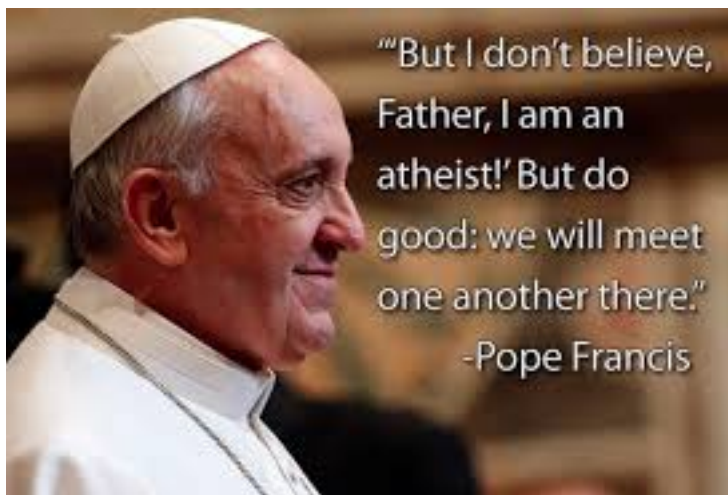


Pope Francis Takes the Faith to the Pages of the Secular Press



VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis has pulled off yet another surprise, by taking the unprecedented step of writing a long letter to the founder of an Italian daily newspaper, explaining the faith to nonbelievers.

The 2,500-word missive, written in response to July 7 and Aug. 7 editorials by Eugenio Scalfari, the atheist founder of the socialist-leaning *La Repubblica* newspaper, principally addresses themes covering the faith, the Church and today's increasingly secularist culture.

Scalfari was prompted to write his articles partly to show his admiration for the Holy Father, but also in response to Pope Francis' first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* (The Light of Faith), that was published in July. After lauding the Pope's qualities and his love for the poor, Scalfari posed three questions at the end of his Aug. 7 editorial, none of which Scalfari expected to be answered.

The first was whether God's mercy extends to nonbelievers; the second, whether it is sinful to doubt the existence of absolute truth; and the third, whether belief in God is merely a product of human thought.

In his letter of reply, published in today's edition of the newspaper, Francis begins by saying, "It is nothing other than positive, not only for us individually, but also for the society in which we live, to pause to dialogue about a reality that is as important as faith, which refers to preaching and the figure of Jesus."

He points to two circumstances that make such dialogue "proper and precious." The first, he says, stems from a paradox: that the Christian faith, once seen as a symbol of light, has been branded as the "darkness of superstition" and "opposed to the light of reason" in today's modern culture, formed by the Enlightenment.

Noting the lack of communication between the Church and modern culture, Pope Francis said "the time has come" and that the Second Vatican Council "inaugurated" such an exchange for "an open dialogue without preconceptions that reopens the doors to a serious and fruitful meeting."

The Security of Faith

The second circumstance, he continues, is to stress that dialogue is “profound and indispensable” and not a “secondary accessory” expression of the believer. He quotes *Lumen Fidei* and a passage (34) on how truth leads to humility: “Far from making us inflexible, the security of faith sets us on a journey; it enables witness and dialogue with all.”

He explains how faith, for him, was born from a personal encounter with Jesus, but also points out how that encounter was made possible through the Church via “the community of faith ... the intelligence of sacred Scripture, to new life that, as gushing water, flows from Jesus through the sacraments, to fraternity with everyone and at the service of the poor, true image of the Lord.”

“Without the Church, I believe, I would not have encountered Jesus, while being aware that the immense gift that is faith is preserved in the fragile clay vessels of our humanity,” he says.

The Holy Father adds that it is “due to this personal experience of faith lived within the Church that I am at ease in listening to your questions and in seeking, together with you, the paths along which we may perhaps begin to walk some of the way together.”

Referring to the first of Scalfari’s articles, the Pope explains the essence of the Christian faith: the Incarnation, the cross and Christ’s love for every man, whom he recognizes as having “inestimable value.”

Each of us, therefore, is called to “choose the love of Jesus, to enter his way of being, thinking and acting,” the Pope explains in his letter. “This is the faith, with all the expressions that are unfailingly described in the encyclical.”

‘Communication, Not Exclusion’

The Pope makes the case that the originality of the Christian faith lies in the fact that it allows each believer to participate in the relationship that Jesus has with God, who is “Abba” (Daddy) — a relationship that extends to all other men, including enemies, as a sign of love.

The sonship of Jesus, he says, is not an “insurmountable separation” between Jesus and everyone else, but tells us that “in him all are called to be children of the Father and brothers to each other.” The particularity of Jesus, he says, is for “communication, not exclusion.”

He explains to Scalfari that the Church is called to sow the leaven and salt of the Gospel in the world — that is, the love and mercy of God — pointing to the afterlife and to our own destiny. For those who live the Christian faith, he adds, “that does not mean fleeing the world” or seeking some kind of “hegemony,” but, rather, “service to mankind,” keeping a sense of hope alive, prompting good works in spite of everything and always looking to what lies beyond.

He then touches on the Jewish faith, stressing that God’s faithfulness to his covenant with Israel has

never failed and that throughout the “terrible trials” of past centuries, “the Jews have preserved their faith in God.” For this, the Pope says, “we as a Church, but also as humanity, will never be sufficiently grateful to them.”

Their perseverance in faith, he continues, “reminds everyone, including Christians, of the fact that we are always waiting, like pilgrims, for the Lord’s return and that, therefore, we must always be open to him and never take refuge in what we have already attained.”

Answering Scalfari’s Questions

Turning to the first question raised by Scalfari, about whether God’s mercy extends to nonbelievers, Francis answers: “Considering — and this is the fundamental issue — that the mercy of God knows no limits, if we turn to him with a sincere and penitent heart, the real question for those who do not believe in God lies in listening to one’s own conscience.”

He explains: “Sin, also in those who are without faith, exists when it goes against our conscience. Listening to and obeying one’s conscience means, indeed, to make decisions in relation to what is perceived as good and bad. And on this decision rests the goodness or evil of our actions.”

Addressing the second question, on whether it is wrong or a sin to believe that no “absolute truth” exists, the Pope writes: “The truth, according to Christian faith, is God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. So the truth is a relationship! Each one of us receives the truth and expresses it in his or her own way, from the history, culture and situation in which he or she lives.”

“This doesn’t mean that truth is variable or subjective; quite the opposite,” the Pope insists. “But it means that it is given to us always and only as a way and a life. Did not Jesus himself say: ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’? In other words, truth being altogether one with love, requires humility and openness to be sought, received and expressed.”

In response to the final question, on whether belief in God is merely a product of human thought, he says that the greatness of man “rests in his capacity to think of God,” and this means “being able to experience a knowing and responsible relationship with him.”

“But the relationship is between two realities,” he says. “God does not depend on our thought. Besides, when man’s life on earth ends — for the Christian faith, in any case, this world as we know it is destined to fall — man will not cease to exist, and in a way that we do not know, nor will the universe that was created with him.”

Francis concludes by emphasizing that the Church, despite “the languidness, the infidelity, the mistakes and the sins that may have been committed by those who belong to her, has no other meaning or aim other than living and bearing witness to Jesus.”

Complementing Benedict's Initiative

Pope Francis' efforts to reach out to nonbelievers complement those of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. During his pontificate, Benedict XVI founded the "Courtyard of the Gentiles," a structure for permanent dialogue between believers and nonbelievers created by the Pontifical Council for Culture. The initiative has organized several events in European capitals since it began in 2010.

Benedict also shared his thoughts with a secular newspaper when he penned an op-ed for the Financial Times shortly before Christmas last year.

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