

The Pope: how the Church will change

Dialogue between Francis and La Repubblica's founder, Eugenio Scalfari: "Starting from the Second Vatican Council, open to modern culture". The conversation in the Vatican after the Pope's letter to La Repubblica: "Convert you? Proselytism is solemn nonsense. You have to meet people and listen to them."



Pope Francis (ap) by *EUGENIO SCALFARI*

Pope Francis told me: "The most serious of the evils that afflict the world these days are youth unemployment and the loneliness of the old. The old need care and companionship; the young need work and hope but have neither one nor the other, and the problem is they don't even look for them any more. They have been crushed by the present. You tell me: can you live crushed under the weight of the present? Without a memory of the past and without the desire to look ahead to the future by building something, a future, a family? Can you go on like this? This, to me, is the most urgent problem that the Church is facing."

Your Holiness, I say, it is largely a political and economic problem for states, governments, political parties, trade unions.

"Yes, you are right, but it also concerns the Church, in fact, particularly the Church because this situation does not hurt only bodies but also souls. The Church must feel responsible for both souls and bodies."

Your Holiness, you say that the Church must feel responsible. Should I conclude that the Church is not aware of this problem and that you will steer it in this direction?

"To a large extent that awareness is there, but not sufficiently. I want it to be more so. It is not the only problem that we face, but it is the most urgent and the most dramatic."

The meeting with Pope Francis took place last Tuesday at his home in Santa Marta, in a small bare room with a table and five or six chairs and a painting on the wall. It had been preceded by a phone call I will never forget as long as I live.

It was half past two in the afternoon. My phone rings and in a somewhat shaky voice my secretary tells me: "I have the Pope on the line. I'll put him through immediately."

I was still stunned when I heard the voice of His Holiness on the other end of a the line saying, "Hello, this is Pope Francis." "Hello Your Holiness", I say and then, "I am shocked I did not expect you to call me." "Why so surprised? You wrote me a letter asking to meet me in person. I had the same wish, so I'm calling to fix an appointment. Let me look at my diary: I can't do Wednesday, nor Monday, would Tuesday suit you?"

I answer, that's fine.

"The time is a little awkward, three in the afternoon, is that okay? Otherwise it'll have to be another day." Your Holiness, the time is fine. "So we agree: Tuesday 24 at 3 o'clock. At Santa Marta. You have to come into the door at the Sant'Uffizio."

I don't know how to end this call and let myself go, saying: "Can I embrace you by phone?" "Of course, a hug from me too. Then we will do it in person, goodbye."

And here I am. The Pope comes in and shakes my hand, and we sit down. The Pope smiles and says: "Some of my colleagues who know you told me that you will try to convert me."

It's a joke, I tell him. My friends think it is you want to convert me.

He smiles again and replies: "Proselytism is solemn nonsense, it makes no sense. We need to get to know each other, listen to each other and improve our knowledge of the world around us. Sometimes after a meeting I want to arrange another one because new ideas are born and I discover new needs. This is important: to get to know people, listen, expand the circle of ideas. The world is crisscrossed by roads that come closer together and move apart, but the important thing is that they lead towards the Good."

Your Holiness, is there is a single vision of the Good? And who decides what it is?

"Each of us has a vision of good and of evil. We have to encourage people to move towards what they think is Good."

Your Holiness, you wrote that in your letter to me. The conscience is autonomous, you said, and everyone must obey his conscience. I think that's one of the most courageous steps taken by a Pope.

"And I repeat it here. Everyone has his own idea of good and evil and must choose to follow the good and fight evil as he conceives them. That would be enough to make the world a better place."

Is the Church doing that?

"Yes, that is the purpose of our mission: to identify the material and immaterial needs of the people and try to meet them as we can. Do you know what agape is?"

Yes, I know.

"It is love of others, as our Lord preached. It is not proselytizing, it is love. Love for one's neighbor, that leavening that serves the common good."

Love your neighbor as yourself.

"Exactly so."

Jesus in his preaching said that agape, love for others, is the only way to love God. Correct me if I'm wrong.

"You're not wrong. The Son of God became incarnate in the souls of men to instill the feeling of brotherhood. All are brothers and all children of God. Abba, as he called the Father. I will show you the way, he said. Follow me and you will find the Father and you will all be his children and he will take delight in you. Agape, the love of each one of us for the other, from the closest to the furthest, is in fact the only way that Jesus has given us to find the way of salvation and of the Beatitudes."

However, as we said, Jesus told us that love for one's neighbor is equal to what we have for ourselves. So what many call narcissism is recognized as valid, positive, to the same extent as the other. We've talked a lot about this aspect.

"I don't like the word narcissism", the Pope said, "it indicates an excessive love for oneself and this is not good, it can produce serious damage not only to the soul of those affected but also in relationship with others, with the society in which one lives. The real trouble is that those most affected by this - which is actually a kind of mental disorder - are people who have a lot of power. Often bosses are narcissists".

Many church leaders have been.

"You know what I think about this? Heads of the Church have often been narcissists, flattered and thrilled by their courtiers. The court is the leprosy of the papacy."

The leprosy of the papacy, those were his exact words. But what is the court? Perhaps he is alluding to the curia?

"No, there are sometimes courtiers in the curia, but the curia as a whole is another thing. It is what in an army is called the quartermaster's office, it manages the services that serve the Holy See. But it has one defect: it is Vatican-centric. It sees and looks after the interests of the Vatican, which are still, for the most part, temporal interests. This Vatican-centric view neglects the world around us. I do not share this view and I'll do everything I can to change it. The Church is or should go back to being a community of God's people, and priests, pastors and bishops who have the care of souls, are at the service of the people of God. The Church is this, a word not surprisingly different from the Holy See, which has its own function, important but at the service of the Church. I would not have been able to have complete faith in God and in his Son if I had not been trained in the Church, and if I had not had the good fortune of being in Argentina, in a community without which I would not have become aware myself and my faith. "

You heard your calling at a young age?

"No, not very young. My family wanted me to have a different profession, to work, earn some money. I went to university. I also had a teacher for whom I had a lot of respect and developed a friendship and who was a fervent communist. She often read Communist Party texts to me and gave them to me to read. So I also got to know that very materialistic conception. I remember that she also gave me the statement from the American Communists in defense of the Rosenbergs, who had been sentenced to death. The woman I'm talking about was later arrested, tortured and killed by the dictatorship then ruling in Argentina."

Where you seduced by Communism?

"Her materialism had no hold over me. But learning about it through a courageous and honest person was helpful. I realized a few things, an aspect of the social, which I then found in the social doctrine of the Church."

Liberation theology, which Pope John Paul II excommunicated, was widespread in Latin America.

"Yes, many of its members were Argentines."

Do you think it was right that the Pope fought against them?

"It certainly gave a political aspect to their theology, but many of them were believers and with a high concept of humanity."

Your Holiness, may I tell you something about my own cultural background? I was raised by a mother who was a strict Catholic. At the age of 12 I won a catechism contest held by all the parishes in Rome and I was given a prize by the Vicariate. I took communion on the first Friday of every month, in other words, I was a practicing Catholic and a true believer. But all that changed when I entered high school. I read, among other philosophical texts that we studied, Descartes' "Discourse on Method" and I was struck by the phrase, which has now become an icon, "I think, therefore I am." The individual thus became the basis of human existence, the seat of free thought.

"Descartes, however, never denied faith in a transcendent God."

That is true, but he laid the foundation for a very different vision and I happened to follow that path, which later, supported by other things I read, let me to a very different place.

"You, however, from what I understand, are a non-believer but not anti-clerical. They are two very different things."

True, I am not anticlerical, but I become so when I meet a clericist.

He smiles and says, "It also happens to me that when I meet a clericist, I suddenly become anti-clerical. Clericalism should not have anything to do with Christianity. St. Paul, who was the first to speak to the Gentiles, the pagans, to believers in other religions, was the first to teach us that."

Can I ask you, Your Holiness, which saints you feel closest to in your soul, those who have shaped your religious experience?

"St. Paul is the one who laid down the cornerstones of our religion and our creed. You cannot be a conscious Christian without St. Paul. He translated the teachings of Christ into a doctrinal structure that, even with the additions of a vast number of thinkers, theologians and pastors, has resisted and still exists after two thousand years. Then there are Augustine, Benedict and Thomas and Ignatius. Naturally Francis. Do I need to explain why?"

Francis - I allow myself to call him that because it is the Pope himself who suggests it by the way he speaks, the way he smiles, with his exclamations of surprise and understanding - looks at me as if to encourage me to ask questions that are even more scandalous and embarrassing for those who guide the Church. So I ask him: **you explained the importance of Paul and the role he played, but I want to know which of those you named feels closer to your soul?**

"You're asking me for a ranking, but classifications are for sports or things like that. I could tell you the name of the best footballers in Argentina. But the saints..."

They say joke with knaves, you know the proverb?

"Exactly. But I'm not trying to avoid your question, because you didn't ask me for ranking of their cultural and religious importance but who is closest to my soul. So I'd say: Augustine and Francis."

Not Ignatius, from whose order you come?

"Ignatius, for understandable reasons, is the saint I know better than any other. He founded our Order. I'd like to remind you that Carlo Maria Martini also came from that order, someone who is very dear to me and also to you. Jesuits were and still are the leavening - not the only one but perhaps the most effective - of Catholicism: culture, teaching, missionary work, loyalty to the Pope. But Ignatius who founded the Society, was also a reformer and a mystic. Especially a mystic."

And you think that mystics have been important for the Church?

"They have been fundamental. A religion without mystics is a philosophy."

Do you have a mystical vocation?

"What do you think?"

I wouldn't think so.

"You're probably right. I love the mystics; Francis also was in many aspects of his life, but I do not think I have the vocation and then we must understand the deep meaning of that word. The mystic manages to strip himself of action, of facts, objectives and even the pastoral mission and rises until he reaches communion with the Beatitudes. Brief moments but which fill an entire life."

Has that ever happened to you?

"Rarely. For example, when the conclave elected me Pope. Before I accepted I asked if I could spend a few minutes in the room next to the one with the balcony overlooking the square. My head was completely empty and I was seized by a great anxiety. To make it go away and relax I closed my eyes and made every thought disappear, even the thought of refusing to accept the position, as the liturgical procedure allows. I closed my eyes and I no longer had any anxiety or emotion. At a certain point I was filled with a great light. It lasted a moment, but to me it seemed very long. Then the light faded, I got up suddenly and walked into the room where the cardinals were waiting and the table on which was the act of acceptance. I signed it, the Cardinal Camerlengo countersigned it and then on the balcony there was the "Habemus Papam".

We were silent for a moment, then I said: we were talking about the saints that you feel closest to your soul and we were left with Augustine. Will you tell me why you feel very close to him?

"Even for my predecessor Augustine is a reference point. That saint went through many vicissitudes in his life and changed his doctrinal position several times. He also had harsh words for the Jews, which I never shared. He wrote many books and what I think is most revealing of his intellectual and spiritual intimacy are the "Confessions", which also contain some manifestations of mysticism, but he is not, as many would argue, a continuation of Paul. Indeed, he sees the Church and the faith in very different ways than Paul, perhaps four centuries passed between one and the other. "

What is the difference, Your Holiness?

"For me it lies in two substantial aspects. Augustine feels powerless in the face of the immensity of God and the tasks that a Christian and a bishop has to fulfill. In fact he was by no means powerless, but he felt that his soul was always less than he wanted and needed it to be. And then the grace dispensed by the Lord as a basic element of faith. Of life. Of the meaning of life. Someone who is not touched by grace may be a person without blemish and without fear, as they say, but he will never be like a person who has touched grace. This is Augustine's insight."

Do you feel touched by grace?

"No one can know that. Grace is not part of consciousness, it is the amount of light in our souls, not knowledge nor reason. Even you, without knowing it, could be touched by grace."

Without faith? A non-believer?

"Grace regards the soul."

I do not believe in the soul.

"You do not believe in it but you have one."

Your Holiness, you said that you have no intention of trying to convert me and I do not think you would succeed.

"We cannot know that, but I don't have any such intention."

And St. Francis?

"He's great because he is everything. He is a man who wants to do things, wants to build, he founded an order and its rules, he is an itinerant and a missionary, a poet and a prophet, he is mystical. He found evil in himself and rooted it out. He loved nature, animals, the blade of grass on the lawn and the birds flying in the sky. But above all he loved people, children, old people, women. He is the most shining example of that agape we talked about earlier."

Your Holiness is right, the description is perfect. But why did none of your predecessors ever choose that name? And I believe that after you no one else will choose it.

"We do not know that, let's not speculate about the future. True, no one chose it before me. Here we face the problem of problems. Would you like something to drink?"

Thank you, maybe a glass of water.

He gets up, opens the door and asks someone in the entrance to bring two glasses of water. He asks me if I want a coffee, I say no. The water arrives. At the end of our conversation, my glass will be empty, but his will remain full. He clears his throat and begins.

"Francis wanted a mendicant order and an itinerant one. Missionaries who wanted to meet, listen, talk, help, to spread faith and love. Especially love. And he dreamed of a poor Church that would take care of others, receive material aid and use it to support others, with no concern for itself. 800 years have passed since then and times have changed, but the ideal of a missionary, poor Church is still more than valid. This is still the Church that Jesus and his disciples preached about."

You Christians are now a minority. Even in Italy, which is known as the pope's backyard. Practicing Catholics, according to some polls, are between 8 and 15 percent. Those who say they are Catholic but in fact are not very are about 20%. In the world, there are a billion Catholics or more, and with other Christian churches there are over a billion and a half, but the population of the planet is 6 or 7 billion people. There are certainly many of you, especially in Africa and Latin America, but you are a minority.

"We always have been but the issue today is not that. Personally I think that being a minority is actually a strength. We have to be a leavening of life and love and the leavening is infinitely smaller than the mass of fruits, flowers and trees that are born out of it. I believe I have already said that our goal is not to proselytize but to listen to needs, desires and disappointments, despair, hope. We must restore hope to young people, help the old, be open to the future, spread love. Be poor among the poor. We need to include the excluded and preach peace. Vatican II, inspired by Pope Paul VI and John, decided to look to the future with a modern spirit and to be open to modern culture. The Council Fathers knew that being open to modern culture meant religious ecumenism and dialogue with non-believers. But afterwards very little was done in that direction. I have the humility and ambition to want to do something."

Also because - I allow myself to add - modern society throughout the world is going through a period of deep crisis, not only economic but also social and spiritual. At the beginning of our meeting you described a generation crushed under the weight of the present. Even we non-believers feel this almost anthropological weight. That is why we want dialogue with believers and those who best represent them.

"I don't know if I'm the best of those who represent them, but providence has placed me at the head of the Church and the Diocese of Peter. I will do what I can to fulfill the mandate that has been entrusted to me."

Jesus, as you pointed out, said: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Do you think that this has happened?

"Unfortunately, no. Selfishness has increased and love towards others declined."

So this is the goal that we have in common: at least to equalize the intensity of these two kinds of love. Is your Church ready and equipped to carry out this task?

"What do you think?"

I think love for temporal power is still very strong within the Vatican walls and in the institutional structure of the whole Church. I think that the institution dominates the poor, missionary Church that you would like.

"In fact, that is the way it is, and in this area you cannot perform miracles. Let me remind you that even Francis in his time held long negotiations with the Roman hierarchy and the Pope to have the rules of his order recognized. Eventually he got the approval but with profound changes and compromises."

Will you have to follow the same path?

"I'm not Francis of Assisi and I do not have his strength and his holiness. But I am the Bishop of Rome and Pope of the Catholic world. The first thing I decided was to appoint a group of eight cardinals to be my advisers. Not courtiers but wise people who share my own feelings. This is the beginning of a Church with an organization that is not just top-down but also horizontal. When Cardinal Martini talked about focusing on the councils and synods he knew how long and difficult it would be to go in that direction. Gently, but firmly and tenaciously."

And politics?

"Why do you ask? I have already said that the Church will not deal with politics."

But just a few days ago you appealed to Catholics to engage civilly and politically.

"I was not addressing only Catholics but all men of good will. I say that politics is the most important of the civil activities and has its own field of action, which is not that of religion. Political institutions are secular by definition and operate in independent spheres. All my predecessors have said the same thing, for many years at least, albeit with different accents. I believe that Catholics involved in politics carry the values of their religion within them, but have the mature awareness and expertise to implement them. The Church will never go beyond its task of expressing and disseminating its values, at least as long as I'm here."

But that has not always being the case with the Church.

"It has almost never been the case. Often the Church as an institution has been dominated by temporalism and many members and senior Catholic leaders still feel this way.

But now let me ask you a question: you, a secular non-believer in God, what do you believe in? You are a writer and a man of thought. You believe in something, you must have a dominant value. Don't answer me with words like honesty, seeking, the vision of the common good, all important principles and values but that is not what I am asking. I am asking what you think is the essence of the world, indeed the universe. You must ask yourself, of course, like everyone else, who we are, where we come from, where we are going. Even children ask themselves these questions. And you?"

I am grateful for this question. The answer is this: I believe in Being, that is in the tissue from which forms, bodies arise.

"And I believe in God, not in a Catholic God, there is no Catholic God, there is God and I believe in Jesus Christ, his incarnation. Jesus is my teacher and my pastor, but God, the Father, Abba, is the light and the Creator. This is my Being. Do you think we are very far apart?"

We are distant in our thinking, but similar as human beings, unconsciously animated by our instincts that turn into impulses, feelings and will, thought and reason. In this we are alike.

"But can you define what you call Being?"

Being is a fabric of energy. Chaotic but indestructible energy and eternal chaos. Forms emerge from that energy when it reaches the point of exploding. The forms have their own laws, their magnetic fields, their chemical elements, which combine randomly, evolve, and are eventually extinguished but their energy is not destroyed. Man is probably the only animal endowed with thought, at least in our planet and solar system. I said that he is driven by instincts and desires but I would add that he also contains within

himself a resonance, an echo, a vocation of chaos.

"All right. I did not want you to give me a summary of your philosophy and what you have told me is enough for me. From my point of view, God is the light that illuminates the darkness, even if it does not dissolve it, and a spark of divine light is within each of us. In the letter I wrote to you, you will remember I said that our species will end but the light of God will not end and at that point it will invade all souls and it will all be in everyone."

Yes, I remember it well. You said, "All the light will be in all souls" which - if I may say so - gives more an image of immanence than of transcendence.

"Transcendence remains because that light, all in everything, transcends the universe and the species it inhabits at that stage. But back to the present. We have made a step forward in our dialogue. We have observed that in society and the world in which we live selfishness has increased more than love for others, and that men of good will must work, each with his own strengths and expertise, to ensure that love for others increases until it is equal and possibly exceeds love for oneself."

Once again, politics comes into the picture.

"Certainly. Personally I think so-called unrestrained liberalism only makes the strong stronger and the weak weaker and excludes the most excluded. We need great freedom, no discrimination, no demagoguery and a lot of love. We need rules of conduct and also, if necessary, direct intervention from the state to correct the more intolerable inequalities."

Your Holiness, you are certainly a person of great faith, touched by grace, animated by the desire to revive a pastoral, missionary church that is renewed and not temporal. But from the way you talk and from what I understand, you are and will be a revolutionary pope. Half Jesuit, half a man of Francis, a combination that perhaps has never been seen before. And then, you like "The Betrothed" by Manzoni, Holderlin, Leopardi and especially Dostoevsky, the film "La Strada" and "Prova d'orchestra" by Fellini, "Open City" by Rossellini and also the film of Aldo Fabrizi .

"I like those because I watched them with my parents when I was a child."

There you are. May I recommend two recently released films? "Viva la libertà" and the films on Fellini by Ettore Scola. I'm sure you'll like them.

Regarding power, I say, you know that when I was 20 I spent a month and a half in a spiritual retreat with the Jesuits? The Nazis were in Rome and I had deserted from military service. That was punishable by the death sentence. The Jesuits hid us on condition that we did spiritual exercises the whole time that they kept us hidden.

"But is it impossible to stand a month and a half of spiritual exercises?" he asks, amazed and amused. I will tell him more next time.

We embrace. We climb the short staircase to the door. I tell the Pope there is no need to accompany me but he waves that aside with a gesture. "We will also discuss the role of women in the Church. Remember that the Church (*la chiesa*) is feminine."

And if you like, we can also talk about Pascal. I'd like to know what you think of that great soul.

"Give all your family my blessings and ask them to pray for me. Think of me, think of me often."

We shake hands and he stands with his two fingers raised in a blessing. I wave to him from the window.

This is Pope Francis. If the Church becomes like him and becomes what he wants it to be, it will be an epochal change.

(Translated from Italian to English by Kathryn Wallace)