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The church should be a hospital for sinners

Fr. Peter Daly | Sep. 24, 2013 Parish Diary

"The church is not a museum of saints, but a hospital for sinners."

I've been using that line for years in our RCIA. I probably stole it from somebody. Now Pope Francis is saying something very much like it, so I feel confident in that assertion.

"I see clearly," said Pope Francis in his interview with the Jesuit magazine *La Civita Cattolica*, "that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle."

Alleluia! A hospital for sinners, not a museum of saints.

We should print that on yard signs and put them on our front lawns. We should paint it on banners and hang the banners from our steeples.

"We are a hospital for sinners. Wounds healed inside."

A broken world needs a place to bring its spiritual injuries. We need an emergency room more than a courtroom. We want healing more than judgment.

"The confessional," Pope Francis says, "is not a torture chamber, but the place in which the Lord's mercy motivates us to do better."

Another alleluia! This is a guy who understands reconciliation. I've always said confession is not so much an encounter with our guilt as it is with God's mercy.

This is a man who also understands people's fear of confession. He knows we have too often rendered judgment, not mercy.

The pope talked of the church he wants: "I dream of a church that is a mother and a shepherdess. The church's ministers must be merciful."

Amen.

All my life, I have heard the church referred to as "Holy Mother the Church." But in truth, that is not how most people outside experience us. The world sees us not so much as "mother" but as the world's "scold."

Instead of a motherly embrace and healing, we come at people with a scowl and a wagging finger. The first words out of our mouths are often not the words of Jesus: "Peace be with you." Instead, we lead with a correction: "Let me tell you what is wrong with you."

Is it any wonder people are just walking away from us? Who wants to be scolded even before they are known?

A good pastor will eventually get around to moral issues, but our first words should be good news, not rules. As Pope Francis puts it, "The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials."

Pope Francis says that in his early years as provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina, at the young age of 36, he was too authoritarian. He was too quick to judge. Over time, he grew and learned to take time to discern.

I think most priests evolve. When I was first ordained at the age of 36, I thought it was my job to enforce the rules. "No Communion for you." But gradually, I came to see that the sacraments are not a reward for good behavior but the medicine of sinners.

The Christian life is not so much about rules as it is about relationships. It's about a relationship with Christ and with each other. If you don't have a relationship with someone, they won't care if you quote the rule book to them. If you do have a relationship with someone, you probably won't need to quote the rules. That's what St. Paul means by the law of love.

Pope Francis thinks mercy comes before catechesis.

"A beautiful homily, a genuine sermon, must begin with the first proclamation, with the proclamation of salvation. There is nothing more solid, deep and sure than this proclamation. *Then* you have to do catechesis" (emphasis added).

Some people think religion is only from the neck up. But I've come to see that it is more about the heart than the head. Too often, we answer questions people have not even asked, but we fail to answer the basic question of life everyone is asking: "Am I loved?"

A good pastor knows you answer that question first. You don't just answer it once, either. It takes time and repetition for the answer to sink in.

Pope Francis recognizes the complexity of life. People must be seen in the context of their lives. I tell the catechumens that God sees our lives as a movie, not a snapshot. It's God's view of the life that the church should be trying to take.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio recalled how someone once asked him provocatively if he approved of homosexuality. He answered, "Tell me; when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love or reject and condemn this person? We must always consider the person. ... It is necessary to accompany them with mercy. When that happens, the Holy Spirit inspires the priest to say the right thing."

In his interview, Pope Francis says, "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in context."

He gives the example of a woman who had a failed marriage and an abortion. Her life continues. She remarries and has five children. She is much more than her sin. "That abortion in her past weights heavily on her conscience and she sincerely regrets it. She would like to move forward in her Christian life. What is the confessor to do?"

His answer is: Focus on the essentials first. Tell her the good news.

"The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot

be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials ... this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn as it did for the disciples at Emmaus."

I've seen that in my own life. As a pastor in the same parish for 19 years, I've seen people fall away and come back. I've seen them be on fire with faith, grow cold, then catch fire again. I've known them as rebellious teens and questioning adults. I've seen their lives collapse from sin but recover by God's grace. Any "snapshot" of their lives is a distortion. We have to wait for the movie. We are all in process, including the church.

To me the most disarming thing about the pope's interview was his answer to the first question, "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" He said simply, "I am a sinner."

Some people dismissed that answer as a cliché, but I don't think so. To illustrate his answer, he said that sometimes, when visiting Rome, he used to go to the Church of St. Louis of France, near Piazza Navona, where he would sit in front of Caravaggio's famous painting, "The Calling of St. Matthew."

When I was a seminarian in Rome, I used to do the same thing, putting my coins in the meter to illuminate the painting. I wonder if we ever sat there together.

"That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew," Pope Francis says, "that's me. I feel like him, like Matthew. ... He holds onto his money as if to say, 'No, not me! No, this money is mine.' Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze. ... I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I admired John Paul II. I respected Benedict. But I think I could love Francis.

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