This morning, Pope Francis conducted the first of a series of recurring events for him – the Sunday “Angelus.” It’s not monumental, in terms of events. It’s not authoritative, in terms of teaching. In some respects, it is no more than a sighting and a greeting, an opportunity for pilgrims and residents to see the pope, who appears at the window of his studio, and to hear him say a few words.

But this Angelus was different, and not only because of the thousands of people who filled St. Peter’s Square on a chilly day. For this appearance showed, to Rome and the world, a different kind of pope.

Despite the life-changing transformation to himself, in virtue of his election as the successor of Peter, this pope seems completely at ease with his people. It’s evident in his smile, his wave, and the simple way he began by wishing them all a “good day.” It’s noticeable in the conversational tone with which he speaks, more that of a gentle grandfather or wise elder than the Church’s supreme authority. Perhaps most of all, it comes to the fore whenever he veers from the text prepared for him (a practice that will no doubt challenge those who have to publish his speeches). Whenever he does that, we hear him speak cor ad cor – “heart to heart” – and that is what the people relish. They hear him as one who speaks to them and with them, not at them, and this bodes quite well for his future as the Church’s universal shepherd.

In other words, he acts as the Vicar of Christ, the very Jesus who successively reveals himself in the Gospel story about the woman caught in adultery on which the pope commented this Sunday. In that memorable tale from the Gospel of John (8:1-11), Jesus came as a teacher. He sat as one with authority (like a judge). But, when questioned about the law regarding the punishment for adultery, he doodled on the ground as would any distraught peasant concerned for the fate of another person. When pressed for an answer, he responded as a sage, extricating himself from the legal dilemma with the famous line “let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her.” Finally, after more doodling, he spoke as God in saying to the woman, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

What this story reveals, and what this pope shows ‘n tells, is that our primary experience as human beings is one of relationship. Sadly, here on earth our relationships are all too often corrupted by human conniving, as seen in the Gospel narrative by the fact that the woman was “caught in the act” in adultery and by the claim that the scribes and Pharisees sought to “trap” Jesus with this fact.

But Jesus’ response shows clearly that, when it comes to our relationship with God, mercy triumphs over judgment. Or, as Pope Francis puts it, God never tires of forgiving, even though we tire of asking for forgiveness. In the Gospel Jesus demonstrated this to the people in the temple area; so today Pope Francis pleaded with the people in St. Peter’s Square to realize the uniqueness of our encounter with this merciful God – where asking for God’s forgiveness is needed not because God’s mercy is in question but because standing before the Lord in humility enables an experience of that divine-human encounter by which reconciliation is assured.
God never tires of forgiving! There’s the message that the heart of God speaks to the heart of man. And when that forgiveness is heard and heeded, the world becomes a better place. Hopefully, the world that now hears the words of Pope Francis will take them to heart whenever he speaks.

REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., S.T.D.
Director

“Believing means entrusting oneself in full freedom and joyfully to God’s providential plan for history ... Faith, then, is an assent with which our mind and our heart say their ‘yes’ to God, confessing that Jesus is Lord. And this ‘yes’ transforms life, unfolds the path toward fullness of meaning, thereby making it new, rich in joy and trustworthy hope.”

(Pope Benedict XVI, 10/24/12)

BOLD BELIEF is a daily blog from the faculty at DeSales University, whose mission as an institution of higher education in the tradition of Salesian Spirituality is to foster vital dialogue between Roman Catholic faith and human culture.