

Mercy is God's identity card; it's ours too!

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! For once, the much anticipated pile of post-Christmas novels has been set aside. Squeezing them out for pride of place has been the first book written by Pope Francis. The slim 150-page book, published in English in mid-January, bears a title written in the pope's own handwriting, *The name of God is Mercy*. Most of the book is the result of an interview with veteran Vatican journalist Andrea Tornielli; attached as an appendix is the text of *Misericordiae Vultus*, the document in which Francis announced his decision to proclaim the Holy Year of Mercy which began on December 8 and will end on November 20.

In simple, personal terms, the book helps to explain why mercy is emerging as the keystone of the present papacy, and why Francis has instituted the Year of Mercy. The bottom line is his deep conviction that mercy is the first attribute of God. "The name of God is mercy," Francis writes. "There are no situations we cannot get out of, we are not condemned to sink into quicksand." The church is not in the world to condemn, he says, but "to make possible an encounter with the visceral love that is God's mercy. For this to occur we must go out. Go out from the churches and parishes, go out to find people where they suffer, where they hope."

There are some key themes in the pope's book which connect directly with our Mercy ministries. One is his insistence that the church be seen not as a specialist centre to which clients with appointments come knocking, but as a field hospital treating those who are most wounded, "a church that warms people's hearts with its closeness and nearness." The McAuley walking Sisters and their partners in ministry will warm to this determination by Pope Francis to push out to the margins, and to care for those who are heavily burdened.

There's another telling expression which the pope uses more than once – 'the apostolate of the ear' – the willingness to make time to listen to people's stories with compassion. It's a reminder of the Mercy maxim 'there are three things more precious than gold which cost nothing to give – the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows,' often attributed to Catherine McAuley, though her biographer Mary Sullivan doubts its authenticity.

Especially disarming is the pope's own sense of sinfulness,

E te Atua nui, te atawhai tou ingoa;
Great God: mercy is your name, in every age
but especially in this Year of Mercy.

So we come in trust as another Lent unfolds,
asking that you take our hearts and make them anew
by your grace, enabling us to walk more faithfully
along the path that leads to life in abundance.
Mercy is your identity card; make it ours as well.
As we meet you in our needy sisters and brothers,
empower us who have freely received to freely give.
Remind us as does St John of the Cross, that "in the
evening of life, we will be judged on love alone."

Imaging Mercy Today



Pope Francis embraces a prison inmate in Philadelphia: 'Why him and not me?' asks the pope. (Photo: J Ernst, RNS)

walking as he does in the shoes of Peter, chosen by Jesus despite the apostle's repeated denials. His awareness of being a sinner is sharpened whenever he goes through the gates of a prison. "I always think, why them and not me? I should be here. Their fall could have been mine. I do not feel superior to the people who stand before me. It might seem shocking, but I derive consolation from Peter. He betrayed Jesus, and even so he was chosen."

The pope recalls that mercy is a word that features in his own motto as bishop and pope – 'miserando atque eligendo' which he translates as "mercy and choosing" – a reference to Jesus calling Matthew the unworthy tax-collector to be a disciple. Mercy thus becomes a verb; it is what God does; it is what we are called to do.

A sharp contrast which Francis draws is between true pastors and those he calls 'the scholars of the law'. The latter were the principal opponents of Jesus, insisting on unconditional obedience to the Law of Moses even if this meant stoning the woman accused of adultery. Jesus always looked for another way, pursuing what Francis calls 'the logic of God', reaching out to welcome and embrace, transforming evil into good, offering an open door, not a closed one.

Not surprisingly, a lot of the pope's attention is focussed on the sacrament of Reconciliation, and on the church's ministry to those who have lost their way through sin. He draws from his own experience as both a confessor and a penitent, and recalls the tears he shed as a 17-year-old after the priest to whom he went for absolution died. He hopes that the Year of Mercy will mean a warm encounter for all who are "in need of an attentive ear, understanding, forgiveness and love."

The question here for our Mercy ministries is around how they might reach out more to all who are feeling alienated or alone. This month Pope Francis will visit Mexico, where his itinerary includes the border city of Ciudad Juarez, a choice that links him clearly with migrants looking for a new life of opportunity in the United States. A visit to a tough prison in the same city is also on the pope's schedule. Who is waiting right now for an embrace from us that will bring them new life and hope? – Dennis Horton