

*Theology of Sin for the Year of Mercy*  
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During his 2013 interview returning from World Youth Day in Rio – remembered for the famously taken-out-of context remark “Who am I to judge?” – Pope Francis made an observation overlooked by the media. The Holy Father mentioned the importance of a “theology of sin” to understanding the truth about God’s mercy.

His recently published book-length interview with journalist Andrea Tornielli, *The Name of God Is Mercy*, gives insight into Pope Francis’ theology of sin – which provides us, in turn, with an invaluable resource to help us observe this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Divine Mercy.

Pope Francis talks about two types of people – those who’ve lost a sense of *sin* and those who’ve lost a sense of God’s *mercy*. Both attitudes are harmful because they stop us from encountering the healing grace of God’s merciful forgiveness.//// ////

It was more than half a century ago that Pope Pius XII said that the tragedy of our age is that it had lost its sense of sin, the awareness of sin – something which has deepened in our times.

Pope Francis shares with Saint John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI concern over the influence of *relativism* which deadens a person’s conscience from being able to distinguish between right and wrong. All things seem equal. All things appear the same. The devil convinces a person: “It’s not much. Relax. Be calm.”

The Holy Father distinguishes between those who retain a deep sense of sin, and those who’ve lose their sense of sin, whom he refers to as “the corrupt”:

*The corrupt are those who arrogantly deny or reject their need for repentance and God’s forgiveness and who make their sin a way of life...They pretend to be Christian, masking their vices with ‘good manners, always managing to keep up appearances,’ leading double lives.*

He gives this shocking example:

*A manager I knew in Argentina had a colleague who seemed to be very committed to the Christian life. He recited the rosary, read spiritual writings and so on. One day the colleague confided, as if it were of no consequence, that he was having a relationship with his maid. He made it clear that he thought it was entirely normal. He said ‘these people’- meaning maids – were ‘for that, too.’ My friend was shocked. His colleague was practically telling him that he believed in the existence of superior and inferior human beings., with the latter destined to be taken advantage of and used, like the maid. I was stunned by that example. Despite all my friend’s objections, the colleague didn’t budge an inch. And he continued to consider himself a good Christian because he prayed and he went to Mass on Sundays. This is arrogance.*

But the Holy Father is quick to point out that such individuals are not beyond the mercy of God.  
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Pope Francis then speaks of another group of Christians who don't seek God's mercy although, unlike the corrupt, they have a painful awareness of their sin and woundedness, but who cling narcissistically to their sin and woundedness, licking their wounds, while losing touch with the true Christian sense of God's merciful love for sinners.

Then there are those Christians who don't seek God's mercy because they mistakenly believe that their sins are so evil that God will not forgive them – that their sins are too great for them to encounter the merciful Jesus. But Pope Francis counters:

*There are no situations we cannot get out of. We're not condemned to sink into quicksand, in which the more we move, the deeper we sink. Jesus is there, his hand extended, ready to reach out to us and pull us out of the mud, out of sin, out of the abyss of evil into which we have fallen. We need only to be conscious of our state, be honest with ourselves and not lick our wounds. We need to ask for the grace to recognize ourselves as sinners. //// ////*

Another theme which runs through *The Name of God Is Mercy* is the candid admission by Pope Francis that *he* is a sinner. In an interview with Father Antonio Spadaro shortly after becoming pope, he was asked, "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" He responded:

*I do not know what might be the most fitting description...I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It's not a figure of speech. I am a sinner.*

In his interview with Andrea Tornielli in *The Name of God Is Mercy*, the Holy Father is asked: "how do we recognize that we ourselves are sinners? What would you say to someone who doesn't feel like one?" He replies:

*I would advise them to ask for the grace of feeling like one! Yes, because even recognizing oneself as a sinner is a grace. It is a grace that is granted to you. Without that grace, the most one can say is: 'I am limited. I have my limits. These are my mistakes.' But recognizing oneself as a sinner is something else: It means standing in front of God, who is our everything, and presenting him with ourselves, which are nothing – our miseries, our sins. What we need to ask for is truly an act of grace.*

Sinners are those individuals who have the humility and sense of woundedness to admit they are weak and in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. Francis points to such persons in the Gospels: Zacchaeus, Matthew, the Samaritan woman at the well and Nicodemus:

*Their sinful hearts were open to forgiveness. That small opening allowed the strength of God to enter. When a sinner recognizes himself as a sinner, he admits in some way that what he's attached to, clings to, is false.*

Pope Francis wants us to truly look at the dark reality of sin in the light of God's mercy. The evil nature of our sin pales in comparison to God's goodness. God views our sin from the perspective of the ancient tradition of the Easter *Exultet* with its shocking praise of Adam's and Eve's sin as

a *felix culpa* (“happy fault”). He knows that an honest knowledge of our sin and our need for God’s mercy will lead us to experience the love of “*so great, so glorious a Redeemer*.”