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Francis, the comic strip
A book commemorating Pope Francis' March 27, 2020, prayer service at the beginning of the

A book commemorating Pope Francis' March 27, 2020, prayer service at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic is distributed to people in St. Peter's Square after the pope's Sunday Angelus at the Vatican March 27, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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VATICAN CITY — God always forgives and joyously welcomes back everyone who returns to him, even after a life of mistakes and sin, Pope Francis said.

"God does not know how to forgive without celebrating! And the father celebrates because of the joy he has because his son has returned," the pope said before reciting the Angelus prayer March 27 with visitors gathered in St. Peter's Square.

The pope reflected on the day's Gospel reading about the parable of the prodigal son, "who has returned home after having squandered all his possessions," Pope Francis said.

"We are that son, and it is moving to think about how much the Father always loves us and waits for us," he said.

But the older son in the parable who becomes indignant because he has always obeyed his father "is also within us and we are tempted to take his side," he said.

"He had always done his duty, he had not left home," and he is angry seeing their father embracing the child who had behaved so badly, he said.

The problem with this reaction, the pope said, is the older son "bases his relationship with his father solely on pure observance of commands, on a sense of duty."

"This could also be our problem, the problem among ourselves and with God: to lose sight that he is a father and to live a distant religion, composed of prohibitions and duties," the pope said.

People who live this cold distance from God become rigid toward others and find it hard to welcome, much less rejoice over, the return of a repentant or struggling child of God, he added.

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"Those who have made mistakes often feel reproached in their own hearts. Distance, indifference and harsh words do not help. Therefore, like the father, it is necessary to offer them a warm welcome that encourages them to go ahead," the pope said.

People must "look for those who are far away," have an open heart, truly listen and never make them feel uncomfortable, he said.

The father "celebrates because of the joy he has because his son has returned," and, like the father, "we need to rejoice," too, when someone repents, no matter how serious their mistakes may have been, he said.

In the parable, the father reassures the older son, saying, "you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."

The parable shows, the pope said, that the father has "two needs, which are not commands, but essentials for his heart."

The pope asked people to reflect and "see if we too have in our hearts these two things the father needs" — to be able to celebrate and rejoice for others.