

The spiritual physician and his remedies

By Paul Haring

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CAGLIARI, Sardinia — “I see the church as a field hospital after battle,” Pope Francis said in his bold interview published last week in Jesuit magazines. His words were running through my mind yesterday as I photographed him tenderly greeting and kissing the sick in the Basilica of Our Lady of Bonaria in Cagliari, on the Italian island of Sardinia.

This wasn’t about just greeting people in wheelchairs. These were seriously ill people lying out on beds, some of them breathing oxygen or with masks over their mouths to protect from disease. The basilica looked as if it had been turned into a field hospital, much as U.S. churches were on battlefields were during the Civil War. In my six months of photographic coverage of Pope Francis, I’ve witnessed the extraordinary emphasis he has placed on personally encountering the sick and disabled. At general audiences he personally greets, blesses and kisses dozens of infirmed. They are very touched by his gestures, many to the point of tears.

After seeing the basilica turned into a field hospital, I had a concrete image of how the pope also sees the church as a refuge for people suffering spiritually.



*Pope Francis blesses a sick man as a guy with a blue iPad
captures the moment in the Basilica of Our Lady of Bonaria.*

(CNS photo/Paul Haring)

I realized that he is like a spiritual physician who is giving us a prescription for how to best approach the deep wounds of a society distant from God.

The prescription is written in an informal and off-the cuff style. It is not the pontificating and direct style that many of us would expect. While experts debate the meaning of his words and style, I find by watching him closely that his manner seems to be that of a skilled country doctor. He makes personal visits and is beloved as he is colorful. He speaks informally, even sometimes using hyperbole to make a point. Like many doctors, he gives his prescription in language that his patients might find difficult to understand. But it would be impossible to doubt his compassion.



*A clown blows bubbles as Pope Francis blesses a sick
man at the basilica. (CNS/Paul Haring)*