

A Big Heart Open to God The exclusive interview with Pope Francis.

Editor's Note: This interview with Pope Francis took place over the course of three meetings during August 2013 in Rome. The interview was conducted in person by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., editor in chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Italian Jesuit journal. Father Spadaro conducted the interview on behalf of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, *Thinking Faith*, *America* and several other major Jesuit journals around the world. The editorial teams at each of the journals prepared questions and sent them to Father Spadaro, who then consolidated and organised them. The interview was conducted in Italian. After the Italian text was officially approved, a team of five independent experts were commissioned to produce the English translation, which is also published by *America*.

Father Spadaro met the pope at the Vatican in the pope's apartments in the Casa Santa Marta, where he has chosen to live since his election. Father Spadaro begins his account of the interview with a description of the pope's living quarters.

The setting is simple, austere. The workspace occupied by the desk is small. I am impressed not only by the simplicity of the furniture, but also by the objects in the room. There are only a few. These include an icon of St. Francis, a statue of Our Lady of Luján, patron saint of Argentina, a crucifix and a statue of St. Joseph sleeping. The spirituality of Jorge Mario Bergoglio is not made of "harmonised energies," as he would call them, but of human faces: Christ, St. Francis, St. Joseph and Mary.

The pope speaks of his trip to Brazil. He considers it a true grace, that World Youth Day was for him a "mystery." He says that he is not used to talking to so many people: "I can look at individual persons, one at a time, to come into contact in a personal way with the person I have before me. I am not used to the masses," the pope remarks. He also speaks about the moment during the conclave when he began to realise that he might be elected pope. At lunch on Wednesday, March 13, he felt a deep and inexplicable inner peace and comfort come over him, he said, along with a great darkness. And those feelings accompanied him until his election later that day.

The pope had spoken earlier about his great difficulty in giving interviews. He said that he prefers to think rather than provide answers on the spot in interviews. In this interview the pope interrupted what he was saying in response to a question several times, in order to add something to an earlier response. Talking with Pope Francis is a kind of volcanic flow of ideas that are bound up with each other. Even taking notes gives me an uncomfortable feeling, as if I were trying to suppress a surging spring of dialogue

Who Is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?

I ask Pope Francis point-blank: "Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" He stares at me in silence. I ask him if I may ask him this question. He nods and replies: "I do not know what might be the most fitting description.... I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner."

The pope continues to reflect and concentrate, as if he did not expect this question, as if he were forced to reflect further. "Yes, perhaps I can say that I am a bit astute, that I can adapt to circumstances, but it is also true that I am a bit naïve. Yes, but the best summary, the one that comes more from the inside and I feel most true is this: I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon." And he repeats: "I am one who is looked upon by the Lord. I always felt my motto, *Miserando atque Eligendo* [By Having Mercy and by Choosing Him], was very true for me."

The motto is taken from the Homilies of Bede the Venerable, who writes in his comments on the Gospel story of the calling of Matthew: “Jesus saw a publican, and since he looked at him with feelings of love and chose him, he said to him, ‘Follow me.’” The pope adds: “I think the Latin *gerund miserando* is impossible to translate in both Italian and Spanish. I like to translate it with another *gerund* that does not exist: *misericordiando* [“mercy-ing”].

Pope Francis continues his reflection and says, jumping to another topic: “I do not know Rome well. I know a few things. These include the Basilica of St. Mary Major; I always used to go there. I know St. Mary Major, St. Peter’s...but when I had to come to Rome, I always stayed in [the neighbourhood of] Via della Scrofa. From there I often visited the Church of St. Louis of France, and I went there to contemplate the painting of ‘The Calling of St. Matthew,’ by Caravaggio.

“That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew.” Here the pope becomes determined, as if he had finally found the image he was looking for: “It is the gesture of Matthew that strikes me: he holds on to his money as if to say, ‘No, not me! No, this money is mine.’ Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze. And this is what I said when they asked me if I would accept my election as pontiff.” Then the pope whispers in Latin: “I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance.”

Why Did You Become a Jesuit?

I continue: “Holy Father, what made you choose to enter the Society of Jesus? What struck you about the Jesuit order?”

“I wanted something more. But I did not know what. I entered the diocesan seminary. I liked the Dominicans and I had Dominican friends. But then I chose the Society of Jesus, which I knew well because the seminary was entrusted to the Jesuits. Three things in particular struck me about the Society: the missionary spirit, community and discipline. And this is strange, because I am a really, really undisciplined person. But their discipline, the way they manage their time – these things struck me so much.

“And then a thing that is really important for me: community. I was always looking for a community. I did not see myself as a priest on my own. I need a community. And you can tell this by the fact that I am here in Santa Marta. At the time of the conclave I lived in Room 207. (The rooms were assigned by drawing lots.) This room where we are now was a guest room. I chose to live here, in Room 201, because when I took possession of the papal apartment, inside myself I distinctly heard a ‘no.’ The papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace is not luxurious. It is old, tastefully decorated and large, but not luxurious. But in the end it is like an inverted funnel. It is big and spacious, but the entrance is really tight. People can come only in dribs and drabs, and I cannot live without people. I need to live my life with others.”

What Does It Mean for a Jesuit to Be Bishop of Rome?

I ask Pope Francis about the fact that he is the first Jesuit to be elected bishop of Rome: “How do you understand the role of service to the universal church that you have been called to play in the light of Ignatian spirituality? What does it mean for a Jesuit to be elected pope? What element of Ignatian spirituality helps you live your ministry?”

“Discernment,” he replies. “Discernment is one of the things that worked inside St. Ignatius. For him it is an instrument of struggle in order to know the Lord and follow him more closely. I was always

struck by a saying that describes the vision of Ignatius: *non coerceri a maximo, sed contineri a minimo divinum est* (“not to be limited by the greatest and yet to be contained in the tiniest – this is the divine”). I thought a lot about this phrase in connection with the issue of different roles in the government of the church, about becoming the superior of somebody else: it is important not to be restricted by a larger space, and it is important to be able to stay in restricted spaces. This virtue of the large and small is magnanimity. Thanks to magnanimity, we can always look at the horizon from the position where we are. That means being able to do the little things of every day with a big heart open to God and to others. That means being able to appreciate the small things inside large horizons, those of the kingdom of God.

“This motto,” the pope continues, “offers parameters to assume a correct position for discernment, in order to hear the things of God from God’s ‘point of view.’ According to St. Ignatius, great principles must be embodied in the circumstances of place, time and people. In his own way, John XXIII adopted this attitude with regard to the government of the church, when he repeated the motto, ‘See everything; turn a blind eye to much; correct a little.’ John XXIII saw all things, the maximum dimension, but he chose to correct a few, the minimum dimension. You can have large projects and implement them by means of a few of the smallest things. Or you can use weak means that are more effective than strong ones, as Paul also said in his First Letter to the Corinthians.

“This discernment takes time. For example, many think that changes and reforms can take place in a short time. I believe that we always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change. And this is the time of discernment. Sometimes discernment instead urges us to do precisely what you had at first thought you would do later. And that is what has happened to me in recent months. Discernment is always done in the presence of the Lord, looking at the signs, listening to the things that happen, the feeling of the people, especially the poor. My choices, including those related to the day-to-day aspects of life, like the use of a modest car, are related to a spiritual discernment that responds to a need that arises from looking at things, at people and from reading the signs of the times. Discernment in the Lord guides me in my way of governing.

“But I am always wary of decisions made hastily. I am always wary of the first decision, that is, the first thing that comes to my mind if I have to make a decision. This is usually the wrong thing. I have to wait and assess, looking deep into myself, taking the necessary time. The wisdom of discernment redeems the necessary ambiguity of life and helps us find the most appropriate means, which do not always coincide with what looks great and strong.”

The Society of Jesus

Discernment is therefore a pillar of the spirituality of Pope Francis. It expresses in a particular manner his Jesuit identity. I ask him then how the Society of Jesus can be of service to the church today, what are its characteristics, but also the possible challenges facing the Society of Jesus.

“The Society of Jesus is an institution in tension,” the pope replied, “always fundamentally in tension. A Jesuit is a person who is not centred in himself. The Society itself also looks to a centre outside itself; its centre is Christ and his church. So if the Society centres itself in Christ and the church, it has two fundamental points of reference for its balance and for being able to live on the margins, on the frontier. If it looks too much in upon itself, it puts itself at the centre as a very solid, very well ‘armed’ structure, but then it runs the risk of feeling safe and self-sufficient. The Society must always have before itself the *Deus semper maior*, the always-greater God, and the pursuit of the ever greater glory of God, the church as true bride of Christ our Lord, Christ the king who conquers us and to whom we offer our whole person and all our hard work, even if we are clay pots, inadequate. This tension takes us out of ourselves continuously. The tool that makes the Society of

Jesus not centred in itself, really strong, is, then, the account of conscience, which is at the same time paternal and fraternal, because it helps the Society to fulfil its mission better.”

The pope is referring to the requirement in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus that the Jesuit must “manifest his conscience,” that is, his inner spiritual situation, so that the superior can be more conscious and knowledgeable about sending a person on mission.

“But it is difficult to speak of the Society,” continues Pope Francis. “When you express too much, you run the risk of being misunderstood. The Society of Jesus can be described only in narrative form. Only in narrative form do you discern, not in a philosophical or theological explanation, which allows you rather to discuss. The style of the Society is not shaped by discussion, but by discernment, which of course presupposes discussion as part of the process. The mystical dimension of discernment never defines its edges and does not complete the thought. The Jesuit must be a person whose thought is incomplete, in the sense of open-ended thinking. There have been periods in the Society in which Jesuits have lived in an environment of closed and rigid thought, more instructive-ascetic than mystical: this distortion of Jesuit life gave birth to the Epitome Instituti.”

The pope is referring to a compendium, made for practical purposes, that came to be seen as a replacement for the Constitutions. The formation of Jesuits for some time was shaped by this text, to the extent that some never read the Constitutions, the foundational text. During this period, in the pope’s view, the rules threatened to overwhelm the spirit, and the Society yielded to the temptation to explicate and define its charism too narrowly.

Pope Francis continues: “No, the Jesuit always thinks, again and again, looking at the horizon toward which he must go, with Christ at the centre. This is his real strength. And that pushes the Society to be searching, creative and generous. So now, more than ever, the Society of Jesus must be contemplative in action, must live a profound closeness to the whole church as both the ‘people of God’ and ‘holy mother the hierarchical church.’ This requires much humility, sacrifice and courage, especially when you are misunderstood or you are the subject of misunderstandings and slanders, but that is the most fruitful attitude. Let us think of the tensions of the past history, in the previous centuries, about the Chinese rites controversy, the Malabar rites and the Reductions in Paraguay.

“I am a witness myself to the misunderstandings and problems that the Society has recently experienced. Among those there were tough times, especially when it came to the issue of extending to all Jesuits the fourth vow of obedience to the pope. What gave me confidence at the time of Father Arrupe [superior general of the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983] was the fact that he was a man of prayer, a man who spent much time in prayer. I remember him when he prayed sitting on the ground in the Japanese style. For this he had the right attitude and made the right decisions.”

The Model: Peter Faber, ‘Reformed Priest’

I am wondering if there are figures among the Jesuits, from the origins of the Society to the present date, that have affected him in a particular way, so I ask the pope who they are and why. He begins by mentioning Ignatius Loyola [founder of the Jesuits] and Francis Xavier, but then focuses on a figure who is not as well known to the general public: Peter Faber (1506-46), from Savoy. He was one of the first companions of St. Ignatius, in fact the first, with whom he shared a room when the two were students at the University of Paris. The third roommate was Francis Xavier. Pius IX declared Faber blessed on September 5, 1872, and the cause for his canonisation is still open.

The pope cites an edition of Faber’s works, which he asked two Jesuit scholars, Miguel A. Fiorito and Jaime H. Amadeo, to edit and publish when he was provincial superior of the Jesuits in Argentina. An

edition that he particularly likes is the one by Michel de Certeau. I ask the pope why he is so impressed by Faber.

“[His] dialogue with all,” the pope says, “even the most remote and even with his opponents; his simple piety, a certain naïveté perhaps, his being available straightaway, his careful interior discernment, the fact that he was a man capable of great and strong decisions but also capable of being so gentle and loving.”

Michel de Certeau characterised Faber simply as “the reformed priest,” for whom interior experience, dogmatic expression and structural reform are inseparable. The pope then continues with a reflection on the true face of the founder of the Society.

“Ignatius is a mystic, not an ascetic,” he says. “It irritates me when I hear that the Spiritual Exercises are ‘Ignatian’ only because they are done in silence. In fact, the Exercises can be perfectly Ignatian also in daily life and without the silence. An interpretation of the Spiritual Exercises that emphasises asceticism, silence and penance is a distorted one that became widespread even in the Society, especially in the Society of Jesus in Spain. I am rather close to the mystical movement, that of Louis Lallement and Jean-Joseph Surin. And Faber was a mystic.”

Experience in Church Government

What kind of experience in church government, as a Jesuit superior and then as superior of a province of the Society of Jesus, helped to fully form Father Bergoglio? The style of governance of the Society of Jesus involves decisions made by the superior, but also extensive consultation with his official advisors. So I ask: “Do you think that your past government experience can serve you in governing the universal church?” After a brief pause for reflection, he responds:

“In my experience as superior in the Society, to be honest, I have not always behaved in that way – that is, I did not always do the necessary consultation. And this was not a good thing. My style of government as a Jesuit at the beginning had many faults. That was a difficult time for the Society: an entire generation of Jesuits had disappeared. Because of this I found myself provincial when I was still very young. I was only 36 years old. That was crazy. I had to deal with difficult situations, and I made my decisions abruptly and by myself. Yes, but I must add one thing: when I entrust something to someone, I totally trust that person. He or she must make a really big mistake before I rebuke that person. But despite this, eventually people get tired of authoritarianism.

“My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led me to have serious problems and to be accused of being ultraconservative. I lived a time of great interior crisis when I was in Cordova. To be sure, I have never been like Blessed Imelda [a goody-goody], but I have never been a right-winger. It was my authoritarian way of making decisions that created problems.

“I say these things from life experience and because I want to make clear what the dangers are. Over time I learned many things. The Lord has allowed this growth in knowledge of government through my faults and my sins. So as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, I had a meeting with the six auxiliary bishops every two weeks, and several times a year with the council of priests. They asked questions and we opened the floor for discussion. This greatly helped me to make the best decisions. But now I hear some people tell me: ‘Do not consult too much, and decide by yourself.’ Instead, I believe that consultation is very important.

“The consistories [of cardinals], the synods [of bishops] are, for example, important places to make real and active this consultation. We must, however, give them a less rigid form. I do not want token

consultations, but real consultations. The consultation group of eight cardinals, this ‘outsider’ advisory group, is not only my decision, but it is the result of the will of the cardinals, as it was expressed in the general congregations before the conclave. And I want to see that this is a real, not ceremonial consultation.”

Thinking With the Church

I ask Pope Francis what it means exactly for him to “think with the church,” a notion St. Ignatius writes about in the Spiritual Exercises. He replies using an image.

“The image of the church I like is that of the holy, faithful people of God. This is the definition I often use, and then there is that image from the Second Vatican Council’s ‘Dogmatic Constitution on the Church’ (No. 12). Belonging to a people has a strong theological value. In the history of salvation, God has saved a people. There is no full identity without belonging to a people. No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships.

“The people itself constitutes a subject. And the church is the people of God on the journey through history, with joys and sorrows. Thinking with the church, therefore, is my way of being a part of this people. And all the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief, and the people display this infallibilitas in credendo, this infallibility in believing, through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together. This is what I understand today as the ‘thinking with the church’ of which St. Ignatius speaks. When the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the pope goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. So this thinking with the church does not concern theologians only.

“This is how it is with Mary: If you want to know who she is, you ask theologians; if you want to know how to love her, you have to ask the people. In turn, Mary loved Jesus with the heart of the people, as we read in the Magnificat. We should not even think, therefore, that ‘thinking with the church’ means only thinking with the hierarchy of the church.”

After a brief pause, Pope Francis emphasises the following point, in order to avoid misunderstandings: “And, of course, we must be very careful not to think that this infallibilitas of all the faithful I am talking about in the light of Vatican II is a form of populism. No; it is the experience of ‘holy mother the hierarchical church,’ as St. Ignatius called it, the church as the people of God, pastors and people together. The church is the totality of God’s people.

“I see the sanctity of God’s people, this daily sanctity,” the pope continues. “There is a ‘holy middle class,’ which we can all be part of, the holiness Malègue wrote about.” The pope is referring to Joseph Malègue, a French writer (1876–1940), particularly to the unfinished trilogy *Black Stones: The Middle Classes of Salvation*.

“I see the holiness,” the pope continues, “in the patience of the people of God: a woman who is raising children, a man who works to bring home the bread, the sick, the elderly priests who have so many wounds but have a smile on their faces because they served the Lord, the sisters who work hard and live a hidden sanctity. This is for me the common sanctity. I often associate sanctity with patience: not only patience as hypomoné [the New Testament Greek word], taking charge of the events and circumstances of life, but also as a constancy in going forward, day by day. This is the sanctity of the militant church also mentioned by St. Ignatius. This was the sanctity of my parents: my dad, my mom, my grandmother Rosa who loved me so much. In my breviary I have the last will

of my grandmother Rosa, and I read it often. For me it is like a prayer. She is a saint who has suffered so much, also spiritually, and yet always went forward with courage.

“This church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people. We must not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a nest protecting our mediocrity. And the church is Mother; the church is fruitful. It must be. You see, when I perceive negative behaviour in ministers of the church or in consecrated men or women, the first thing that comes to mind is: ‘Here’s an unfruitful bachelor’ or ‘Here’s a spinster.’ They are neither fathers nor mothers, in the sense that they have not been able to give spiritual life. Instead, for example, when I read the life of the Salesian missionaries who went to Patagonia, I read a story of the fullness of life, of fruitfulness.

“Another example from recent days that I saw got the attention of newspapers: the phone call I made to a young man who wrote me a letter. I called him because that letter was so beautiful, so simple. For me this was an act of generativity. I realised that he was a young man who is growing, that he saw in me a father, and that the letter tells something of his life to that father. The father cannot say, ‘I do not care.’ This type of fruitfulness is so good for me.”

Young Churches and Ancient Churches

Remaining with the subject of the church, I ask the pope a question in light of the recent World Youth Day. This great event has turned the spotlight on young people, but also on those “spiritual lungs” that are the Catholic churches founded in historically recent times. “What,” I ask, “are your hopes for the universal church that come from these churches?”

The pope replies: “The young Catholic churches, as they grow, develop a synthesis of faith, culture and life, and so it is a synthesis different from the one developed by the ancient churches. For me, the relationship between the ancient Catholic churches and the young ones is similar to the relationship between young and elderly people in a society. They build the future, the young ones with their strength and the others with their wisdom. You always run some risks, of course. The younger churches are likely to feel self-sufficient; the ancient ones are likely to want to impose on the younger churches their cultural models. But we build the future together.”

The Church as Field Hospital

Pope Benedict XVI, in announcing his resignation, said that the contemporary world is subject to rapid change and is grappling with issues of great importance for the life of faith. Dealing with these issues requires strength of body and soul, Pope Benedict said. I ask Pope Francis: “What does the church need most at this historic moment? Do we need reforms? What are your wishes for the church in the coming years? What kind of church do you dream of?”

Pope Francis begins by showing great affection and immense respect for his predecessor: “Pope Benedict has done an act of holiness, greatness, humility. He is a man of God.

“I see clearly,” the pope continues, “that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.... And you have to start from the ground up.

“The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all. The confessor, for example, is always in danger of being either too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the person. The rigorist washes his hands so that he leaves it to the commandment. The loose minister washes his hands by simply saying, ‘This is not a sin’ or something like that. In pastoral ministry we must accompany people, and we must heal their wounds.

“How are we treating the people of God? I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbour. This is pure Gospel. God is greater than sin. The structural and organisational reforms are secondary – that is, they come afterward. The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.

“Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent. The ones who quit sometimes do it for reasons that, if properly understood and assessed, can lead to a return. But that takes audacity and courage.”

I mention to Pope Francis that there are Christians who live in situations that are irregular for the church or in complex situations that represent open wounds. I mention the divorced and remarried, same-sex couples and other difficult situations. What kind of pastoral work can we do in these cases? What kinds of tools can we use?

“We need to proclaim the Gospel on every street corner,” the pope says, “preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing, even with our preaching, every kind of disease and wound. In Buenos Aires I used to receive letters from homosexual persons who are ‘socially wounded’ because they tell me that they feel like the church has always condemned them. But the church does not want to do this. During the return flight from Rio de Janeiro I said that if a homosexual person is of good will and is in search of God, I am no one to judge. By saying this, I said what the catechism says. Religion has the right to express its opinion in the service of the people, but God in creation has set us free: it is not possible to interfere spiritually in the life of a person.

“A person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: ‘Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?’ We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. It is necessary to accompany them with mercy. When that happens, the Holy Spirit inspires the priest to say the right thing.

“This is also the great benefit of confession as a sacrament: evaluating case by case and discerning what is the best thing to do for a person who seeks God and grace. The confessional is not a torture chamber, but the place in which the Lord’s mercy motivates us to do better. I also consider the

situation of a woman with a failed marriage in her past and who also had an abortion. Then this woman remarries, and she is now happy and has five children. That abortion in her past weighs heavily on her conscience and she sincerely regrets it. She would like to move forward in her Christian life. What is the confessor to do?

“We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.

“The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow.

“I say this also thinking about the preaching and content of our preaching. A beautiful homily, a genuine sermon must begin with the first proclamation, with the proclamation of salvation. There is nothing more solid, deep and sure than this proclamation. Then you have to do catechesis. Then you can draw even a moral consequence. But the proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives. Today sometimes it seems that the opposite order is prevailing. The homily is the touchstone to measure the pastor’s proximity and ability to meet his people, because those who preach must recognise the heart of their community and must be able to see where the desire for God is lively and ardent. The message of the Gospel, therefore, is not to be reduced to some aspects that, although relevant, on their own do not show the heart of the message of Jesus Christ.”

A Religious Order Pope

Pope Francis is the first pontiff from a religious order since the Camaldolese monk Gregory XVI, who was elected in 1831. I ask: “What is the specific place of religious men and women in the church of today?”

“Religious men and women are prophets,” says the pope. “They are those who have chosen a following of Jesus that imitates his life in obedience to the Father, poverty, community life and chastity. In this sense, the vows cannot end up being caricatures; otherwise, for example, community life becomes hell, and chastity becomes a way of life for unfruitful bachelors. The vow of chastity must be a vow of fruitfulness. In the church, the religious are called to be prophets in particular by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never give up prophecy. This does not mean opposing the hierarchical part of the church, although the prophetic function and the hierarchical structure do not coincide. I am talking about a proposal that is always positive, but it should not cause timidity. Let us think about what so many great saints, monks and religious men and women have done, from St. Anthony the Abbot onward. Being prophets may sometimes imply making waves. I do not know how to put it.... Prophecy makes noise, uproar, some say ‘a mess.’ But in reality, the charism of religious people is like yeast: prophecy announces the spirit of the Gospel.”

The Roman Curia

I ask the pope what he thinks of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia, the various departments that assist the pope in his mission.

“The dicasteries of the Roman Curia are at the service of the pope and the bishops,” he says. “They must help both the particular churches and the bishops’ conferences. They are instruments of help. In some cases, however, when they are not functioning well, they run the risk of becoming institutions of censorship. It is amazing to see the denunciations for lack of orthodoxy that come to Rome. I think the cases should be investigated by the local bishops’ conferences, which can get valuable assistance from Rome. These cases, in fact, are much better dealt with locally. The Roman congregations are mediators; they are not middlemen or managers.”

On June 29, during the ceremony of the blessing and imposition of the pallium on 34 metropolitan archbishops, Pope Francis spoke about “the path of collegiality” as the road that can lead the church to “grow in harmony with the service of primacy.” So I ask: “How can we reconcile in harmony Petrine primacy and collegiality? Which roads are feasible also from an ecumenical perspective?”

The pope responds, “We must walk together: the people, the bishops and the pope. Synodality should be lived at various levels. Maybe it is time to change the methods of the Synod of Bishops, because it seems to me that the current method is not dynamic. This will also have ecumenical value, especially with our Orthodox brethren. From them we can learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and the tradition of synodality. The joint effort of reflection, looking at how the church was governed in the early centuries, before the breakup between East and West, will bear fruit in due time. In ecumenical relations it is important not only to know each other better, but also to recognise what the Spirit has sown in the other as a gift for us. I want to continue the discussion that was begun in 2007 by the joint [Catholic–Orthodox] commission on how to exercise the Petrine primacy, which led to the signing of the Ravenna Document. We must continue on this path.”

I ask how Pope Francis envisions the future unity of the church in light of this response. He answers: “We must walk united with our differences: there is no other way to become one. This is the way of Jesus.”

Women in the Life of the Church

And what about the role of women in the church? The pope has made reference to this issue on several occasions. He took up the matter during the return trip from Rio de Janeiro, claiming that the church still lacks a profound theology of women. I ask: “What should be the role of women in the church? How do we make their role more visible today?”

He answers: “I am wary of a solution that can be reduced to a kind of ‘female machismo,’ because a woman has a different make-up than a man. But what I hear about the role of women is often inspired by an ideology of machismo. Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed. The church cannot be herself without the woman and her role. The woman is essential for the church. Mary, a woman, is more important than the bishops. I say this because we must not confuse the function with the dignity. We must therefore investigate further the role of women in the church. We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman. Only by making this step will it be possible to better reflect on their function within the church. The feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions. The challenge today is this: to think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the church is exercised for various areas of the church.”

The Second Vatican Council

“What did the Second Vatican Council accomplish?” I ask.

“Vatican II was a re-reading of the Gospel in light of contemporary culture,” says the pope. “Vatican II produced a renewal movement that simply comes from the same Gospel. Its fruits are enormous. Just recall the liturgy. The work of liturgical reform has been a service to the people as a re-reading of the Gospel from a concrete historical situation. Yes, there are hermeneutics of continuity and discontinuity, but one thing is clear: the dynamic of reading the Gospel, actualising its message for today – which was typical of Vatican II – is absolutely irreversible. Then there are particular issues, like the liturgy according to the *Vetus Ordo*. I think the decision of Pope Benedict [his decision of July 7, 2007, to allow a wider use of the Tridentine Mass] was prudent and motivated by the desire to help people who have this sensitivity. What is worrying, though, is the risk of the ideologisation of the *Vetus Ordo*, its exploitation.”

To Seek and Find God in All Things

At the World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis repeatedly declared: “God is real. He manifests himself today. God is everywhere.” These are phrases that echo the Ignatian expression “to seek and find God in all things.” So I ask the pope: “How do you seek and find God in all things?”

“What I said in Rio referred to the time in which we seek God,” he answers. “In fact, there is a temptation to seek God in the past or in a possible future. God is certainly in the past because we can see the footprints. And God is also in the future as a promise. But the ‘concrete’ God, so to speak, is today. For this reason, complaining never helps us find God. The complaints of today about how ‘barbaric’ the world is – these complaints sometimes end up giving birth within the church to desires to establish order in the sense of pure conservation, as a defence. No: God is to be encountered in the world of today.

“God manifests himself in historical revelation, in history. Time initiates processes, and space crystallises them. God is in history, in the processes.

“We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes. We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience, waiting.

“Finding God in all things is not an ‘empirical eureka.’ When we desire to encounter God, we would like to verify him immediately by an empirical method. But you cannot meet God this way. God is found in the gentle breeze perceived by Elijah. The senses that find God are the ones St. Ignatius called spiritual senses. Ignatius asks us to open our spiritual sensitivity to encounter God beyond a purely empirical approach. A contemplative attitude is necessary: it is the feeling that you are moving along the good path of understanding and affection toward things and situations. Profound peace, spiritual consolation, love of God and love of all things in God – this is the sign that you are on this right path.”

Certitude and Mistakes

I ask, “So if the encounter with God is not an ‘empirical eureka,’ and if it is a journey that sees with the eyes of history, then we can also make mistakes?”

The pope replies: “Yes, in this quest to seek and find God in all things there is still an area of uncertainty. There must be. If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions – that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble. Uncertainty is in every true discernment that is open to finding confirmation in spiritual consolation.

“The risk in seeking and finding God in all things, then, is the willingness to explain too much, to say with human certainty and arrogance: ‘God is here.’ We will find only a god that fits our measure. The correct attitude is that of St. Augustine: seek God to find him, and find God to keep searching for God forever. Often we seek as if we were blind, as one often reads in the Bible. And this is the experience of the great fathers of the faith, who are our models. We have to re-read the Letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 11. Abraham leaves his home without knowing where he was going, by faith. All of our ancestors in the faith died seeing the good that was promised, but from a distance.... Our life is not given to us like an opera libretto, in which all is written down; but it means going, walking, doing, searching, seeing.... We must enter into the adventure of the quest for meeting God; we must let God search and encounter us.

“Because God is first; God is always first and makes the first move. God is a bit like the almond flower of your Sicily, Antonio, which always blooms first. We read it in the Prophets. God is encountered walking, along the path. At this juncture, someone might say that this is relativism. Is it relativism? Yes, if it is misunderstood as a kind of indistinct pantheism. It is not relativism if it is understood in the biblical sense, that God is always a surprise, so you never know where and how you will find him. You are not setting the time and place of the encounter with him. You must, therefore, discern the encounter. Discernment is essential.

“If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal ‘security,’ those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists – they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies. I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person’s life. God is in everyone’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else – God is in this person’s life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God.”

Must We Be Optimistic?

The pope’s words remind me of some of his past reflections, in which as a cardinal he wrote that God is already living in the city, in the midst of all and united to each. It is another way, in my opinion, to say what St. Ignatius wrote in the Spiritual Exercises, that God “labours and works” in our world. So I ask: “Do we have to be optimistic? What are the signs of hope in today’s world? How can I be optimistic in a world in crisis?”

“I do not like to use the word optimism because that is about a psychological attitude,” the pope says. “I like to use the word hope instead, according to what we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 11, that I mentioned before. The fathers of the faith kept walking, facing difficulties. And hope does not disappoint, as we read in the Letter to the Romans. Think instead of the first riddle of Puccini’s opera ‘Turandot,’” the pope suggests.

At that moment I recalled more or less by heart the verses of the riddle of the princess in that opera, to which the solution is hope: "In the gloomy night flies an iridescent ghost./ It rises and opens its wings/ on the infinite black humanity./ The whole world invokes it/ and the whole world implores it./ But the ghost disappears with the dawn/ to be reborn in the heart./ And every night it is born/ and every day it dies!"

"See," says Pope Francis, "Christian hope is not a ghost and it does not deceive. It is a theological virtue and therefore, ultimately, a gift from God that cannot be reduced to optimism, which is only human. God does not mislead hope; God cannot deny himself. God is all promise."

Art and Creativity

I am struck by the reference the pope just made to Puccini's "Turandot" while speaking of the mystery of hope. I would like to understand better his artistic and literary references. I remind him that in 2006 he said that great artists know how to present the tragic and painful realities of life with beauty. So I ask who are the artists and writers he prefers, and if they have something in common.

"I have really loved a diverse array of authors. I love very much Dostoevsky and Hölderlin. I remember Hölderlin for that poem written for the birthday of his grandmother that is very beautiful and was spiritually very enriching for me. The poem ends with the verse, 'May the man hold fast to what the child has promised.' I was also impressed because I loved my grandmother Rosa, and in that poem Hölderlin compares his grandmother to the Virgin Mary, who gave birth to Jesus, the friend of the earth who did not consider anybody a foreigner.

"I have read *The Betrothed*, by Alessandro Manzoni, three times, and I have it now on my table because I want to read it again. Manzoni gave me so much. When I was a child, my grandmother taught me by heart the beginning of *The Betrothed*: 'That branch of Lake Como that turns off to the south between two unbroken chains of mountains....' I also liked Gerard Manley Hopkins very much.

"Among the great painters, I admire Caravaggio; his paintings speak to me. But also Chagall, with his 'White Crucifixion.' Among musicians I love Mozart, of course. The 'Et incarnatus est' from his Mass in C minor is matchless; it lifts you to God! I love Mozart performed by Clara Haskil. Mozart fulfills me. But I cannot think about his music; I have to listen to it. I like listening to Beethoven, but in a Promethean way, and the most Promethean interpreter for me is Furtwängler. And then Bach's Passions. The piece by Bach that I love so much is the 'Erbarme Dich,' the tears of Peter in the 'St. Matthew Passion.' Sublime. Then, at a different level, not intimate in the same way, I love Wagner. I like to listen to him, but not all the time. The performance of Wagner's 'Ring' by Furtwängler at La Scala in Milan in 1950 is for me the best. But also the 'Parsifal' by Knappertsbusch in 1962.

"We should also talk about the cinema. 'La Strada,' by Fellini, is the movie that perhaps I loved the most. I identify with this movie, in which there is an implicit reference to St. Francis. I also believe that I watched all of the Italian movies with Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi when I was between 10 and 12 years old. Another film that I loved is 'Rome, Open City.' I owe my film culture especially to my parents who used to take us to the movies quite often.

"Anyway, in general I love tragic artists, especially classical ones. There is a nice definition that Cervantes puts on the lips of the bachelor Carrasco to praise the story of Don Quixote: 'Children have it in their hands, young people read it, adults understand it, the elderly praise it.' For me this can be a good definition of the classics."

I ask the pope about teaching literature to his secondary school students.

“It was a bit risky,” he answers. “I had to make sure that my students read El Cid. But the boys did not like it. They wanted to read Garcia Lorca. Then I decided that they would study El Cid at home and that in class I would teach the authors the boys liked the most. Of course, young people wanted to read more ‘racy’ literary works, like the contemporary La Casada Infiel or classics like La Celestina, by Fernando de Rojas. But by reading these things they acquired a taste in literature, poetry, and we went on to other authors. And that was for me a great experience. I completed the programme, but in an unstructured way – that is, not ordered according to what we expected in the beginning, but in an order that came naturally by reading these authors. And this mode befitted me: I did not like to have a rigid schedule, but rather I liked to know where we had to go with the readings, with a rough sense of where we were headed. Then I also started to get them to write. In the end I decided to send Borges two stories written by my boys. I knew his secretary, who had been my piano teacher. And Borges liked those stories very much. And then he set out to write the introduction to a collection of these writings.”

“Then, Holy Father, creativity is important for the life of a person?” I ask. He laughs and replies: “For a Jesuit it is extremely important! A Jesuit must be creative.”

Frontiers and Laboratories

During a visit by the fathers and staff of La Civiltà Cattolica, the pope had spoken about the importance of the triad “dialogue, discernment, frontier.” And he insisted particularly on the last point, citing Paul VI and what he had said in a famous speech about the Jesuits: “Wherever in the church – even in the most difficult and extreme fields, in the crossroads of ideologies, in the social trenches – there has been and is now conversation between the deepest desires of human beings and the perennial message of the Gospel, Jesuits have been and are there.” I ask Pope Francis what should be the priorities of journals published by the Society of Jesus.

“The three key words that I commended to La Civiltà Cattolica can be extended to all the journals of the Society, perhaps with different emphases according to their natures and their objectives. When I insist on the frontier, I am referring in a particular way to the need for those who work in the world of culture to be inserted into the context in which they operate and on which they reflect. There is always the lurking danger of living in a laboratory. Ours is not a ‘lab faith,’ but a ‘journey faith,’ a historical faith. God has revealed himself as history, not as a compendium of abstract truths. I am afraid of laboratories because in the laboratory you take the problems and then you bring them home to tame them, to paint them, out of their context. You cannot bring home the frontier, but you have to live on the border and be audacious.”

I ask for examples from his personal experience.

“When it comes to social issues, it is one thing to have a meeting to study the problem of drugs in a slum neighbourhood and quite another thing to go there, live there and understand the problem from the inside and study it. There is a brilliant letter by Father Arrupe to the Centres for Social Research and Action on poverty, in which he says clearly that one cannot speak of poverty if one does not experience poverty, with a direct connection to the places in which there is poverty. The word insertion is dangerous because some religious have taken it as a fad, and disasters have occurred because of a lack of discernment. But it is truly important.”

“The frontiers are many. Let us think of the religious sisters living in hospitals. They live on the frontier. I am alive because of one of them. When I went through my lung disease at the hospital, the doctor gave me penicillin and streptomycin in certain doses. The sister who was on duty tripled my doses because she was daringly astute; she knew what to do because she was with ill people all

day. The doctor, who really was a good one, lived in his laboratory; the sister lived on the frontier and was in dialogue with it every day. Domesticating the frontier means just talking from a remote location, locking yourself up in a laboratory. Laboratories are useful, but reflection for us must always start from experience.”

Human Self-Understanding

I ask Pope Francis about the enormous changes occurring in society and the way human beings are reinterpreting themselves. At this point he gets up and goes to get the breviary from his desk. It is in Latin, now worn from use. He opens to the Office of Readings for Friday of the 27th Week in Ordinary Time and reads me a passage from the Commonitorium Primum of St. Vincent of Lerins: “Even the dogma of the Christian religion must follow these laws, consolidating over the years, developing over time, deepening with age.”

The pope comments: “St. Vincent of Lerins makes a comparison between the biological development of man and the transmission from one era to another of the deposit of faith, which grows and is strengthened with time. Here, human self-understanding changes with time and so also human consciousness deepens. Let us think of when slavery was accepted or the death penalty was allowed without any problem. So we grow in the understanding of the truth. Exegetes and theologians help the church to mature in her own judgment. Even the other sciences and their development help the church in its growth in understanding. There are ecclesiastical rules and precepts that were once effective, but now they have lost value or meaning. The view of the church’s teaching as a monolith to defend without nuance or different understandings is wrong.

“After all, in every age of history, humans try to understand and express themselves better. So human beings in time change the way they perceive themselves. It’s one thing for a man who expresses himself by carving the ‘Winged Victory of Samothrace,’ yet another for Caravaggio, Chagall and yet another still for Dalí. Even the forms for expressing truth can be multiform, and this is indeed necessary for the transmission of the Gospel in its timeless meaning.

“Humans are in search of themselves, and, of course, in this search they can also make mistakes. The church has experienced times of brilliance, like that of Thomas Aquinas. But the church has lived also times of decline in its ability to think. For example, we must not confuse the genius of Thomas Aquinas with the age of decadent Thomist commentaries. Unfortunately, I studied philosophy from textbooks that came from decadent or largely bankrupt Thomism. In thinking of the human being, therefore, the church should strive for genius and not for decadence.

“When does a formulation of thought cease to be valid? When it loses sight of the human or even when it is afraid of the human or deluded about itself. The deceived thought can be depicted as Ulysses encountering the song of the Siren, or as Tannhäuser in an orgy surrounded by satyrs and bacchantes, or as Parsifal, in the second act of Wagner’s opera, in the palace of Klingsor. The thinking of the church must recover genius and better understand how human beings understand themselves today, in order to develop and deepen the church’s teaching.”

Prayer

I ask Pope Francis about his preferred way to pray.

“I pray the breviary every morning. I like to pray with the psalms. Then, later, I celebrate Mass. I pray the Rosary. What I really prefer is adoration in the evening, even when I get distracted and think of other things, or even fall asleep praying. In the evening then, between seven and eight o’clock, I stay

in front of the Blessed Sacrament for an hour in adoration. But I pray mentally even when I am waiting at the dentist or at other times of the day.

“Prayer for me is always a prayer full of memory, of recollection, even the memory of my own history or what the Lord has done in his church or in a particular parish. For me it is the memory of which St. Ignatius speaks in the First Week of the Exercises in the encounter with the merciful Christ crucified. And I ask myself: ‘What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What should I do for Christ?’ It is the memory of which Ignatius speaks in the ‘Contemplation for Experiencing Divine Love,’ when he asks us to recall the gifts we have received. But above all, I also know that the Lord remembers me. I can forget about him, but I know that he never, ever forgets me. Memory has a fundamental role for the heart of a Jesuit: memory of grace, the memory mentioned in Deuteronomy, the memory of God’s works that are the basis of the covenant between God and the people. It is this memory that makes me his son and that makes me a father, too.”