

Pope Francis: *The Name of God is Mercy: A
Conversation with Andrea Torielli.*

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This book presents a long interview between Pope Francis and the veteran Vatican reporter Andrea Torielli, who poses questions to better understand why “mercy” is a central theme of Francis’s papacy and why he proclaimed a special Jubilee Year of Mercy. This Jubilee began on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in 2015 and is scheduled to end on the Solemnity of Christ the King in 2016. The book begins by quoting the parable of the prayers of the self-righteous Pharisee and the contrite tax collector (Lk 18:9–14). Torielli then provides an introduction to “Francis’s Vision of Mercy,” including an explanation of how the book came to be written. The book contains nine chapters and an appendix.

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In chapter I, “A Time for Mercy,” Pope Francis shares: “The centrality of mercy . . . has slowly evolved over the years in my work as a priest, as a consequence of my experience as a confessor, and thanks to the many positive and beautiful stories that I have known” (5–6). He speaks of the motherly love of the church and the opportune time (*kairos*) for mercy today. Pope Francis offers quotations about mercy from Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, the latter calling mercy “the name of God himself,” thereby showing his continuity with his predecessors. Pope Francis says he likes to think “of the Church as a field hospital, where treatment is given above all to those who are most wounded” (8). He explains that mercy is connected to God’s faithfulness and that “when one feels the mercy of God, he feels a great shame for himself and for his sin” (10). Pope Francis shares a personal experience of being seventeen years old and confessing to Fr. Ibarra: “I felt welcomed by the mercy of God” (11). He also shares a story about a young priest who came to him for help, saying that he sometimes had doubts about forgiving too much in the confessional. In prayer he said to Jesus: “Lord, forgive me if I have forgiven too much. But you’re the one who gave me the bad example!” (13).

Pope Francis, however, points out other sides to the question, saying, among other things, that “Relativism wounds people too” and reminding us that Pope Pius XII “said that the tragedy of our age was that it had lost its sense of sin.” By contrast, Pope Francis says, “Today . . . we don’t believe that there is a chance for redemption. . . . We need mercy” (16). Pope Francis asks, Why do many today go to psychics and fortune-tellers? He responds, in part: “Today people try to find salvation wherever they can” (16). In another interesting moment, he explains that if “a confessor

cannot absolve a person, he needs to explain why, he needs to give them a blessing. . . . The love of God exists even for those who are not disposed to receive it” (17). In this opening chapter, as is typical of his style, Pope Francis shares a number of experiences from his own life and others’ lives to illustrate his points.

In chapter 2, Pope Francis describes sacramental confession as a gift and priests as instruments of God’s mercy. He points out, “Sin is more than a stain, it is a wound that needs to be healed” (26). He says that it is good to feel shame for one’s sins, that it is a grace to ask for, because it makes us humble: “When I heard confessions I always thought of my own sins, my own need for mercy” (28).

In chapter 3, he continues along these lines, stating: “Sin is displeasing to God; we should be displeased when we commit sin. If we don’t feel like a sinner, we should ask for the grace to feel like one” (31–32). He refers to Bruce Marshall’s novel about a young priest, Gaston, who hears the confession of a young German soldier about to be sentenced to death. He confesses numerous amorous affairs with women but does not feel that he can repent of them since he would do them again. The priest asks, “But are you sorry you are not sorry? He says yes.” Pope Francis responds: “The door is opened a crack” (33). He sees this as an example of how God seeks a small opening that will permit him to grant grace. God does not want anyone to be lost. A person’s gesture of going to confession is testimony to the desire for change.

In chapter 4, Pope Francis shares his thoughts when he visits prisoners: “Why them and not me? I should be here. I deserve to be here. Their fall could have been mine.” He says, “We often fall because of our weakness and choose evil. This is the consequence of original sin” (41–42). To redeem us for our sins, to heal that

wound, Jesus allowed himself to be crucified. Pope Francis mentions the case he heard about a man who had an affair with his maid but thought he was a good Christian because he prayed and did his spiritual reading. The pope responds: “This is arrogance” (44). In these chapters we see how he often uses stories of real or fictional people to illustrate his points, as Jesus did in his parables. He continues in this vein in chapter 5, where he says: “The Church condemns sin because it has to relay the truth. . . . But at the same time, it embraces the sinner who recognizes himself as such. . . . The Church does not exist to condemn people but to bring about an encounter with God’s mercy” (50, 52).

In chapter 6, Pope Francis says that sometimes we take narcissistic pleasure in the wounds of our sins, which is unhealthy, or we despair that we will ever be forgiven. The important thing is not to never fall but, when we do, to get back up and start over. One of the tasks of the church is to help people perceive that there are no situations from which they cannot get up. When he was a parish priest in Argentina, he met a woman with young children whose husband had left her and who, when she could not find work, prostituted herself to feed her children. She thanked him that he always called her “Señora,” which he did to emphasize that it is important that we not wound people’s dignity. When asked about homosexuality he notes that we are all first an “individual person”; he prefers “that homosexuals come to confession, that they stay close to the Lord, and that we all pray together. You can . . . show them the way and accompany them along it” (62). When asked if there can be opposition between truth and mercy, he says that “mercy is real; it is the first attribute of God” (62). With regard to the law that cast out the leper to protect the healthy from contamination, he points out that “Jesus moves according to a different

kind of logic,” (65) that of a God of love who desires the salvation of all people. He touches and heals the leper and brings him back into the community. He shows us the way, which can be shocking to the scholars of the law. We need to make contact with those in darkness without letting ourselves be influenced by that darkness. Our faults give us an opportunity to be humble, to receive God’s mercy, and to sympathize with our neighbors’ faults.

In chapter 7, however, Pope Francis points out that mercy does not mean “throwing open the doors of our prisons but . . . helping those who have fallen get back up” (80). Corruption elevates sin to a system. The corrupt man is not humble; he does not recognize his need for mercy and does not repent of sin but pretends to be a Christian and masks his corruption with good manners. “Generally the Lord saves the corrupt man by great ordeals which crack open his shell and allow the grace of God to enter” (84). The family is the first school of mercy where we learn to love and forgive.

In chapter 8, he continues: “Mercy is divine and has to do with the judgment of sin. Compassion has a more human face. It means to suffer with . . . to not remain indifferent to the pain and the suffering of others” (91). Many teachings of the gospel “help us understand the overabundance of mercy, God’s logic.” As examples he mentions turning the other cheek, giving to the one who asks, loving one’s enemies, and the parable of the king inviting guests to his son’s wedding.

In the last chapter of the book, chapter 9, “Living the Holy Year of Mercy,” Pope Francis states that the works of mercy are still valid. The Seven Corporal Works of Mercy are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, dressing the naked, housing the pilgrims, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead. Today there is no lack of opportunity to live these

mercies: “We are called to serve Christ the Crucified through every marginalized person” (98). The Spiritual Works of Mercy include advising those in doubt, teaching the ignorant, admonishing the sinners, consoling the afflicted, forgiving offenses, being patient with annoying people, and praying to God for both the living and the dead. “By welcoming a marginalized person whose body is wounded and by welcoming the sinner whose soul is wounded, we put our credibility as Christians on the line” (99). Pope Francis concludes his interview by citing the words of St. John of the Cross: “In the evening of life, we will be judged on love alone” (99).

The book also includes, in an appendix, *Misericordiae Vultus*, the bull that proclaimed the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, on April 11, 2015. In some ways this document offers a more systematic treatment of mercy as a counterpoint to the interviews, which include stories that illustrate some main points about mercy. This review offers readers a sense of this book’s contents and style. As a professor of Christian moral and spiritual theology, I found this book both inspiring and very moving. I recommend it to a wide audience.