

Catholic

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Learning to See through the Eyes of Mercy

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The day Jesus of Nazareth walked into the tax collector's den and called Matthew was a compelling moment. Surely Matthew was compelled, for he followed without hesitation (Matthew 9:9–13). The dynamism persists: The story found its way into three of the Gospels; 700 years later it captivated the Venerable Bede; 800 years after Bede it enthralled an artist named Caravaggio, resulting in the famous painting *The Calling of St. Matthew*. And several decades ago, a young Argentinian named Jorge Bergoglio reaffirmed the incident's forcefulness. It is at this point in the sustenance of the tale of Matthew's merciful calling—through the juxtaposition of meanings in a person, a painting, and a Latin sentence—that we, too, should become compelled.

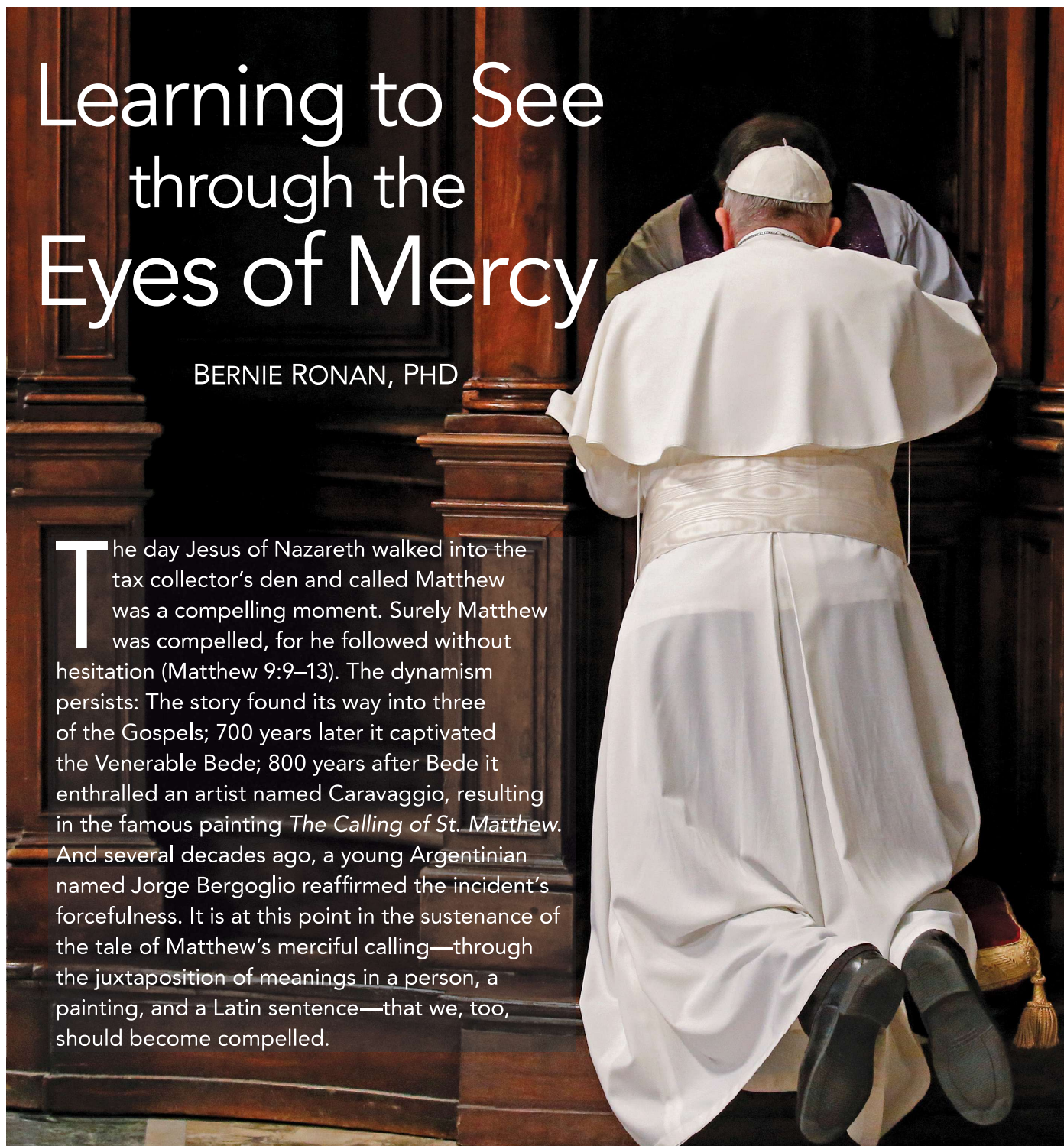


IMAGE: CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE



Peeling back these layers of meaning reveals and illuminates what it means to be mercifully called. For Bergoglio, the first call came at age seventeen. He recalls how, on the first day of spring in 1953 (also the feast of St. Matthew), he was going to a party when he decided, on a whim, to stop at church and go to confession. The experience changed his life; he felt the call from God to become a priest. “The loving face of God crossed my path and invited me to follow him,” he recounted.

Fast-forward to his election as Pope Francis and his first interview. Asked, “Who is Jorge Bergoglio?” he replied: “I am a sinner.” Being a sinner forgiven by God defines him. How likely is it that any of us would answer this question similarly? What does it mean, that the leader of the Catholic Church defines himself by his sinfulness? The simple answer? The experience of mercy, as seen in the Gospel where Jesus calls and forgives Matthew, arcs like a rainbow over Francis’ life. He experienced life-changing forgiveness that day as a teen on the feast of St. Matthew. Thanks partly to his ministries, he returned to Rome often, where he visited the French national church, San Luigi dei Francesi, to reflect on the compelling scene painted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

The Calling of St. Matthew is seen as one of the great paintings of all time. Though it has a majestic sweep, its subject and portrayal are mundane, dense with the drama of the everyday. With Caravaggio’s characteristic genius for light that illumines but does more than just brighten, the scene is backlit by a beam shining in from an unseen window on Matthew and his visage, while casting Jesus and his companion, Peter, partly in golden shadow. But the artist deftly guides the eye to Matthew and Jesus and their interaction. We see Jesus’ face from the side, shaded, a look that’s difficult to surmise. Matthew’s face is better lit, though still inscrutable. However, the painting’s focus is on the fingers of the two—Jesus’ languid hand outstretched, beckoning and conveying heartfelt forgiveness. By contrast, Matthew’s left hand seems to actually declaim, alive with speech: “Who, me? Why me? What does it mean to ‘follow’ you? Now?”

Suffusing this scene is its subtext, oozing from the canvas: sin, opprobrium, scandal, and judgment. Jesus is picking a scoundrel to be his disciple, someone scorned and hated by his own people. A “publican” like Matthew took from the Jews their meager earnings in the form of taxes, which he then gave to the

Romans. However, Bergoglio saw something else at work in the scene that trumped scandal: mercy. Bergoglio saw a sinner, like him, one who was being both forgiven and chosen.

Bergoglio saw this because he viewed this salvific scene through the prism of a Latin sentence that resonated with him. Each year on the feast of St. Matthew, a date he'd held dear since his teenage years, the priest would contemplate a reading in his breviary written by St. Bede the Venerable. In the eighth century, commenting on this fateful scene from Matthew's life, Bede penned this beautiful sentence, from which Bergoglio would pluck three words to serve as the motto on his coat of arms as bishop and as pope: *Miserando atque eligendo*. The sentence and some possible translations follow:

*Vidit ergo Iesus publicanum,
et quia miserando atque eligendo vidit,
ait illi, "Sequere me."*

* * *

Jesus saw the tax collector
in a way that expressed both mercy and selection
and said to him, "Follow me."

The Catholic News Service says the three-word Latin motto means, "because he saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him." Bede's brilliance is seen in the virtually untranslatable density and interconnection of the three words Bergoglio chose for his motto. The first word seems to be key to understanding and capturing Bergoglio's interpretation. *Vidit* means "he saw"—"Jesus saw the publican." But how did he see this tax collector? Bede explains by adding a phrase with a conjunction, *quia* ("because"), followed by two gerunds, *miserando* ("pitying, forgiving"), and *eligendo* ("choosing").

These gerunds, or verbal nouns—one expressing an act of mercy, the other an act of choice or selection—are joined by the conjunction *atque*. This conjunction usually connotes something more than and, often something causal or sequential. So there are possible nuances in translation—the selection comes because of the mercy. First comes the mercy. Then the choices—namely, election and forgiveness—occur hand-in-glove.

Jesus looks upon Matthew with compassion, and Bede says that the call comes because of and through this special way of seeing. Because Jesus viewed the publican with a gaze that was both forgiving and indicated choosing, he therefore said to him, "Follow me." In harmony with Bede's interpretation, Bergoglio describes what happened to him at seventeen: "That is the way he saw me, and that is how he wants me to look at others, with compassion, as if I were choosing them for him, not excluding anyone, because everyone is chosen by the love of God."

In Caravaggio's painting, you can almost hear Bergoglio's words resounding through Matthew's head as he looks out to Jesus, pointing to him: *pierced by God's look of love...caught with my guard down...the loving face of God crossed my path and invited me to follow him*. Jesus' appraisal of this despised man was colored by the mercy he showered on everyone he met, the mercy that paralleled all he did. And in one fell swoop, Jesus saw Matthew as a greedy extortionist, forgave him, and called him to follow in his way. Merciful election hinges on

sight. Because Bede saw two dynamics under way, forgiving and choosing, Bergoglio did, too. Bergoglio's experience suggests that Jesus forgives and chooses when he calls each of us to follow him. Vocation for Christians takes place through a redemptive and undeserved mix of mercy and election.

The theology and spirituality of Christian vocation tend to focus not on forgiving but on electing. The will of the individual in choosing the religious vocation is to be informed by, even driven by, the choice God has made in selecting the individual. But Bede later writes that Matthew is moved to follow Jesus "by an invisible, interior impulse flooding his mind with the light of grace." This impulse, laden with grace, is shaped by both the acts of forgiveness and being chosen. Since Jesus is, for the believer, "divine mercy in person"—as Pope Benedict XVI so cogently phrased it—the call to discipleship is always issued mercifully.

The merciful call comes from the world, and it is costly. To paraphrase Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when Christ calls us, he bids us to come and die. The death that follows can take the dramatic form it did for Matthew, as depicted in Caravaggio's painting, but for most of us, the calling, like the dying, comes in countless daily acts whereby the person follows by regularly and routinely dispensing mercy to others in line with that which was shown to him when he was mercifully called. As Bergoglio wrote in the prayer he shared on the eve of his ordination: "I believe in the death that is experienced from day to day, a burning death from which I flee, but which smiles at me, inviting me to accept it." Christ calls us, mercifully, today to die to self and to follow him by showing mercy today. We can answer the call by imitating Christ, who "emptied" himself through his mercy-driven life, ending in death (Philippians 2:7).

How does this merciful call come to us from the world? In a circle meant to be virtuous, Christ calls us from the world, embodied in the poor, silently pleading that we show mercy. And it is the same Christ who lavishes on us the grace to answer that call. We are both mercifully called and called to mercy.

Mercy, after all, is a form of love, which John's Gospel says is the closest we can get to a definition of God. Since mercy is love shown in external words and actions, Aquinas says, "The sum total of the Christian religion consists in mercy." What does merciful love entail? It denotes forgiveness, pity, compassion, empathy and pardon, and is best summarized in the "works of mercy." It is prominently featured in the Last Judgment scene in Matthew 25:31–46, where Christ directs "sheep" to heaven and "goats" to hell. The judging, in fact, has in one sense already taken place, through the deeds of those standing before the throne of God. Their lives are their judge. And when told they are condemned for not serving Jesus in his state of hunger, nakedness, and thirst, we hear (and may sympathize with) the goats' famous, dumbfounded plea: "When did we see *you* hungry?" Seeing is the key, as Jesus' answer sounds through the years to us today: "Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me." The goats didn't get a pass because they couldn't recognize Jesus. Their failing to mercifully love condemns them. Through the mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus is now found in the poor. He waits to be seen.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta relates her encounters with the poor and lonely as meeting Christ in "his most distressing disguise."

In her own life, she felt called by God to leave the comfort of her convent and answer the call that came from the world in the suffering and dying she saw all over Calcutta. She saw the need because of mercy. Her way of seeing followed the logic of the Latin word for mercy, *misericordia*: *Miseria* denotes “wretchedness, misery, poverty of every stripe”; *cor* is the word for “heart.” Mercy is about loving—having the heart for—misery, not for its own sake but because it is divinely embodied before me now. For St. Teresa, too, vision was key, as she prayed: “Give me the eyes of faith.” And as she reminds us, our wealthy societies are also filled with the poor: the lonely, the distraught, the despairing, the desolate, those consumed by anger and fear.

Why the poor? The intellectual reason is found in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount where Jesus calls the poor *Makários* (“blessed”) because they need God. When we see someone who is *poor* (“hungry, saddened, abused”), we see someone who—aware or not—needs God. In that sense, in our vulnerable need, each of us is poor. As Francis, bishop of Rome, said to a group of his fellow citizens, “It would be good if every Roman were neglected, then they would feel the need for God.”

As Catholics, many of us are aware of all this; yet do we see mercy as active love shown to others as a central focus of our Christian living? Perhaps we saw in Caravaggio’s masterpiece recruitment and not forgiveness, *eligendo* and not *miserando*. For many of us, mercy is the private sense we have of our sins being forgiven, a feature of our devotional life. Let us embrace the acts of compassion and care calling to us each day as we recognize that both our shriven sins and the care we show toward others—especially the downtrodden—are connected. Both are works of mercy.

Consider the significance of the song we sing at Mass, the “Agnus Dei” (Lamb of God). “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” Shame is a grace, Francis reminds us, because as we sing, we recall our own sins, an opportunity to once more feel forgiveness, mercy. Shame then leads us, riding the words of the “Agnus Dei,” into all the sinful, merciless places and events in our world—all bathed in the blood of the lamb. A lamb, the most innocent, helpless, and undeserving of slaughter, metaphorically reminds us that we are forgiven through

an abundance of love that suffuses the whole of creation, a slaying that “takes away the sins of the world.” To paraphrase Bergoglio’s nineteenth-century Jesuit confrere Gerard Manley Hopkins: We are enwrapped by mercy, like we are by air.

One of Pope Francis’ frequently used Italian words is *sguardo*. It can mean “a look,” “a longer gaze,” or “a brief glance.” A beautiful example is found in the official prayer from the Jubilee Year of Mercy (2016), so evocative of the insight Francis gained from Caravaggio and Bede: “Your loving gaze (*sguardo*) freed Matthew from being enslaved by money.”

Two other examples of *squardi* help us to see mercifully like Pope Francis.

One took place when Francis stood in prayer next to Timothy Cardinal Dolan at the 9/11 Memorial, two priests staring into the abyss of remembered yet unspeakable horror. They are both visibly moved as they gaze, riveted, into the middle distance, in a manner associated with being deep in prayer, gripped by the tragedy memorialized before them. Yet their sorrowful seeing is suffused with the mercy that flows from what Leo the

Great called “the catastrophe of the cross.” The ancient hymn *Ave crux, spes unica* captures how counterintuitive Christianity is at its core: “Behold the cross, our only hope.” This phrase aptly frames what Christianity relies on: “omnipotent weakness.” Mercy conquers tragedy.

Francis’ other *sguardo*, evident of mercy, was more a glance than a gaze. After climbing into his car to make his way to the Philadelphia airport, he looked out of the vehicle as it drove off and saw a young man in a wheelchair among the crowd lining the route. He asked the driver to stop, got out of the car, walked to the young man...and kissed him (see photo). He was called by seeing this young man’s poverty, his need, and the need summoned mercy in Francis—mercy’s call.

Just as the teenage Jorge Bergoglio decided to walk with the Lord when “the loving face of God crossed my path and invited me to follow him,” may all of us respond with an enthusiastic yes to the invitation of the call of mercy.

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—Editor

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