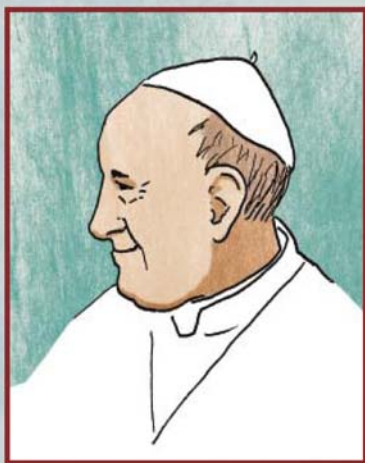


Andrea Tornielli

# *Fioretti*



*The Little Flowers of Pope Francis*

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**HEARTWARMING STORIES OF  
THE GOSPEL IN ACTION**

IGNATIUS

*Fioretti:*  
The Little Flowers  
of Pope Francis



ANDREA TORNIELLI

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*Heartwarming Stories  
of the Gospel in Action*

Translated by William J. Melcher

IGNATIUS PRESS    SAN FRANCISCO

Original Italian edition:  
*I fioretti di Papa Francesco*  
© 2013 Edizioni Piemme Spa, Milan  
www.edizpiemme.it

Unless otherwise indicated, citations from papal documents, homilies, and interviews are largely taken from the Vatican website or [www.news.va](http://www.news.va)

Cover design by John Herreid

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ISBN 978-1-58617-931-1

Library of Congress Control Number 2013922732

Printed in the United States of America (∞)

*In memory of Nora and Nando,  
who are watching us from above*



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## *Introduction*

### The Fragrance of the Gospel

Since the evening of March 13, 2013, when the conclave elected a Pope who had come “from the end of the earth”, the gestures, words, and witness of Francis have impressed and continue to move a great many people in the world.

It is worthwhile returning for a moment to the memory of that March evening, when the new Pope, appearing on the central balcony of St. Peter’s, had the whole square pray, reciting the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be, and before blessing the men and women of his new diocese and of the entire world, asked the crowd, the people of God, to pray for him.

The election, which took place very rapidly, as had been the case with the election of his predecessor, was a surprise. Just as the announcement, one month before, of the resignation by Benedict XVI had been a surprise.

Two basic things stand out, which help to explain the attention and the sympathy prompted by Francis, even in distant circles. This sympathetic attention gives no sign of diminishing, despite predictions about the end of the media “honeymoon” that have been made by those who seem sometimes to regret the recent experiences of the Church “under attack”.

The first is his personal witness to the Gospel message: little gestures and big ones, the minor or major choices that he has made each day, his ability to meet everyone and to speak to everyone, his simple way of being himself, have made him not only credible but above all close. The Pope is perceived by many, many people throughout the world as “one of us”. It is enough to watch him embrace the sick, the suffering, children. It is enough to see how much time he spends among the people before and after his Wednesday audiences, to notice this closeness of the Bishop of Rome who is not afraid of tenderness. “We must not be afraid of tenderness!” he repeated from the first acts of his new ministry as Bishop of Rome. Moreover the changes that he has brought about are there for everyone to see, in keeping with the unprecedented name that the Jesuit Pope chose to take: the name of the *Poverello*, the Little Poor Man of Assisi.

The second thing is the magisterium consisting of the homilies at the Mass that he celebrates each day in the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*. Short commentaries on the readings of the day, an encounter that is expected every morning. A “bit-by-bit catechesis” (*Catechetica in briciole* was the title of a book by Albino Luciani [Pope John Paul I], who cared very much about the simplicity of preaching) which is at the same time profound and capable of touching the hearts of individuals. Day after day, this magisterium is guiding many believers, many more than major encyclicals or important cultural debates could ever reach.

The message that Francis considers most important, as he himself said in his homily at the Mass in the Vatican parish

of St. Anna on March 17, is the message of mercy. “Without mercy”, he said to the Brazilian bishops during his journey to Rio de Janeiro, “we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of ‘wounded’ persons in need of understanding, forgiveness, love.” He added, “We need a church able to make sense of the ‘night’ contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters. . . . We need a church unafraid of going forth into their night . . . a church capable of meeting them on their way.”

“I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess”, Francis said during his interview with the editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Antonio Spadaro [which was published in English by *America*]. “The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans, and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel. God is greater than sin.”

The Pope added:

The structural and organizational reforms are secondary—that is, they come afterward. The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able

to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.

Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent. The ones who quit sometimes do it for reasons that, if properly understood and assessed, can lead to a return. But that takes audacity and courage.

One fact that is obvious to anyone who is trying to look at reality—and does not allow himself to be affected by nostalgic prejudices, by his own tastes in ecclesiastical attire, or else by the self-referential debate of some intellectual circles that often flattened the profound Magisterium of Pope Benedict XVI into the dimensions of an exclusively law-and-order Church—is that the pontificate of Francis has given many people a second wind.

Francis' attitude of "humility and closeness", this return to the essentials of the Christian faith and to the radical character of the Gospel, is the distinctive sign of this initial period. A closeness capable of "warming hearts", which was manifested in full force on the occasion of his first journey outside of Rome, in July 2013, when the Pope traveled to Lampedusa to visit the immigrants who land there on the old, unsafe boats that too often turn into coffins sunk in the depths of the sea.

A closeness that emerged during the journey to Brazil, which culminated with a visit of the Pontiff to a *favela* [slum].

“If we step outside ourselves”, Francis said during the Vigil of Pentecost with the ecclesial movements, “we find poverty.”

Today—it sickens the heart to say so—the discovery of a tramp who has died of the cold is not news. . . . Today, the thought that a great many children do not have food to eat is not news. This is serious, this is serious! We cannot put up with this! . . . We cannot become starched Christians, those over-educated Christians who speak of theological matters as they calmly sip their tea. No! We must become courageous Christians and go in search of the people who are the very flesh of Christ!

This book contains incidents, excerpts from homilies, testimonies, encounters, telephone calls that have Pope Francis as their protagonist. The title echoes the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, the famous collection of stories about the beloved Francis of Assisi, whose name the Pope adopted for himself. The present work makes no claim to completeness, nor does it intend to offer a systematic account of the first months of Francis’ pontificate or to present analyses and commentaries. It merely tries to offer a collection of fragments, a little selection which, page after page, may help the reader to become better acquainted with the Bishop of Rome who came “from the end of the earth”.







LITTLE FLOWERS  
OF MERCY





## *Infinite Mercy*

People today certainly need words, but most of all they need us to bear witness to the mercy and tenderness of the Lord.

*Homily during a Mass for  
seminarians and novices, July 7, 2013*

**T**he new Pope celebrated his first Mass with the faithful in the little parish church of St. Anna, in the Vatican, on Sunday, March 17. Francis gave the homily, speaking off the cuff. “Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think—and I say it with humility—that this is the Lord’s most powerful message.”

The Pope commented on the Gospel passage about the adulterous woman, whom the scribes and Pharisees were about to stone, as prescribed by the Mosaic law. Jesus saved her life by demanding that someone who was without sin should cast the first stone: and they all went away. “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again”, Jesus had said to the woman. Bergoglio, referring to the scribes and Pharisees who had dragged the woman they were going to stone into the Nazarene’s presence, said: “We too, . . . at times, like to find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others.”

The first and only step required in order to experience God's infinite mercy, Francis explained, is to acknowledge one's need of his forgiveness: "Jesus . . . comes for us, when we recognize that we are sinners." It is enough to avoid imitating the Pharisee who stood before the altar and thanked God that he was "not like other men". If we are like that Pharisee, if we think that we are just, "then we do not know the Lord's heart, and we will never have the joy of experiencing this mercy!"

Someone who habitually judges others, feels that he is okay, and considers himself just and good, does not notice that he needs to be embraced and forgiven. But there are also those who do notice that need but think that they can not be redeemed because they have committed too much evil.

The Pope, who even as a bishop had the habit of spending time in the confessional, related in this connection a conversation with a man who, upon hearing these words about mercy, had replied to Bergoglio as follows: "Oh, Father, if you knew my life, you would not say that to me! I am a great sinner!" He answered:

All the better! Go to Jesus: he likes you to tell him these things! He forgets, he has a very special capacity for forgetting. He forgets, he kisses you, he embraces you and he simply says to you: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more." That is the only advice he gives you. After a month, if we are in the same situation. . . . Let us go back to the Lord. The Lord never tires of forgiving: never! It is we who tire of asking his forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace not to tire of asking forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving.

God never tires of welcoming and pardoning, if only we acknowledge that we need his forgiveness. These simple, profound words of Francis are a breath of oxygen. For so many people. Precisely because they present the face of a Church that does not reproach people for their fragility and their wounds, but treats them with the medicine of mercy. A Church that embraces.

The Pope added, referring to the Gospel about the adulterous woman: “Jesus’ attitude is striking. . . . We do not hear words of condemnation but only words of love.” It is so easy for us to become indignant about the sins of others, to ask for condemnations without making an examination of conscience. “The face of God is the face of a merciful Father who always has patience”, Francis says. “He does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to him with a contrite heart”, he adds. And to acknowledge that we need to be forgiven.

Shortly after this homily, given in the church of St. Anna, Francis appeared at the window of the study of the Apostolic Palace for his first Angelus. “Mercy . . . changes the world. A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just”, he said, citing the prophet Isaiah: “Even if our sins were scarlet, God’s love would make them white as snow.” To a world that has such trouble believing, the new Pope wants to shout the same proclamation of two thousand years ago, namely, that this mercy is not a feeling but a person. His remarkable way of recalling the Incarnation—the Angelus is precisely the memorial of the Incarnation—is a maternal gesture: he holds his arms in front of him and moves them as though rocking a baby and says: “Our

Lady . . . held in her arms the Mercy of God made man, Jesus.”

Then another anecdote, another personal recollection from his long, daily experience as a confessor. Francis tells about an old woman who had confessed to him when he was an auxiliary bishop in Buenos Aires, during an outdoor Mass in the presence of the Pilgrim Virgin Statue of Our Lady of Fatima. “She said to me: ‘We all have sins, but the Lord forgives all things.’ And I said: ‘But how do you know, Madam?’ She answered: ‘If the Lord did not forgive everything, the world would not exist.’” Bergoglio’s reply was: “Tell me, Madam, did you study at the Gregorian [University]?” That old woman without any diplomas or degrees from pontifical universities had marvelously and very effectively expressed a great truth of the faith.

We live in a society where we become less and less accustomed to acknowledging our responsibilities and blaming ourselves for our mistakes: indeed, it is always someone else’s fault. Other people are always the immoral ones; someone else is always at fault, never me. We also experience a certain view of the Church that sees her only imposing requirements and prohibitions that stifle freedom and weigh down everyday life, which is already burdensome. The message of mercy knocks down both clichés at the same time.

There is no doubt that these words of the Pope made an impression on the hearts of many people. Above all on the fallen-away, on those who have distanced them-

selves from the Church and from the practice of their faith. Many pastors from all parts of Italy have testified to this, speaking about the increase in the number of confessions in the Easter season and about the fact that many penitents specifically cited Francis' words about mercy.

The sociologist Massimo Introvigne, director of CES-NUR (*Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni* [Center for Studies on the New Religions]), conducted a survey on the "Francis effect". In other words, on returns to the Church and to the Sacraments on the part of individuals who had fallen away and were struck by the words of Pope Bergoglio about mercy and forgiveness.

"From anecdotal evidence", Introvigne explained, "we tried to make a transition to scientific observation, however initial and preliminary it may be. We distributed a questionnaire by means of so-called cascade technology that utilizes the social networks Facebook and Twitter, starting with groups that are visited particularly by Catholics."

"Assuming", the sociologist continued, "that, as with all technologies, this one too has its advantages and limitations with regard to sampling, and that the effects connected with the first period of a new pontificate must always be verified at a distance of several months so as to ascertain whether they are ephemeral or lasting, out of a sample of two hundred priests and religious, 53 percent stated that they had encountered in their own community an increase of persons who are returning to the Church or going to confession, adding that these persons explicitly



cite the appeals of Pope Francis as the reason for their return to religious practice.”

“In 43.8 percent of these cases, the increase in the number of faithful is described as consistent, greater than 25 percent. Religious priests (66.7%) note this more often in comparison to diocesan priests (50%). And for 64.2 percent of the sample the increase pertains to confessions in particular. We conducted the same survey”, Introvigne continues, “on a sample of more than five hundred Catholic lay people. They perceive the Francis effect less than the priests and religious, but are directly involved in the confessions. But a significant 41.8 percent of the laity have noticed the effect, which therefore seems to be visible to the naked eye, so to speak.”

“These findings”, the sociologist concludes, “are very significant, within the limits of the survey. An effect observed by more than half of a sample is a phenomenon that not only exists but is of great importance. If we were to seek to translate the data into numerical terms on a national scale, with reference to half of the parishes and communities, we would have to speak about hundreds of thousands of persons who are returning to the Church, accepting the invitations of Pope Francis.”

