Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



Pope Francis greets inmates at the San Joaquin women's prison in Santiago, Chile, Jan. 16, 2018. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)



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I wish I could clearly express what moves me about Pope Francis. One of the things that touches me most is his gaze: a gaze of faith that truly sees the person.

I remember the day he left Gemelli Hospital for the last time. In the crowd was a simple woman holding yellow flowers. We don't know her name or her story. But in the midst of the crowd, Francis had the ability to see the loving gesture of that simple woman who just wanted to wish him life.

The yellow flowers, a sign of resurrection, reminded me of another occasion when his gaze also touched my life.

In 2018, I was in Chile, working alongside Divine Shepherd Sr. Nelly León Correa, a chaplain for the Women's Penitentiary Center in San Joaquín in Santiago. We were accompanying women deprived of their freedom when it was announced that Francis would visit the prison. There were months of preparation, of simple and meaningful gestures.

I especially remember how, during the visit, he approached each of the pregnant women outside the prison chapel, holding some of the inmates' babies in his arms, smiling with immense tenderness. Even Michelle Bachelet, the president of the country, was there, but the attention of our brother Francis was on the women deprived of their freedom.

I participated in the choir. We asked the women to write what they wanted to say to the pope, and with those words we created a song: "Shepherd Who Smells of His Sheep." During the visit, Sister Nelly approached Francis, explained the meaning of the song, and handed him a copy of the lyrics.

> What Francis said to them that day still resonates in me: 'Being deprived of freedom is not the same as being deprived of dignity. ... No one's dignity can be touched; it must be protected, guarded, cherished.'

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I will never forget his gesture: Moved by the women's singing, by their cry for freedom, he didn't hand the paper to one of the aides who were with him. He folded it carefully into quarters and put it in his pocket, as someone does when they need to keep something close. That simple gesture meant so much: The pope had received and welcomed the love of these women.

What Francis said to them that day still resonates in me: "Being deprived of freedom is not the same as being deprived of dignity; no, it is not the same thing. No one's dignity can be touched; it must be protected, guarded, cherished. No one can be stripped of their dignity."

This reaffirmation of their dignity, directed at women so wounded by life, renews my faith in the resurrection, in the new life that Jesus offers us.

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The pope's gaze toward that woman with the yellow flowers, his attentive listening to the words of the imprisoned women, and his powerful voice reminding us that dignity remains intact can all be summed up in the same gaze: one that sees each person for who they are. Francis looked at each of us in our reality — and loved us.

There was another moment that marked my heart: when Francis visited northern Chile and was confronted by journalists about the cases of abuse within the church. Francis didn't dodge the pain. He allowed himself to be challenged, looked at the victims with tenderness, and, shortly after, asked to meet with them in private. One of those victims is a friend of mine, a laywoman.

That attitude healed something deep in the Chilean church. To be seen — to feel truly seen — was important. It made a difference.

All this, for me, is Francis: a gaze that does not look away, a presence that restores, a heart that knows how to keep within it the simplest gestures of love.

"Shepherd Who Smells of His Sheep," lyrics written by the women inmates of San Joaquin Female Penitentiary Center in Chile, where they interpreted it for Pope Francis (YouTube/Bio Bio)

"Shepherd Who Smells of His Sheep"

I am a bird that's been trapped
with a pain hidden inside
With my wings broken,
I welcome you, friend Pope.

A light begins to shine,
today hope is reborn.
I feel loved again;
set free from my chains.

Refrain:
God guides me through your gaze,
my beauty lights up again.
Today I trust myself once more,
and the sadness disappears.

One more day of life,
one less day of sentence.
Your visit is my joy,
shepherd who smells of his sheep.

Stanza:
Our chains are released,
and our cries silenced.
You reveal to us in your smile,
God holds you in his arms.

You recognize my gaze,
you took my sin.
In Jesus I'll place my eyes —
thank you, Francis, brother.

(Repeat refrain)

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This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.