Offering a precious stone: the communication of Pope Francis’s Jubilee of Mercy

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ABSTRACT

The Jubilee of Mercy (8 December 2015–21 November 2016) was a bold attempt by Pope Francis to place God’s mercy at the heart of the Catholic Church’s offer to contemporary society. Discerning that the Catholic message is too often seen as Pharisaism – defending the law while not caring for the sufferer – he set out to demonstrate that mercy is what defines God, and that the Church exists, essentially, to bring humanity into an encounter with that mercy. This reset, which is key to the ‘pastoral conversion’ the Latin-American bishops called for in their May 2007 meeting in Aparecida, Brazil, is possibly the most ambitious attempt to reframe the Catholic offer since the Second Vatican Council, and is in many ways a return to that Council’s key messages, while building on the growing awareness of mercy in the pontificates since then. This paper narrates the background to the Jubilee and suggests reasons for Francis’s diagnosis. It looks at the way Francis sought to frame the Jubilee in the year running up to it, and the instruments he deployed in the course of the year to help effect that reframe, in words and concrete actions.

Sources

A few months before his election as pope, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio gave a retreat to the charitable organization Caritas in which he compared truth to a precious stone. ‘When you offer it in your hand, it seduces,’ he told them, ‘but when you throw it in someone’s face, it wounds.’

The way the Christian message is communicated impacts its effect. To the extent that it captures and channels God’s tenderness and mercy, the message communicates who God is, and, therefore, has the capacity to convert. ‘The truth is ultimately Christ himself, whose gentle mercy is the yardstick for measuring the way we proclaim the truth and condemn injustice,’ Pope Francis wrote in his message for World Communications Day 2016. ‘Only words spoken with love and accompanied by meekness and mercy can touch our sinful hearts.’ Conversely, he added, ‘[h]arsh and
moralistic words and actions risk further alienating those whom we wish to lead to conversion and freedom, reinforcing their sense of rejection and defensiveness. Why this should be so is in the nature of divine mercy; God’s merciful love is not a reward for an embrace of the Truth, but opens a soul to that Truth. As Francis continually reminds us, God takes the initiative.

Mercy is first of all a way of seeing, a hermeneutic. Jesus sees the person with the heart, with the eyes of the Good Shepherd, and therefore truthfully, whereas the Pharisees, who start with the defence of the truth and the law, turn out to be blind guides, because they ignore the complex realities before them that do not fit their schemes. Despite its religious origins, their truth becomes ideology – merely human truths, without authentic foundation – and, therefore, rigid, sclerotic, and narrow, incapable of change, ‘a fundamental closure in face of the wholeness of reality, one which turns a partial aspect into an absolute’, as Karl Rahner describes it. While mercy without truth would be ‘a consolation that lacks authenticity … a mere empty promise’, as Walter Kasper notes, conversely ‘truth without mercy would be cold, dismissive and hurtful’ – like the stone thrown rather than offered in the hand. In Evangelii Gaudium, Francis uses the term eticismo sin bondad – ‘ethical systems bereft of kindness’ – to describe this morality without mercy. Mercy, conversely, takes into account the singularity and uniqueness of different situations and people, and their circumstances. That is how God sees humanity.

That is why, because Jesus is the Good Shepherd, only when we communicate mercy do we successfully communicate God. As Pope Francis told the Mexican bishops in February 2016, ‘la Virgen Morenita [Our Lady of Guadalupe] teaches us that the only power capable of conquering the hearts of men and women is the tenderness of God. That which delights and attracts, that which humbles and overcomes, that which opens and unleashes, is not the power of instruments or the force of law, but rather the omnipotent weakness of divine love, which is the irresistible force of its gentleness and the irrevocable pledge of its mercy.

For Francis, mercy is not just the response God makes to a contrite heart, but the initiative God takes in response to human pain and need, which in turn has the potential to trigger repentance, which in turn opens a person to the transformative power of divine mercy. Francis is convinced that a sinful person is more likely to change their life if they encounter gratuitous mercy and forgiveness, rather than a law before which they stand condemned. That means opening new possibilities for people to come to recognize God’s grace in their lives, whatever their limitations or circumstances. Strikingly absent from the ‘narrative theology’ of the Francis pontificate is any mention of God’s anger, but instead a constant focus on His compassionate, suffering love and desire to heal and forgive.

Hence, the emphasis in his pontificate on the art of accompaniment, discernment and forming consciences in both Evangelii Gaudium, Francis’s 2013 exhortation, and Amoris Laetitia, the 2016 exhortation on love and the family released halfway during the Jubilee. Both documents seek to open up or revive a tradition of pastoral accompaniment that allows for the discernment in people’s concrete lives – that is, taking into account their limitations and constraints – of God’s grace. To form consciences, as Francis asks of the Church, says Msgr Phillipe Bordeyne, rector of the Institut Catholique in Paris, ‘you must awaken people to the sweet presence in them of Grace,
which bathes their limitations in a light of mercy in such a way that the decisions they are to take become at the same time more audacious and more realistic.  

Meditating in another retreat in Buenos Aires on Jesus’s forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11), Cardinal Bergoglio asked: ‘Do you think that after being forgiven, the woman returned to her sinful life, to her adultery?’ The Gospel does not tell us, he went on, yet you could be sure that she didn’t because ‘no one who experiences such great mercy is capable of departing from the law. It is the consequence.’ Francis expressed the same idea in his document concluding the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Misericordia et Misera, on 21 November 2016. ‘Once clothed in mercy, even if the inclination to sin remains,’ he noted of the adulterous woman forgiven by Jesus, ‘it is overcome by the love that makes it possible for her to look ahead and to live her life differently.’

In a retreat for priests during the Jubilee of Mercy, Francis suggested how this conversion could come about: by ‘delaying’ the application of the law and refusing to go along with the stoning crowd, Jesus resists the ‘categorization’ of the woman as an adulterer, and creates thereby a space for her transformation. This, essentially, was the space Francis intended to create in Chapter 8 of Amoris Laetitia. The timing was not coincidence. Francis wanted the Jubilee to shape the ‘hermeneutic’ with which the exhortation was received.

The primary objective of the Jubilee of Mercy (8 December 2015–21 November 2016), therefore, was to allow or enable people to experience God’s grace, trusting that, if a door is opened just a little bit, God can enter into a situation or heart and transform them. But that implied a secondary objective: to enable the Church – God’s instrument – to become better at opening those doors by coming closer to people in their concrete realities. This is the concept captured in the term ‘pastoral conversion’ used by the 2007 document of the Latin-American bishops agreed at Aparecida, Brazil, which is in turn laid out in Evangelii Gaudium.

Francis’s 2013 exhortation mentions mercy 32 times, and calls for the Church to be ‘the house of the Father, with doors always wide open,’ not a ‘tollhouse’ but ‘the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.’ The Pope imagines an ‘evangelizing community’ of ‘missionary disciples’ that ‘has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy.’ That meant also taking up again the invitation of the Second Vatican Council, which had sought to move mercy into the centre of the Church’s proclamation and praxis. Providentially, the Jubilee opened on 8 December 2015, the 50th anniversary of the close of the Council.

The Jubilee was a privileged mechanism for bringing about that pastoral conversion crucial for the new evangelization. The conversion meant recognizing and imitating the ‘divine pedagogy’, that is, God’s way of interacting with humanity. The imitation is captured in the Jubilee’s motto, taken from Luke’s Gospel (6:36), Merciful like the Father, as well as its logo, the work of the Slovenian Jesuit, Fr Marko Ivan Rupnik, which showed Jesus as the Good Shepherd carrying a person on his shoulders as if he were a lost sheep. The scene is captured within an iconic mandorla, calling to mind the two natures of Christ, divine and human, the colours progressively lighter as they move outward, suggesting the movement of Christ who carries humanity out of the night of sin and death.
The formal announcement of the Jubilee was made a few months before it opened, on April 11 2015, by means of a ‘Bull of Indiction’ entitled *Misericordiae Vultus* (‘the Face of Mercy’). In it Francis made clear that the embrace of mercy was the key to spreading the Gospel. ‘The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love,’ Francis wrote, adding that unless people saw in the Church God’s merciful love, they would fail to recognize it as God’s body on earth. ‘Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy,’ he warned starkly.14

That forgetting or sidelining of mercy in the Church’s proclamation was taken up in Walter Kasper’s book *Mercy*, which Francis praised at his first Angelus as pope. In it the German cardinal claims that the most serious criticism that can be raised against the Church is that its words (about mercy) ‘often are followed by or seem to be followed by few actions; that it speaks of the mercy of God, but many people perceive its actions as rigorous, harsh and cruel.’15

The media narrative, reflecting this prejudice, has tended to view the Church in the role of a harsh judge more interested in the defence of its doctrine and law than in helping people, and more concerned with its institutional preservation than the good of society and humanity. This ‘pharisaical’ frame, not always undeserved but overall false, has proved a major obstacle to the Church’s capacity to communicate in contemporary society. As society becomes unchained from its Christian moorings and states adopt radical equality agendas, the Church has been continually cast in a series of frames: attached to power and privilege, eager to condemn, dogmatic and out of touch.16

In setting out to change that perception, Francis has risen to the central communications challenge for the Church in modern times: to demonstrate the falsity of the cultural prejudice against Catholic Christianity as harsh, legalistic, distant, and judgemental. It meant demonstrating that God was mercy, and that the Church needed to reflect that key attribute by means of a ‘pastoral conversion’ characterized by proximity, warmth, and an emphasis on forgiving and healing. Francis captured this idea in his metaphor for the Church, which he insisted was not a regulator or tollhouse but a ‘battlefield hospital.’17

As he insisted throughout the Jubilee, Francis was drawing from a stream already tapped by previous papacies. St John XXIII had called the Second Vatican Council as a pastoral assembly that would use ‘the medicine of mercy more than that of severity,’ as he put it, a vision that found expression in the famous opening lines of *Gaudium et spes* which made clear that the Church walked alongside the world, sharing its sufferings as well as its joys.18 Blessed Paul VI spoke at the Council’s conclusion of a ‘river of affection and admiration’ that had gone out from the Council to the world, correcting errors but treating people with love and respect: ‘instead of depressing predictions, hopeful remedies; rather than dire warnings, messages of hope.’19 *Amoris Laetitia*, which notes how ‘we have often been on the defensive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness’, is an expression of that same emphasis.20

Pope St. John Paul II issued an early encyclical on mercy, *Dives in Misericordia* (1980), which remains the classic teaching on the topic. There he laid out a theme that Francis would develop in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si* as well as during the
Jubilee, namely the threat from an impersonal, technology-driven mentality. ‘The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy,’ *Misericordiae Vultus* quoted *Dives in Misericordia*. ‘The word and the concept of ‘mercy’ seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it (cf. Gen 1:28). This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy ... And this is why, in the situation of the Church and the world today, many individuals and groups guided by a lively sense of faith are turning, I would say almost spontaneously, to the mercy of God.’

The technocratic paradigm is, essentially, merciless; it spurns failure, limitations, and patience, trusting only human and material power. Mercy, therefore, is counter-cultural, the antidote to the spirit of the age, demonstrated both in Christ’s closeness to suffering, and in the Father’s going beyond the boundaries of justice to embrace the Prodigal Son, restoring his dignity, as a merciful God seeks to do with a humanity burdened by ‘the awareness of squandered sonship’. In a chapter dedicated to the topic, ‘The Mercy of God in the Mission of the Church’, John Paul II emphasized that it was the Church’s duty to give witness to divine mercy in its own life, for the sake of humanity.

Arguably, however, the postconciliar struggles between so-called ‘progressives’ and ‘traditionalists’ over doctrine resulted in a reinforcement of the preconciliar emphasis on doctrine rather than praxis. The need to reformulate Catholic doctrine in the light of the Second Vatican Council using a hermeneutic of reform (neither continuity nor discontinuity) was the great task of the Polish pope’s pontificate, which took place against the cultural backdrop of growing relativism and subjectivism. The Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, who in the 1980s was general editor of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, has recalled how fear of relativism led many moral theologians to reduce conscience to being concerned with the mere transposition of the Church’s teaching into actions. This made it harder to show the role of grace in complex or irregular situations, a hallmark of God’s mercy.

While papal teaching has constantly started with the love of God – especially Benedict XVI’s 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, which places love rather than justice as the basic principle of Catholic social teaching – the charge identified by Kasper, that Church speaks of mercy but acts mercilessly, has proved hard to shift.

Kasper argues that the failure of theological reflection concerning the central message of mercy ‘has allowed this concept often to be downgraded, degenerating into a ‘soft’ spirituality or a vapid pastoral concern’, a ‘pseudomercy’ counterposed to truth and the law. This corrupted idea of mercy helps explain why many critics have seen Francis’ mercy teaching as an ‘opt-out’ from the full demands of Christ’s teaching, rather than a deeper embrace of them.

An additional theological challenge is posed by the metaphysical starting-point of the doctrine of God. Pastorally, the abstract conception of God as distant and insensitive to suffering is a ‘catastrophe’, Kasper argues, ‘for the proclamation of a God who is insensitive to suffering is a reason that God has become alien and finally irrelevant to many human beings.’
Francis’s pontificate, but especially the Jubilee, can be seen, therefore, as a response to the challenge Kasper set forth in his book. From the start, Francis has sought to put mercy at the heart of the Church, to restore it to its proper place. He has constantly emphasized, in both actions and words, God’s initiative in response to human suffering, need and sin, expressed above all in Jesus’s close attention to poverty and pain. He has spoken often of his own childhood experience of that mercy while confessing his sins to a priest who became his spiritual guide. The experience created his vocation, a missionary impulse as a result of God’s merciful action (‘misericordiando’). His episcopal motto, which he retains as pope, miserando atque eligendo, describes the moment the apostle Matthew is called by Jesus, who, in the words of the Venerable Bede, ‘looked on him with mercy, and chose him’.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), Francis quotes St. Thomas Aquinas that mercy is the greatest of all the virtues, making clear it is the guiding criterion for church reform: the Church must change to become a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel. Mercy should be at the heart of the Church’s kerygmatic proclamation as well as its concern for the world and especially the poor. EG offers the vision of a missionary Church that knows how to come alongside, rather than just talk at, people; a Church that offers not just God’s truth but God’s merciful understanding; a Church that doesn’t just offer you the goal, but walks with you in that direction.

With the Brazilian bishops in Rio de Janeiro in July 2013, Francis described pastoral care as ‘the exercise of the Church’s motherhood,’ adding: ‘We need a Church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of ‘wounded’ persons in need of understanding, forgiveness, love.’ Returning from Rio, Francis told journalists that this time was a ‘kairos of mercy.’

On the eve of the Jubilee itself, in an interview with *Credere*, Francis denied that it was ‘a strategy’ but said it had come to him as a prompting of the Holy Spirit. Later, in his book-length interview on mercy with Andrea Tornielli, he recalled that he first came upon the idea during a roundtable meeting with theologians as the archbishop of Buenos Aires. ‘The topic was what the pope could do to bring people closer together; we were faced with so many problems that there seemed to be no solution,’ Francis recalled. ‘One of the participants suggested’ a Holy Year of forgiveness.’ This idea stayed with me.

In *Credere* he made three observations about the ‘sources’ of the Jubilee. First, that the theme of mercy had been strongly stressed in the Church since the time of Pope Paul VI, and had been given new depth by St John Paul II in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, his canonization of Faustina Kowalska and his institution of the Feast of Divine Mercy.

Second, that mercy was in response to the times. It was ‘obvious that today’s world is in need of mercy, it is in need of compassion. We are used to bad news, to cruel news and to the greatest atrocities that offend the name and life of God. The world is in need of discovering that God is Father, that there is mercy, that cruelty isn’t the way, that condemnation isn’t the way.’ (This was an idea he repeated in the Tornielli interview, where he also linked the forgetfulness of sin to the lack of experience of mercy. ‘Pius XII, more than half a century ago, said that the tragedy of our age was
that it had lost its sense of sin, the awareness of sin. Today we add further to the tragedy by considering our illness, our sins, to be incurable, things that cannot be healed or forgiven. We lack the actual concrete experience of mercy.\textsuperscript{31} In other words, mercy was as necessary a response to unbelief and secularism as had been the re-emphasis on truth and orthodoxy. Perhaps counter-intuitively, rather than offering condemnation in response to the rejection of that truth, the Church was called to heal the wounds it had caused.

Hence, third, the Church’s need of pastoral conversion. ‘Because the Church herself sometimes follows a hard line,’ he observed, ‘she falls into the temptation of stressing only the moral rules, but many people remain outside.’\textsuperscript{32} In \textit{Evangelii Gaudium} he had spelled out the importance of restoring a focus in the Church’s preaching and communication on the \textit{kerygma}, the saving love of a merciful God, rather than on a disjointed series of doctrines. Being merciful did not mean reducing the demands of truth: confessors who were either too rigorist or too lax were not merciful, because they abandoned people, either by taking refuge in the law or by giving the impression that a sin wasn’t sinful. For Francis, it was clear, being merciful meant coming close to people and healing wounds, not merely bandaging them with pseudo-mercy.\textsuperscript{33} In \textit{Misericordia et Misera}, the document concluding the Jubilee, he again explicitly linked mercy with pastoral conversion. ‘Our communities can remain alive and active in the work of the new evangelization in the measure that the ‘pastoral conversion’ to which we are called will be shaped daily by the renewing force of mercy.’\textsuperscript{34}

**Proclaiming the year of God’s favour**

In 2014, Francis returned continually to the theme, especially in the build-up to the synod of October that year. The Synod on the Family, like the Second Vatican Council, would be taken up not in endless restatements of doctrinal positions and condemnations of the world’s errors, but seek to come alongside people in their concrete lives, offering them practical assistance in preparing for a living-out the vows of marriage as well as helping to bind the wounds and integrate those whose marriages had failed.

In February, Francis invited Cardinal Kasper to address the cardinals. In his two-hour address, he argued that mercy was the hermeneutical principle for the interpretation of truth, and that the two were bound to each other. In respect of the issue that would prove so contentious in the course of the synod, Kasper asked that if a divorced and remarried couple was truly sorry for the failures in their first union, and if a declaration of nullity or a return to that union was out of the question, and if they longed for the sacraments as a source of strength in striving to obey God’s will, ‘do we then have to refuse or can we refuse him or her the sacrament of penance and communion, after a period of reorientation?’ This was not, he said, a ‘general solution’ but called for \textit{discretio}, the discernment of individual cases, avoiding the twin dangers of laxism and rigorism.\textsuperscript{35}

At the same consistory, Francis gave one of his most significant and challenging homilies, one that would shape the narrative of the Jubilee. He presented a dichotomy between the ‘logic of God’ on the one hand, and the ‘logic of the doctors of the law’ on the other. The primary focus of the latter is the defence of the law and preventing
the community from being contaminated, while the first is preoccupied above all with the reinstatement or integration of the outcast. Jesus does not abolish the law of Moses, noted Francis, but restores it to its proper purpose; by healing and reintegrating the leper, rather than casting him out, he shows what the law is for.

There are two ways of thinking and of having faith: we can fear to lose the saved and we can want to save the lost. Even today it can happen that we stand at the crossroads of these two ways of thinking. The thinking of the doctors of the law, which would remove the danger by casting out the diseased person, and the thinking of God, who in his mercy embraces and accepts by reinstating him and turning evil into good, condemnation into salvation and exclusion into proclamation. These two ways of thinking are present throughout the Church’s history: casting off and reinstating… The Church’s way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement. This does not mean underestimating the dangers of letting wolves into the fold, but welcoming the repentant prodigal son; healing the wounds of sin with courage and determination; rolling up our sleeves and not standing by and watching passively the suffering of the world. The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for eternity; but to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart.36

By polarizing the contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees as two different approaches to the law expressed in two different attitudes, Francis had found a frame that he would use in many homilies and messages on the topic. In March 2015, for example, Francis spoke of people who had made mistakes in life summoning up the courage to go to a church but finding the doors closed, or a cold response. ‘So what the Holy Spirit creates in the heart of people, those Christians with their doctors-of-the-law mentality destroy,’ he lamented. Francis contrasted this attitude with that of Jesus, who he said not only welcomes but ‘goes out to find this man’. Rather than scolding him, he carries him on his shoulders. ‘And when God rebukes his people – “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” – he’s talking about this,’ he added. He then prayed for each person and the Church to be ‘converted to the mercy of Jesus’ which would allow for the law to be ‘fully accomplished’.37 A week later, he returned to the challenge, warning against ‘judges who lack mercy’ both in the Church and in wider society. ‘Where there is no mercy there is no justice. When God’s people come close asking for forgiveness, it often finds itself condemned by one of these judges.38

That same month, on a Friday afternoon penitential service at St. Peter’s exactly two years after his election, Pope Francis announced the Extraordinary Jubilee in a homily reflecting on the sinful woman in the house of the pharisee Simon (Luke 7:36–50). Francis showed how the woman responds to Jesus’s merciful love in a way that allows her to be reborn to a new life, in contrast to Simon, who ‘cannot find the path of love’ because he is incapable of taking the next step to meet Jesus: ‘he invokes only justice, and in so doing, he errs.’ Because ‘no one can be excluded from the mercy of God’, he said, ‘the Church is the house that welcomes all and refuses no one. Its doors remain wide open, so that those who are touched by grace can find the certainty of forgiveness.’

He added: ‘I have often thought about how the Church might make clear its mission of being a witness to mercy. It is a journey that begins with a spiritual conversion. For this reason, I have decided to call an extraordinary Jubilee that is to have
the mercy of God at its center. It shall be a Holy Year of Mercy. We want to live this Year in the light of the Lord’s words: ‘Be merciful, just as your father is merciful’.39

Francis said he was entrusting the organization of the Jubilee to the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, the Vatican dicastery created by Benedict XVI in 2011 and whose task – to design ways of presenting the Gospel in secularized western continents – had been the topic of the synod of 2012. It was a significant choice. The answer to the question posed by the 2012 synod had been given by the Latin-American bishops attending, namely that the Church’s efficacy and credibility as an evangelizer depended in essence on the Church’s pastoral conversion. To the question posed by that synod – how to represent the Gospel in secularized western countries? – Francis had given his answer in Evangelii Gaudium. Mercy was the means to that conversion, and therefore it was only appropriate that Archbishop Rino Fisichella’s council should take charge of it.

He spelled this out in October 2015 in an address to the New Evangelization council’s plenary assembly. ‘There is need of Christians who render the mercy of God visible to the people of today,’ he told them, adding that because the crisis of contemporary humanity was ‘profound’ the New Evangelization ‘cannot but use the language of mercy, made up of attitudes and gestures even before words.’ Francis saw the same crisis of lack of faith in society as his predecessors, but focussed instead on the damage inflicted – and humanity’s need of healing.40

Misericordiae Vultus (MV), the Bull of Indiction of 11 April 2015, made clear that mercy was not a theory or a concept but an earthly, fleshy, ‘visceral’ kind of love that expresses the action of God made ‘visible and tangible’ in concrete intentions, attitudes and behaviours that show He desires people’s wellbeing and to see them ‘happy, full of joy and peaceful’. He critiqued a conception of the law that effectively divides people into ‘just’ and ‘sinners’, noting that Jesus ‘goes beyond the law; the company he keeps with those the law considers sinners makes us realize the depth of his mercy.’

Francis stressed in the 10,000-word document that that Church ‘is authentic and credible only when she becomes a convincing herald of mercy’, which was ‘the core of the revelation of Jesus Christ.’ The Church’s primary task, he said, was ‘to introduce everyone to the great mystery of God’s mercy by contemplating the face of Christ.’41

Francis had referred in MV to sending out ‘Missionaries of Mercy’ during Lent of the holy year, namely ‘priests to whom I will grant the authority to pardon even those sins reserved to the Holy See, so that the breadth of their mandate as confessors will be even clearer.’42 In a September letter to Archbishop Fisichella, Francis said he had met many women scarred by the pain of abortion. ‘What has happened is profoundly unjust; yet only understanding the truth of it can enable one not to lose hope,’ he wrote, adding that, because God’s forgiveness cannot be denied to a repentant person who sincerely seeks it, he was conceding to all priests for the Jubilee Year the discretion to absolve the sin of abortion.43

This was the first Jubilee-related event or announcement to make the mainstream news, one that presented a challenge to commentators. It was hard to work out what the gesture meant in practice, given that most bishops in the western world – although not in Italy, for example – had already given their priests the faculty to
forgive the sin of abortion. An even greater challenge lay in explaining that making something easier to confess did not reduce its sinfulness. Indeed, as Catholic Voices speakers argued in the UK in a series of media appearances, it was precisely because of the gravity of the sin that healing was so necessary. Many women were more than aware of the seriousness of what they had done, and believed themselves beyond the pale; if some of those women in pain heard a different message – which was likely given the massive coverage given to the item – then it was a highly successful gesture.44

The abortion indult, which Francis would extend indefinitely at the end of the Jubilee, was a prime example of the reframing of the Church’s offer that Francis sought. Abortion is a grave sin and in the Church’s law and teaching (Gaudium et Spes #5) also a crime. Although St. John Paul II in Evangelium Vitae #99 had reached out sympathetically to women who had aborted, ‘aware of the factors that may have influenced your decision’, the message that was clearly heard in public discourse was that the Catholic Church abhorred abortion and regarded it as so grave that even confessing it was problematic.

Francis wanted another message to get through. Rather than rehearse well-known condemnations, Francis focused on the wounds abortion created, seeing – with the eyes of mercy – a woman who aborts as primarily not a criminal or a sinner but as a suffering person in need of healing. In Misericordia et Misera Francis made clear that that healing required repentance, restating ‘as firmly as I can that abortion is a grave sin, since it puts an end to an innocent life’ but equally firmly, ‘I can and must state that there is no sin that God’s mercy cannot reach and wipe away when it finds a repentant heart seeking to be reconciled with the Father’ (MM #12). By making clear that God’s forgiveness was readily available, in spite of the gravity of the sin, Francis showed that conversion was always possible, and that God never tired of forgiving and offering a fresh start to those who regretted their actions.

It was perhaps striking that this impactful gesture was related to a conventional, even counter-cultural, context of sacramental confession of the sort that had been, for him as a teenager, a vehicle for an encounter with the transformative power of God’s mercy. In both Credere and the book-length interview The Name of God is Mercy, Francis recalled the moment when, nearly 17, he had found his vocation in confessing his sins to a priest who became his soul-guide until his death from leukaemia the following year. After the funeral, Francis recalled, he experienced a profound sense of abandonment followed by an encounter with God’s mercy that lay behind his vocation.

In the same letter to Fisichella Francis included an olive branch to the traditionalist Fraternity of Pius X, which had broken with Rome over the Second Vatican Council. In declaring that those who confess abortion to Lefebvrist priests can be absolved ‘validly and licitly’, Francis said he wished to respond to ‘the good of these faithful’ and to show that the Year of Mercy ‘excludes no one’. As he would later do with the Anglicans and Lutherans, Francis used mercy – whether through sacramental confession or humanitarian relief – to build bridges with Christians outside the Catholic communion.

Francis also made clear that the Jubilee would have a strong social dimension, noting in his message for World Day of Peace (traditionally released in September) that
‘love for others – foreigners, the sick, prisoners, the homeless, even our enemies – is the yardstick by which God will judge our actions. Our eternal destiny depends on this.’ He went on to remind governments that the purpose of prison was rehabilitation, appealed to them to abolish the death penalty and asked them to consider an ‘amnesty’ – releasing prisoners before the end of their sentences. And he called for legislation on migration to be ‘reviewed’ so as to better reflect ‘a readiness to welcome migrants and to facilitate their integration.’ In an obvious reference to stalled laws in the United States that would offer a pathway to citizenship for many of its 11 m undocumented migrants, he called for ‘special concern’ to be paid to the conditions for legal residency, ‘since having to live clandestinely can lead to criminal behavior.’

The second major gesture on the eve of the Jubilee was the announcement to changes in the annulment system, to speed the process and facilitate access to justice for those whose marriages had broken down. ‘Charity and therefore mercy demand that the Church Herself become close to her children who consider themselves separated,’ Francis said. The changes eliminated sometimes lengthy and redundant judicial procedures, reduced their costs, and empowered local bishops to make judgments on their own in ‘particularly evident’ cases. Again, the changes spelled out in Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus (‘The Lord Jesus, Clement Judge’) presented a communications challenge: on the whole, the Catholic press reported that the changes ‘streamlined’ and ‘simplified’ the processes for declaration of nullity, but some headlines in the mainstream media suggested that the grounds themselves were being relaxed. The reporting required an additional intervention from Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio, president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, who clarified that the changes did not compromise the nature of the process of search for the truth (pro rei veritate) about marriage. The clarifications illustrated the difficulty in communicating mercy to a culture imbued with the corrupted concept of it as laxity.

Although the official opening was not until 8 November, Francis inaugurated the Jubilee in the Central African Republic (CAR) capital, Bangui, thereby demonstrating God’s closeness to those suffering and on the margins. Explaining to people outside the cathedral that their city was that day ‘the spiritual capital of the world’, he said the Holy Year of Mercy ‘begins earlier in this land that has suffered for many years as a result of war, hatred, misunderstanding and a lack of peace.’ He urged the Catholic community to help CAR make a fresh start through forgiveness. Anyone who has a role of evangelizer, teacher or preacher in the Christian community, he said, must be ‘first and foremost practitioners of forgiveness, specialists in reconciliation, experts in mercy.’

His Africa trip, especially to CAR, was itself a lesson in mercy as proximity to suffering. The pope went to an active war-zone to make an impassioned appeal for peace and to launch the Jubilee, visiting refugee camps of displaced people as well as a paediatric hospital. He also met with evangelical Christians, again pointing to mercy as the shared invitation that binds the churches together. ‘In these difficult circumstances, the Lord keeps asking us to demonstrate to everyone his tenderness, compassion and mercy,’ he told them, describing this ‘shared mission’ as ‘a providential opportunity for us to advance together on the path of unity.’

The ‘unofficial’ opening in Bangui underscored the Jubilee’s global, periphery-focused character. ‘Unlike previous jubilee years, which were conceived as pilgrimage
experiences focused on bringing people to Rome, Francis had in mind a planetary and decentralized jubilee,’ notes John Allen. It was a jubilee in which the centre went out to the people, rather than the other way round, thereby matching form and content. Worldwide, according to Vatican estimates, around 900m faithful across the world passed through a Holy Door between December 2015 and November 2016, with just over half of the Catholic population taking part (rising to 80% in Europe and Latin America). Participation was particularly strong in pilgrim sites; Santiago de Compostela, for example, broke its previous 2010 record.

But there would still be plenty of visitors to the centre: 21.3 m from 156 countries ‘participated in the Jubilee here in Rome’, according to Archbishop Fisichella, using a broad definition of those who visited the Vatican in the course of the year. Participation in papal events (general audiences, etc.) was not exceptionally higher: close to 4 m, higher than 2015 but down on 2014, on account of the threat of terrorist attacks: the Jubilee began in the aftermath of unprecedented ISIS assaults on European soil.

**Communicating Mercy**

The Year of Mercy officially began on 8 December 2015, when Francis opened the Holy Door of St. Peter’s Basilica and praised the Second Vatican Council as ‘an encounter marked by the force of the Spirit, who pushed the Church to emerge from the shoals which for many years had kept her closed in on herself, to set out once again, with enthusiasm, on her missionary journey.’ Making explicit the link between the Jubilee and the pastoral conversion of the Church, he said the Holy Year compels us ‘not to neglect the spirit which emerged from Vatican II, that of the Samaritan’. In his first interview-book as pope, he made clear that the mercy was God’s nature, His ‘identity card’, evident in ‘the divine attitude which embraces; it is God giving himself to us, accepting us, and bowing to forgive.’ He also spoke of the importance of believing in the power of forgiveness, and of the Church making that power freely available. Observing that a person unable to forgive or who has not experienced forgiveness has not known the Lord and has not fully loved, he said ‘the Church’s forgiveness must be every bit as broad as that offered by Jesus on the Cross and by Mary at his feet.’

‘The Church does not exist to condemn people but to help them encounter “the visceral love of God’s mercy,”’ he told Tornielli in a pithy Catholic mission statement.

In his message for World Communications Day Francis spoke of mercy as paradigmatic of the Church’s communication, proclamation, and evangelization. ‘What we say and how we say it, our every word and gesture, ought to express God’s compassion, tenderness and forgiveness for all,’ he observed. In Mexico, he told the country’s bishops that ‘that which delights and attracts’ was ‘the omnipotent weakness of divine love, which is the irresistible force of its gentleness and the irrevocable pledge of its mercy.’
Repeating the contrast he used in his homily to the cardinals in February 2015, in the Tornielli interview Francis critiqued the approach of the ‘scholars of the law’ who criticize Jesus in the name of doctrine, an approach he says is ‘repeated throughout the long history of the Church.’ Whereas the ‘logic of the law’ is driven by a fear of losing the just and the saved, ‘the logic of God’ is shown in Jesus’ desire to save the lost and sinners. The Pharisees ‘are always with us’, he warned; they are ‘men who live attached to the letter of the law but who neglect love; men who only know how to close doors and draw boundaries.’

Francis also warned against the temptation of theorizing about mercy, stressing that it was expressed in action rather than words. ‘In the corporal works of mercy we touch the flesh of Christ in our brothers and sisters who need to be fed, clothed, sheltered, visited,’ he said in his Lent message, adding that ‘in the spiritual works of mercy – counsel, instruction, forgiveness, admonishment and prayer – we touch more directly our own sinfulness.’ ‘I will never tire of saying that the mercy of God is not some beautiful idea but rather a concrete action,’ he told a meeting of volunteers. ‘Mercy is not doing something good while passing by; it means involving yourself there where there is evil, where there is sickness, where there is hunger, where there is human exploitation.’

In September 2016, Francis added two acts to the traditional list of corporal and spiritual works, to include the environment. As a spiritual work of mercy, he said, ‘care for our common home calls for a ‘grateful contemplation of God’s world’ which ‘allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us.’ As a corporal work of mercy, meanwhile, ‘care for our common home requires ‘simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness’ and ‘makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world.’

To illustrate the stress on concrete action, Francis acted in a number of ways that taught lessons about the nature of mercy and offered a model for the wider Church to emulate. ‘Nothing unites us with God more than act of mercy,’ he told priests in the first of three mediations on a day-long retreat he led in June 2016 – possibly his most complete treatment of the topic.

His first action was to alter the rubrics of the Roman Missal to make clear that the traditional foot-washing ritual by priests at the start of Easter can include women and girls, not just men and boys. Fr Federico Lombardi, the Vatican’s spokesman, told journalists that the pope wished ‘this dimension of the gesture of Christ’s love for all’ to be the focus of the service, rather than just a portrayal of the biblical scene during the Last Supper.

Second, he dedicated one Friday each month during the year to making a surprise visit in Rome or nearby to a place of suffering. Among the places he visited were a retirement home, a care home for people in vegetative state, a rehabilitation centre for drug addicts, a safe house for trafficked former prostitutes, a neonatal unit, and a hospice for the terminally ill. Although the managers of the places were told of his visit in advance, the residents or patients did not – enhancing the sense of gratuity and surprise. In each case, there was a chance for Francis to hear stories and eat and drink with them.

Although the visits were private, anecdotes leaked out. For example, Fr Aldo Bonaiuto, spiritual director of the Pope John XXIII Community, a centre for women
rescued from prostitution, said Francis had asked for their forgiveness in the name of all Christians for the violence and wrongdoing they had suffered. The pope himself later said two moments from these visits had stayed with him: an African prostitute who had given birth on the street in winter, whose baby had died; and a woman in a hospital for the terminally ill who had cried incessantly over the death of one of her children. He said the stories had made him think of the horror of abortion, ‘the habit of sending away children before they are born, that horrendous crime.’

A third ‘action’ was the teaching and practice of confession. In February, he spoke in detail to the priests designated as ‘missionaries of mercy’ about mercy, shame and forgiveness, urging them not to forget that before them was not the sin but the repentant sinner, whose nakedness (shame, vulnerability) they were to cover with what he called ‘the garment of mercy.’ Later he initiated a 24-h ‘confession drive’ in Lent by going to confess his own sins in St Peter’s Basilica, before hearing confessions himself for the youth in St Peter’s Square (the video footage had over 2,398,000 hits, according to Archbishop Fisichella). Before going out, he spoke to priests on a course organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary, telling them God had a ‘bad memory’: ‘Once He has forgiven you, He forgets. And this is great! The sins are no more; they have been wiped away by divine mercy. Every absolution is, in a certain way, a jubilee of the heart, which brings joy not only to the faithful and the Church but first of all to God himself.’ Over and over, in his addresses to priests, he urged them to dedicate more time to hearing confessions and to ensure it was a liberating experience of joy. There was evidence of a sharp increase in participation in the sacrament.

Francis also used the Jubilee to draw attention to three groups often treated mercilessly by contemporary society: migrants, homeless and prisoners.

Meeting 11 January 2016 with ambassadors to the Holy See, the Pope acknowledged the social and political challenges that come with welcoming migrants, but insisted on the human and religious obligation to care for those forced to flee in search of safety or a dignified life. In his message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees a few days later (January 17) he repeated that they should not be seen firstly in juridical terms – ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’ – but as people whose dignity needs to be protected and who make a positive contribution to the countries that receive them. These messages contained a framework for developing attitudes and policies capable of responding to the largest influx of migrants into the west since the Second World War. At a cross-frontier Mass in the northern Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez the following month he reframed the issue as a humanitarian crisis of suffering and vulnerability, one that demanded a compassionate, international response. ‘This crisis which can be measured in numbers and statistics, we want instead to measure with names, stories, families.’

His invitation was to see the influx as an opportunity to practise the Works of Mercy: ‘We could perhaps recognize that God, in his wisdom, has sent to us in rich Europe the hungry so that we would feed them, the thirsty so that we would give them to drink, strangers so that we would welcome them, the naked so that we would clothe them,’ he had said in November 2015. Asked about then Republican hopeful Donald Trump’s proposal to build a wall along the Mexican border, Francis was clear: a ‘person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not in the Gospel.’ A month later, he pointed
to the failures to meet God’s challenge: ‘Today’s migrants who suffer the cold, are without food. They cannot enter. They do not feel welcome. It really pleases me when I hear and see that nations, authorities open the heart and open the doors.’

After Easter, Francis went with the Orthodox ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew to the Greek island of Lesbos, to visit refugees being held in detention centres. The Pope returned from the island to Rome with 12 Syrian Muslim refugees, who were cared for by the Community of Sant’Egidio. ‘Not since John Paul II kissed the soil of his native Poland when he disembarked from a plane on his first visit as pope has there been a gesture so eloquent as Pope Francis taking three Muslim families back to the Vatican for refuge,’ commented The Guardian in an editorial. Asked on the return flight why none of the families was Christian, Francis answered: ‘I didn’t make a religious choice between Christians and Muslims. These three families had their documents in order. There were, for example, two Christian families who didn’t. This is not a privilege. All twelve of them are children of God.’

In Rome, Pope Francis via the papal almoner offered direct assistance to the homeless: not just showers, hot meals and haircuts, but also a laundrette and medical centre. Francis invited a group of homeless to the Sistine Chapel, telling them ‘this is your home’ and to join him for breakfast on his birthday, and for dinner to celebrate the third anniversary of his election. Over the summer of 2016 Pope Francis via his almoner treated dozens of Rome’s homeless to a day at the beach and dinner in a pizzeria on the way back.

Having made prisoners and prisons a priority on many of his trips, Francis used the Year of Mercy to make specific calls for prison reform and the eradication of the death penalty. Speaking in St Peter’s Square in February he asked Catholic politicians around the world to ‘make a courageous and exemplary gesture’ to ensure no one was put to death during the Jubilee. Modern means existed to ‘efficiently repress crime without definitively denying the person who committed it the possibility of rehabilitating themselves,’ Francis said, adding that the commandment ‘Do not kill’ applied to the guilty as well as the innocent.

‘This is why I wanted to celebrate with you the Jubilee of Mercy, because it does not exclude the possibility of writing a new story and moving forward,’ he told prisoners in Ciudad Juárez, adding that those who had experienced hell were often those who best built alternatives.

In November 2016, Francis celebrated a special Jubilee for Prisoners at the Vatican, drawing detainees from around Italy and beyond. In his homily, Francis warned against thinking of prisoners as ‘the other’. ‘At times we are locked up within our own prejudices or enslaved to the idols of a false sense of wellbeing … Pointing the finger against someone who has made mistakes cannot become an alibi for concealing our own contradictions.’ Throughout the year, Francis also made private phone calls to inmates on death row, and kept in touch with prisoners he met back when he was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires.

Francis made an appeal to governments from around the world to release ‘our brothers and sisters in prison,’ as a special Jubilee of Mercy gesture. Illustrating Pope Francis’s long-held conviction that the Gospel is received first at the margins of society, the three countries (Cuba, Paraguay, Pakistan) who responded to his November 6
request to set prisoners free were among the world’s poorest; one was Marxist, one was Muslim.79

There were three further areas in which Francis used the Jubilee to teach the world about mercy: the canonization of Mother Teresa, World Youth Day in Poland and ecumenical dialogue.

The declaration of sainthood of St Teresa of Kolkata in September 2016 was the greatest public act of the Jubilee. Media discussion of the world’s most famous icon of mercy turned on a debate about justice and charity; Mother Teresa, after all, never treated poverty as a problem to be solved, but poor people as the flesh of Christ who needed to be embraced. In his homily, Pope Francis noted that there was ‘no alternative to charity’ in that those who put themselves at the service of others are those who love God. At the same time, ‘merely extending a hand in times of need’ was not enough if it wasn’t rooted in what he called ‘the vocation to charity in which each of Christ’s disciples puts his or her entire life at his service, so to grow each day in love.’ Offering her to volunteers as their ‘model of holiness’, he described Mother Teresa as ‘a generous dispenser of divine mercy, making herself available for everyone through her welcome and defence of human life’ and prayed that ‘this tireless worker of mercy help us to increasingly understand that our only criterion for action is gratuitous love, free from every ideology and all obligations, offered freely to everyone without distinction of language, culture, race or religion.’80

World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, which began in late July 2016, took place in the shadow of the atrocious murder of a Catholic priest at the altar by Islamic militants in the diocese of Rouen in France. Francis used his addresses to show that true religion showed the face of God, which was mercy, and, therefore, religion that justified violence in the name of God was not religion at all, and capable only of ‘senseless’ or ‘absurd’ violence.

At the national shrine of Czestochowa Francis sought to connect the country’s Christian heritage – a culture formed by the story of God’s humble, discreet presence in Polish history – with the Jubilee of Mercy, picking out St John Paul II and Sr Faustina as what he called ‘those meek and powerful heralds of mercy’. In this way, he framed the culture of a Christian nation as a history of the experience of God’s mercy, of God as ‘little, near and real.’81 He led a moving Stations of the Cross at the iconic Divine Mercy shrine in the city, stressing mercy as God’s response to evil, and telling thousands of young people at the Vigil: ‘Our response to a world at war has a name: its name is fraternity, its name is brotherhood, its name is communion, its name is family.’ At the ‘Mercy Field’ where he celebrated the closing Mass the following day, Francis used the story of Jesus’ calling of Zacchaeus to urge young people not to resist God’s mercy, and again imploring them to combat violence with love.82

Finally, Francis dedicated much of October 2016, close to the conclusion of the Jubilee, to bridge-building with other Christian Churches: visiting the Orthodox in Georgia at the start of the month, receiving leaders of the Church of England in Rome on the 50th anniversary of the first meeting since the Reformation of a pope and an archbishop of Canterbury, and concluding with a historic visit to Sweden to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. In various joint declarations and statements, the church leaders committed themselves to an ‘ecumenism of mercy’,
which people of different theological views could still meet in common actions of witness to justice and charity.83

‘We have celebrated an intense Jubilee Year in which we have received the grace of mercy in abundance,’ Francis wrote in his apostolic letter at the conclusion of the Jubilee, Misericordia et Misera. ‘Like a gusting but wholesome wind, the Lord’s goodness and mercy have swept through the entire world.’ He used the letter to underline the link between the rediscovery of mercy and the pastoral conversion on which the Church’s mission depends. ‘Our communities can remain alive and active in the work of the new evangelization in the measure that the ‘pastoral conversion’ to which we are called will be shaped daily by the renewing force of mercy,’ he wrote. ‘Let us not limit its action; let us not sadden the Spirit, who constantly points out new paths to take in bringing to everyone the Gospel of salvation.’

He made a series of practical suggestions for enabling this pastoral conversion. One was to dedicate a Sunday in the parish to the reading of passages about mercy in the Bible. Another was to enable the Sacrament of Reconciliation to ‘regain its central place in the Christian life’ through initiatives such as the 24 Hours for the Lord, a celebration held in proximity to the Fourth Sunday of Lent. Francis also extended indefinitely the two faculties he had earlier conceded allowing priests to forgive abortions and the Society of Pius X to perform confessions, and instituted on the 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time the ‘World Day of the Poor’. ‘This Day will also represent a genuine form of new evangelization (cf. Mt 11:5),’ he said, ‘which can renew the face of the Church as She perseveres in her perennial activity of pastoral conversion and witness to mercy.’84

In an interview reflecting on the Jubilee with the Italian bishops’ TV channel, TV2000, Francis noted how it had been lived the world over: ‘The news that comes from the dioceses tell of the Church coming closer to people, and an encounter with Jesus … It has opened the heart and so many have encountered Jesus.’85

Notes

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queda después de la tormenta’, Medellín (theological journal of CELAM), Vol. 43, Núm 168 (2017).

9. Ivereigh, The Great Reformer, ch. 6.
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11. Pope Francis, Spiritual retreat given on the occasion of the Jubilee for priests, 3rd Meditation, Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls (June 2, 2016).
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16. I analyse this dynamic in Austen Ivereigh & Kathryn Jean Lopez, How to Defend the Faith Without Raising Your Voice (Our Sunday Visitor, 2nd ed, 2015), ch. 1.
17. Antonio Spadaro SJ, ‘A Big Heart Open to God: An interview with Pope Francis’, September 21, 2013, original in Italian at La Civiltà Cattolica and published in English at America, September 30, 2013.
18. Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes #1.
19. Pope Paul VI, Speech at Council’s final session, December 7, 1965, www.vatican.va.
20. Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation Amoris laetitia #38.
21. Misericordiae Vultus #11.
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24. Kasper, Mercy, Loc. 368
25. I treat this in The Great Reformer. Francis gave further details in his 2 December interview with Credere, the official magazine of the Jubilee of Mercy.
26. Carol Glatz, "Pope’s episcopal motto comes from homily by English doctor of church”, Catholic News Service, March 15, 2013.
27. Evangelii Gaudium #37, 114, 164, 188.
28. Meeting with the bishops of Brazil, Address of Pope Francis, Archbishop's House, Rio de Janeiro, July 28, 2013.
29. Press conference of pope Francis during the return flight from Rio de Janeiro (July 28, 2013).
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31. Ibid, p. 14.
32. Interview of the Holy Father Francis to the Italian weekly Credere, 49, December 6, 2015.
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37. Pope Francis, Homily, March 17, 2015.
38. Pope Francis, Homily, March 23, 2015.
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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