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EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

## Mercy

A new book, *The Name of God is Mercy*, by Pope Francis was just released this past week. It is yet another example of how this pope is trying to reach beyond the usual official channels to communicate his message. Much more than his predecessors, Pope Francis relies on non-Vatican sources to broadcast his ideas and beliefs. In doing so, he speaks to the world, not just Catholics. Shortly after his election, he agreed to meet with the editor of *La Civiltá Cattolica*, a well-respected Italian Jesuit magazine, to discuss the priorities of his papacy. The conclave had elected him with very clear motives in mind. He later expounded on these comments in the *Joy of the Gospel*, setting a template for his papal ministry. In *Laudato Si*, his first encyclical, he addressed the environment and global warming from the perspective of his papal patron, St. Francis of Assisi. *The Name of God is Mercy*, his first book as pope, is a series of conversations with Andrea Tornielli, a veteran correspondent for the Italian journal, *La Stampa*. It is a perfect topic, coming at the beginning of the Holy Year of Mercy.

For Pope Francis, mercy is a fundamental gospel value that defines everything Jesus said and did. He intends it to be a priority of his papacy. For Pope Francis, mercy is the path to healing the world afflicted from “the many slaveries of the third millennium,” including certainly the public crimes of war, violence, injustice and ideology but also the harms caused by personal selfishness, intolerance, and self-righteousness. This pope also sees mercy as a reform strategy, focusing the Church on issues of the Gospel, not just self-selected, doctrinaire interpretations which, he believes, do not reflect the true spirit of Jesus Himself. Accordingly, he rejects the critical, harsh, and condemnatory attitudes in much of religion today. Personally, I believe, he also is distancing himself from the policies of his immediate predecessors and returning to the more open spirit of Vatican II.

Once a month throughout this entire year, the pope plans on making a very visible gesture, symbolizing the meaning of mercy and the practical results it can effect. On his recent trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa, he set a new papal precedent by personally opening the first door of Mercy outside the Vatican, bringing a message of peace to a war-weary nation. Immediately afterwards, he visited a barricaded mosque, fostering a new environment of cooperation between local Christians and Muslims. At the beginning of this year, he visited a homeless shelter at the main railway station in Rome, affirming the value of the poor and forgotten. Perhaps his example can motivate all of us to practice mercy in positive ways this year too.