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Francis preaches mercy, forgiveness on first papal Sunday

by Dennis Coday by Joshua J. McElwee

Pope Francis

Vatican City — About 300,000 people enthusiastically greeted Pope Francis for his first Angelus prayer and address Sunday and heard a short reflection on mercy, a theme the new pope had preached on at the Mass he celebrated that morning in the parish church of Vatican City dedicated to St. Anne.

When he appeared at the window of his study in the apostolic palace, he showed again a knack for engaging his audience. He greeted the crowd with a simple, "Buongiorno," [good day], and the people in the square roared back, "Buongiorno."

The pope also surprised some observers by mentioning in his address retired German Cardinal Walter Kasper, a theologian and former Vatican official known for his sometimes public disagreements with Pope Benedict XVI.

Francis told two stories during the Angelus address that drew laughter and applause from the immense crowd.

First, he mentioned meeting a very old woman at a religious festival while still archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Francis said he asked her, "Grandmother, would you like to make your confession? But, if you have not sinned?" and she said, "we all have sinned."

Francis said he replied: "If perhaps he should not forgive you?" and she replied, "The Lord forgives everything." I asked, "How do you know this for sure, madam?" and she replied, "If the Lord hadn't forgiven all, then the world wouldn't [still] be here." And, I wanted to ask her, "Madam, did you study at the Gregorian?"

The Gregorian is a pontifical university in Rome, the oldest Jesuit university, established in 1551 by the order's founder St Ignatius Loyola. Francis is the first pope from the order.

The elderly woman showed great wisdom, surely given by the Holy Spirit, Francis continued. "Let us not forget this word: God never tires of forgiving us, but we sometimes tire of asking Him to forgive us."

"Let us never tire of asking God's forgiveness," he said.

Such straightforward messages of essential kindness have been winning over Catholics not only in St. Peter's Square, but world-wide since Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was elected pope and took the name of Francis on Wednesday, March 13.

Paolo and Catia Cavani Storchi of Rome brought their son and daughter to the square Sunday to see Pope Francis. Catia said that she wanted to come because she has been very impressed with what she has seen and heard from the new pope. She sees him bringing new hope to the church because he has a very different view of the world, different from previous popes.

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"The world needs change. The church needs change and this represents a new way to bring a change," she said.

"He is humble and the name he chose has meaning. He is like St. Francis [of Assisi]; he wants to change some things. He wants a church that is at the service of the poor people, the humble people -- just people in general."

"I think he wants to underline that it is the person who is important, to find what [each person] has inside," Catia said.

About halfway through his Angelus address, Francis mentioned he had been reading a book about mercy by Kasper, a retired prelate who has previously served as secretary and president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Previous to working in the Vatican, Kasper had received public disapproval from then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 1993, when Kasper was serving as bishop of the German diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart.

As head of the Vatican's powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ratzinger expressed his disapproval over a letter Kasper had signed along with other German bishops allowing divorced and remarried Catholics access to the sacraments.

In another instance of disapproval between the two, Kasper openly criticized a document written under Ratzinger's leadership in 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the role of the church in salvation.

While joking that he didn't mean to use the Angelus address to give publicity to cardinals, Francis said he had enjoyed reading Kasper's book and called the cardinal "a talented theologian, a good theologian."

In the square for the address and Angelus, Sophie Janssens said she thought the new pope was helping "the church show its true face."

A Belgian living in Rome and a member of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a global Catholic lay movement, Janssens said she thought his declaration Saturday that the church is for the poor "is a victory for the gospel."

"The pope seems to be a very sympathetic man and wants a church that is close to the people. That is energizing!" she exclaimed.

Janssens said the church faces many challenges right now, including being relevant in the world. Francis has shown that he wants to engage the world, not hide from it or be separate from it, she said.

"When you love the world and love the people, that is the right attitude to have to find solutions," she said.

"The gospel should be announced," she continued. Francis is showing that the "focus should be on the external world and then on internal problems. You have to love people first and then the solutions will come."

Before praying the Angelus Sunday with the crowds at St. Peter's, Francis had celebrated Mass that morning at Sant'Anna dei Palafrenieri, a small parish church inside the Vatican for its residents and staff.

Dressing in a simple purple chasuble and a plain white mitre, Francis gave a short five-minute homily for the Mass without a prepared text.

The pope focused on the Gospel reading for the day, an account from John where Jesus tells a crowd to "let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone."

Francis said that mercy is the key point of that Gospel account. "Mercy is the Lord's most powerful message."

"It is not easy to trust oneself to the mercy of God, because [God's mercy] is an unfathomable abyss -- but we must do it," the pope continued.

"He has the ability to forget, [which is] special: he forgets [our sins], he kisses you, he embraces you, and he says to you, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now, on, sin no more.' Only that counsel does he give you."

"We ask for the grace of never tiring of asking pardon, for he never tires of pardoning," the pope concluded.

Following the Mass, Francis went to the back of the church and greeted people one-by-one as they left the service, shaking hands and even hugging some.

Thomas Meyer and Manuela Raker, 30-something practicing Catholics from Cloppenburg, Germany, wanted to be in Rome for the election of the new pope, but arrived after the white smoke had appeared. They are staying in Rome until after the inaugural Mass, because they feel excitement around the new pope.

Meyer said he finds hope in the name the new pope chose. "I hope that will mean he will be a sympathetic to people," Meyer said, which he thinks the church needs from a pope now.

Raker agrees that Francis has instilled hope in Catholics, but she worries that he may be too old at 76 to bring enough change to the church. "The church must change. The churches in Germany are empty," she said. "The only people who go are old people. More young people need to go to church."

To make that happen it will take more than talk about "the poor" and "a poor church," Raker said. Still, she wanted to reiterate that she sees hope for that change in Francis.

Francis warmly ended his noon-time Angelus remarks by telling those in the crowd to "have a good Sunday and a good lunch."

It has long been a tradition for the pope to address crowds in St. Peter's Square on Sundays at noon and then recite the Angelus Prayer. The practice began to be broadcast by Italian television during the pontificate of John XXIII.

The English text of the prayer, which is traditionally recited daily at 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m:

Leader: The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

R: And she conceived by the power of Holy Spirit.

Hail Mary, full of grace ...

Leader: Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

R: Be it done unto me according to your Word.

Hail Mary, full of grace ...

Leader: And the Word was made flesh.

R: And dwelt among us.

Hail Mary, full of grace ...

Leader: Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.

R: That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray: Pour forth, we beseech thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we to whom the incarnation of Christ Thy Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His resurrection; through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Glory be...

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See below for video and English translation of Pope Francis' homily today at the Church of Saint Anne in the Vatican, provided by Salt + Light, a Canadian Catholic media network.

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