

Interview of Pope Francis with Italian daily ‘Corriere della Sera’



Close to the first anniversary of his election as bishop of Rome, Pope Francis describes himself as, “A man who laughs, cries, sleeps well and has friends like everyone else.” It is the self-description the Holy Father offered to the editor-in-chief of the **Italian daily, Corriere della Sera, Ferruccio De Bortoli**, in an interview published in the paper’s **March 5th edition**. The Pope’s wide-ranging conversation with the veteran journalist covered themes from bioethics, to styles and modes of Church governance, to his friendship with, and esteem for his predecessor, Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI. Some of the strongest remarks concerned the role of women in the Church.

Here below an English translation, by CNA's Estefania Aguirre and Alan Holdren.

Ferruccio De Bortoli:



Holy Father, every once in a while you call those who ask you for help. Sometimes they don’t believe you.

Pope Francis:

Yes, it has happened. When one calls, it is because he wants to speak, to pose a question, to ask for counsel. As a priest in Buenos Aires it was more simple. And, it has remained a habit for me. A service. I feel it inside. Certainly, now it is not that easy to do due to the number of people who write me.

And, is there a contact, an encounter that you remember with particular affection?

A widowed woman, aged 80, who had lost a child. She wrote me. And, now I call her every month. She is happy. I am a priest. I like it.

The relations with your predecessor. Have you ever asked for the counsel of Benedict XVI?

Yes. The Pope emeritus is not a statue in a museum. It is an institution. We weren’t used to it. 60 or 70 years ago, ‘bishop emeritus’ didn’t exist. It came after the (Second Vatican) Council. Today, it is an institution. The same thing must happen for the Pope emeritus. Benedict is the first and perhaps there will be others. We don’t know. He is discreet, humble, and he doesn’t want to disturb. We have spoken about it and we decided together that it would be better that he sees people, gets out and participates in the life of the Church. He once came



here for the blessing of the statue of St. Michael the Archangel, then to lunch at Santa Marta and, after Christmas, I sent him an invitation to participate in the consistory and he accepted. His wisdom is a gift of God. Some would have wished that he retire to a Benedictine abbey far from the Vatican. I thought of grandparents and their wisdom. Their counsels give strength to the family and they do not deserve to be in a home for the elderly.



Your way of governing the Church has seemed to us to be this: you listen to everyone and decide alone. A bit like a general of the Jesuits. Is the Pope a lone man?

Yes and no. I understand what you want to say to me. The Pope is not alone in his work because he is accompanied and counselled by so many. And, he would be a lone man if he decided without listening, or feigned to listen. But, there is a moment, when it is about deciding, placing a signature, in which he is alone with his sense of responsibility.

You have innovated, criticized some attitudes of the clergy, shaken the Curia. With some resistance, some opposition. Has the Church already changed as you would have liked a year ago?

Last March, I didn't have a project to change the Church. I didn't expect this transfer of dioceses, let's put it that way. I began to govern seeking to put into practice that which had emerged in the debate among cardinals in the various congregations. In my way of acting, I wait for the Lord to give me inspiration. I'll give you an example. We had spoken of the spiritual care of the people who work in the Curia, and they began to make spiritual retreats. We needed to give more importance to the annual spiritual exercises. Everyone has the right to spend five days in silence and meditation, whereas before, in the Curia, they heard three talks a day and then some continued to work.

Kindness and mercy are the essence of your pastoral message...

And of the Gospel. It is the centre of the Gospel. Otherwise, one cannot understand Jesus Christ, the kindness of the Father who sent him to listen to us, to heal us, to save us.

But has this message been understood? You have said that the Francis-mania will not last long. Is there something in your public image that you don't like?

I like being among the people. Together with those who suffer. Going to parishes. I don't like the ideological interpretations, a certain 'mythology of Pope Francis'. When it is said, for example, that he goes out of the Vatican at night to walk and to feed the homeless on Via Ottaviano. It has never crossed my mind. If I'm not wrong, Sigmund Freud said that in every idealization there is an aggression. Depicting the Pope to be a sort of superman, a type of star, seems offensive to me. The Pope is a man who laughs, cries, sleeps calmly and has friends like everyone. A normal person.



(Do you have) nostalgia for your Argentina?



The truth is that I don't have nostalgia. I would like to go and see my sister, who is sick, the last of us five (siblings). I would like to see her, but this does not justify a trip to Argentina. I call her by phone and this is enough. I'm not thinking of going before 2016 because I was already in Latin America, in Rio. Now I must go to the Holy Land, to Asia, and then to Africa.

You just renewed your Argentinian passport. You are still a head of state.

I renewed it because it was about to expire.

Were you displeased by the accusations of Marxism, mostly American, after the publication of Evangelii Gaudium?

Not at all. I have never shared the Marxist ideology, because it is not true, but I have known many great people who professed Marxism.

The scandals that rocked the life of the Church are fortunately in the past. A public appeal was made to you, on the delicate theme of the abuse of minors, published by (the Italian newspaper) Il Foglio and signed by Besancon and Scruton, among others, that you would raise your voice and make it heard against the fanaticisms and the bad conscience of the secularized world that hardly respects infancy.



I want to say two things. The cases of abuses are terrible because they leave extremely deep wounds. Benedict XVI was very courageous and he cleared a path.

The Church has done so much on this path. Perhaps more than anyone. The statistics on the phenomenon of the violence against children are shocking, but they also show clearly that the great majority of abuses take place in the family environment and around it. The Catholic Church is perhaps the only public institution to have acted with transparency and responsibility. No other has done more. And, the Church is the only one to be attacked.

Holy Father, you say 'the poor evangelize us.' The attention to poverty, the strongest stamp of your pastoral message, is held by some observers as a profession of 'pauperism.' The Gospel does not condemn well-being. And Zaccheus was rich and charitable.



The Gospel condemns the 'cult' of well-being. 'Pauperism' is one of the critical interpretations. In Medieval times, there were a lot of pauperistic currents. St. Francis had the genius of placing the theme of poverty on the evangelical path. Jesus says that one cannot serve two masters, God and Wealth. And when we are judged in the final judgement (Matthew 25), our closeness to poverty



counts. Poverty distances us from idolatry, it opens the doors to Providence. Zaccheus gave half of his wealth to the poor. And to he who keeps his granary full of his own selfishness, the Lord, in the end, will present him with the bill. I have expressed well in *Evangelii Gaudium* what I think about poverty.

You have indicated that in globalization, especially financially, there are some evils that accost humanity. But, globalization has ripped millions of people out of indigence. It has given hope, a rare feeling not to be confused with optimism.

It is true, globalization has saved many persons from poverty, but it has condemned many others to die of hunger, because with this economic system it becomes selective. The globalization which the Church supports is similar not to a sphere in which every point is equidistant from the center and in which then one loses the particularity of a people, but a polyhedron, with its diverse faces, in which every people conserves its own culture, language, religion, identity. The current 'spherical' economic, and especially financial, globalization produces a single thought, a weak thought. At the center is no longer the human person, just money.

The theme of the family is central in the activity of the Council of eight cardinals. Since the exhortation 'Familiaris Consortio' of John Paul II many things have changed. Two Synods are on the schedule. Great newness is expected. You have said of the divorced: they are not to be condemned but helped.



It is a long path that the Church must complete. A process wanted by the Lord. Three months after my election the themes for the Synod were placed before me. It was proposed that we discuss what is the contribution of Jesus to contemporary man. But in the end with gradual steps - which for me are signs of the will of God - it was chosen to discuss the family, which is going through a very serious crisis. It is difficult to form it. Few young people marry. There are many separated families in which the project of common life has failed. The children suffer greatly. We must give a response. But for this we must reflect very deeply. It is that which the Consistory and the Synod are doing. We need to avoid remaining on the surface. The temptation to resolve every problem with casuistry is an error, a simplification of profound things, as the Pharisees did, a very superficial theology. It is in light of the deep reflection that we will be able to seriously confront particular situations, also those of the divorced, with a pastoral depth.

Why did the speech from Cardinal Walter Kasper during the last consistory (an abyss between doctrine on marriage and the family and the real life of many Christians) so deeply

divide the cardinals? How do you think the Church can walk these two years of fatiguing path arriving to a large and serene consensus? If the doctrine is firm, why is debate necessary?

Cardinal Kasper made a beautiful and profound presentation that will soon be published in German, and he confronted five points; the fifth was that of second marriages. I would have been concerned if in the consistory there wasn't an intense discussion. It wouldn't have served for anything. The cardinals knew that they could say what they wanted, and they presented many different points of view that are enriching. The fraternal and open comparisons make theological and pastoral thought grow. I am not afraid of this, actually I seek it.



In the recent past, it was normal to appeal to the so-called 'non-negotiable values', especially in bio-ethics and sexual morality. You have not picked up on this formula. The doctrinal and moral principles have not changed. Does this choice perhaps wish to show a style less preceptive and more respectful of personal conscience?

I have never understood the expression non-negotiable values. Values are values, and that is it. I can't say that, of the fingers of a hand, there is one

less useful than the rest. Whereby I do not understand in what sense there may be negotiable values. I wrote in the exhortation 'Evangelii Gaudium' what I wanted to say on the theme of life.

Many nations have regulated civil unions. Is it a path that the Church can understand? But up to what point?

Marriage is between a man and a woman. Secular states want to justify civil unions to regulate different situations of cohabitation, pushed by the demand to regulate economic aspects between persons, such as ensuring health care. It is about pacts of cohabitating of various natures, of which I wouldn't know how to list the different ways. One needs to see the different cases and evaluate them in their variety.

How will the role of the woman in the Church be promoted?

Also here, casuistry does not help. It is true that women can and must be more present in the places of decision-making in the Church. But this I would call a promotion of the functional sort. Only in this way you don't get very far. We must rather think that the Church has a feminine article: 'La'. She is feminine in her origin. The great theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar worked a lot on this theme: the Marian principle guides the Church aside the Petrine. The Virgin Mary is more important than any bishop and any apostle. The theological deepening is in process. Cardinal Rylko, with the Council for the Laity, is working in this direction with many women experts in different areas.



At half a century from Paul VI's Humanae Vitae, can the Church take up again the theme of birth control? Cardinal Martini, your confrere, thought that the moment had come.

All of this depends on how *Humanae Vitae* is interpreted. Paul VI himself, at the end, recommended to confessors much mercy, and attention to concrete situations. But his genius was prophetic, he had the courage to place himself against the majority, defending the moral discipline, exercising a culture brake, opposing present and future neo-Malthusianism. The question is not that of changing the doctrine but of going deeper and making pastoral (ministry) take into account the situations and that which it is possible for people to do. Also of this we will speak in the path of the synod.

Science evolves and redesigns the frontiers of life. Does it make sense to artificially prolong life in a vegetative state? Can a ‘living will’ be a solution?

I am not a specialist in bioethical issues. And I fear that every one of my sentences may be wrong. The traditional doctrine of the Church says that no one is obligated to use extraordinary means when it is known that they are in the terminal phase. In my pastoral ministry, in these cases, I have always advised palliative care. In more specific cases it is good to seek, if necessary, the counsel of specialists.



Will the coming trip to the Holy Land bring an agreement of intercommunion with the Orthodox that Paul VI, 50 years ago, nearly signed with Athenagoras?

We are all impatient to obtain ‘closed’ results. But the path of unity with the Orthodox means most of all walking and working together. In Buenos Aires, in the catechism courses, some Orthodox came. I spent Christmas and January 6 together with their bishops, who sometimes also asked advice of our diocesan offices. I don’t know if the episode you are telling me of Athenagoras who would have proposed to Paul VI that they walk together and send all of the theologians to an island to discuss among themselves is true. It is a joke, but it is important that we walk together. Orthodox theology is very rich. And I believe that they have great theologians at this moment. Their vision of the Church and of synodality is marvellous.

In a few years, the biggest world power will be China, with which the Vatican does not have relations. Matteo Ricci was Jesuit like yourself.

We are close to China. I sent a letter to president Xi Jinping when he was elected, three days after me. And he answered me. There are relations. They are a great people, whom I love.

Why doesn’t the Holy Father ever speak of Europe? What doesn’t convince you about the European design?

Do you remember the day I spoke of Asia? What did I say? I didn’t speak of Asia, nor of Africa, nor of Europe. Only of Latin America when I was in Brazil and when I had to receive the Commission for Latin America. There hasn’t yet been occasion to speak of Europe. It will come.

What book are you reading these days?

Peter and Magdalene by Damiano Marzotto, on the feminine dimension of the Church. It is a beautiful book.

And are you not able to see any nice films, another of your passions? “La Grande Bellezza” won an Oscar. Will you see it?



I don't know. The last film I saw was “Life is Beautiful” from Benigni. And before, I saw “La Strada” of Fellini. A masterpiece. I also liked Wajda...

St. Francis had a carefree youth. I ask you, have you ever been in love?

In the book “Il Gesuita,” I tell the story of when I had a girlfriend at 17 years old. And I speak also of this in “On Heaven and Earth,” the volume I wrote with Abraham Skorka. In the seminary a girl made me lose my head for a week.

And how did it end, if I'm not indiscreet?

They were things of youth. I spoke with my confessor (a big smile).

Thanks Holy Father.

Thank you.