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Pope Francis's Forgiveness

Ken Briggs | Mar. 18, 2013 NCR Today

Penance as the primary sacramental focus of Pope Francis's first week opens up a can of questions.

With warmth and reach, pope has served the world a message of God's mercy and forgiveness. He touches hearts with a promise that has the power of the Spirit.

He thereby ministers to a universal need with the most gracious balm of forgiveness.

That presupposes the other half of the penitential rite that Catholics have widely abandoned: the confession of actual sins.

It may be that Francis's offering of forgiveness he is inviting his listeners to forgive him his own unspoken transgressions as an indirect means of gaining their absolution. His first act as pope was to ask that the masses hearing him would pray for him. His repeated mention of God's unbounded love for sinners could be both a profession of faith in the renewal of the soul and a projection of his needy state onto his followers. If so, it could signal his yearning to begin again by turning, moving beyond difficulties in his past in order to turn over a new leaf.

The pope shows a depth and breadth of compassion for sinners that implies they have sinned. It could mean a less legalistic attitude toward the stated violations of Catholic morality or continuing to emphasize those moral codes as a pretext of traditional penance.

Francis may be channeling forgiveness to those who confess offenses under a moral code that goes unchanged or hinting that the church itself must seek absolution for promoting unjust teachings and enforcing ungodly restrictions on women and others.

What is striking is that the call for mercy and renewal has been so pronounced and pointed. Assuming it is a conscious note, the meaning of it will be worth watching.

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