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Faith Today

One step beyond compassion: A modern parable

By David Gibson
NC News Service

The older man was accompanied by several associates as he began a drive through the city that day. It would take him to a meeting that the man well knew was not simply one more event on his already overfilled agenda.

Meanwhile a young man waited. Dressed in blue jeans and a sweater, his jogging shoes unlaced, one might not have suspected he had become a figure on the world stage.

When the older man and his party arrived at the large building, they first greeted some others. Then they walked along the corridors toward the room where the meeting they all had on their minds was to take place.

The older man's manner grew serious. No one could know his exact thoughts. Perhaps he worried over how the meeting would go. Perhaps his thoughts leapt backward two and a half years to a day he might have preferred to forget, if he could.

Then the party arrived at the meeting place. The younger man rose and greeted the older man. Most of what they would say to each other would be unheard by the others who waited outside the room. But the younger man was heard to say, "First of all, I want to ask your forgiveness."

The younger man's name was Mehmet Ali Agca.

The older man's name was Pope John Paul II.

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Their meeting place was Agca's prison cell in Rome's Rebibbia prison. He had been convicted of shooting the pope in May 1981 — an action that nearly took the pope's life and that necessitated a long period of recovery for him.

After the meeting the pope told a reporter: "I have spoken to a brother who has my complete trust. What was said is a secret that will remain between him and me."

One of those who witnessed the meeting said that the pope and Agca had spoken in very low voices, in an "almost-confessional tone."

The stories we find in Scripture are preserved, cherished and told again and again because they point us to the essence of who we really are. The story of one modern-day man who transformed Scripture from mere words into a way of being is one that will be remembered as well.

A brother? Forgiveness?

My own thought about the pope's visit to Agca was plain, simple: This visit must come directly from the heart of Christianity as the pope views it. This is what it means for him to be a person of the Bible, to live by the Gospel.

And I think the pope himself sees it this way, for he has written much about mercy and forgiveness.

Once the pope wrote: "The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy."

He wrote those words in his second encyclical, completed in 1980, long before the attempt on his life in St. Peter's Square. The topic of the entire encyclical was mercy. Now, in his visit to Agca, he was putting those words into action.

The encyclical had become much more than words. In his action, the Gospel, too, was much more than words. It was more than information worth studying. In the pope's action, the Gospel was seen as a way of viewing life — a way of living.

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According to the pope's own thinking in his encyclical, his encounter with Agca was a recognition of the young man's dignity. Mercy — as Christ presented it in the biblical parable of the prodigal son — is about love, the pope wrote. This is the kind of love that "is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every

human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin. When this happens the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and 'restored to value.'"

Mercy, the pope said, is not merely "looking, however penetratingly and compassionately, at moral, physical or material evil."

Rather, mercy is truly seen

"when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man." It involves this extra step.

Seen in this way, mercy is "the fundamental content" of the message of Christ. Mercy, he suggested, is the driving force in Christ's mission.

As the church moves toward the year 2000, the message about mercy is especially important, the pope said. This, he explained, is a "difficult, critical phase of the history of the church and of the world." People need to see now that mercy is "more powerful than evil."

(Gibson is editor of Faith Today.)



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