teachings. His year-long Wednesday catechesis and jubilee-related events provided his most organized and extended discussions.

Francis's theme of mercy casts a strong influence on his dream of a missionary option for the Church, one that lives and breathes the spirit of mercy as a form of witness to the world. Mercy is the core of Francis's evangelizing Church which is illustrated best by models of a community that goes forth, that accompanies people, and that lives poor for the sake of the poor.

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