

Francis discusses death, life and 'bruised' church in new interviews

by Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 14, 2015

Rome -- Pope Francis gave two wide-ranging radio interviews on Sunday and Monday, discussing everything from the current refugee crisis facing countries across Europe to the reasons he called the upcoming Holy Year of Mercy to how he wants to face his own death.

The pontiff spoke on Sunday to Argentine radio station FM Milenium. On Monday, a lengthy interview was released between him and Aura Miguel, the Vatican correspondent for the Portuguese station Radio Renascença.

The second interview, released in an English version, finds the pope mixing expansive thoughts about the political situation in Europe with sometimes humorous and deeply personal remarks on his own life.

In one example towards the end of the encounter, Francis tells Miguel that he goes to confession about every 15 to 20 days, joking about his confessor: "I never had to call an ambulance to take him back, in shock over my sins!"

In another personal moment, the pope is asked how he feels about his own global popularity. "I often ask myself what my cross will be like ... Crosses exist," he responds. "You can't see them, but they are there. Jesus also, for a certain time, was very popular, and look at how that turned out."

"One thing consoles me," Francis says. "That Saint Peter committed a serious sin -- denying Jesus -- and then they made him Pope."

"If they made him Pope despite that sin, with all the sins I have it is a great consolation, because the Lord will look after me as he looked after Peter," he continues. "But Peter died on a cross, whereas I don't know how I'll die. Let Him decide, so long as he gives me peace, may His will be done."

Among issues talked about at most length in the Portuguese interview is the continuing refugee crisis, the state of Europe, and Francis' vision for a church that risks getting "bruised" by going out to those in need.

On the last subject, the pontiff says that image is "an image of life." He continues:

If somebody has a room in his house that is closed for long periods, it develops humidity, and a bad smell. If a church, a parish, a diocese or an institute lives closed in on itself it grows ill (just like with the closed room) and we are left with a scrawny Church, with strict rules, no creativity. Safe, more than safe, insured by an insurance agency, but not safe!

On the contrary – if it goes forth – if a Church and a parish go out into the world, then once outside they might suffer the same fate as anybody else who goes out: have an accident. Well in that case, between a sick and a bruised Church, I prefer the bruised, because at least it went into the street....

But, I ask, how often, in Church, has Jesus knocked on the door, but on the inside, so as to be let out to proclaim the kingdom. Sometimes we appropriate Jesus, just for us, and we forget that a Church that is not going out into the world, a Church which does not go out, keeps Jesus imprisoned.

Earlier in the interview, Francis calls the current refugee crisis across Europe "the tip of an iceberg." While acknowledging that people from the Middle East are fleeing war and hunger, the pope says underneath that "is a bad and unjust socioeconomic system."

The pontiff also acknowledges that there is a "danger of infiltration" into Europe by refugees who are a part of terrorist groups.

"It is a mixture of things and we can't be simplistic," states Francis. "Obviously, if a refugee arrives, despite all the safety precautions, we must welcome him, because this is a commandment from the Bible. Moses said to his people: 'Welcome the foreigner, because you also were a foreigner in the land of Egypt.'"

Asked later for the reason why he called the Jubilee Holy Year of Mercy, the pope responds simply: "Come all! Come and feel the love and the forgiveness of God."

The pontiff then recalls the story of a Franciscan friar he knew who thought he forgave too much in the confessional, and felt guilty about it.

"Once we were talking and he said: 'Sometimes I feel guilty,'" Francis says. "And I asked him: 'And what do you do when you feel guilty like that?'"

"I go before the tabernacle, I look at the Lord and say to Him: Lord, forgive me, today I forgave so much, but let it be very clear that it is all your fault, because you were the one who set me the bad example!" the pope says the priest responded.

Asked about October's upcoming global meeting of Catholic bishops on family life, known as a Synod, Francis likewise responds at first succinctly: "I ask that people pray a lot."

Questioned on how the Synod should speak to those living in situations counter to church teaching, the pope states: "One thing should be very clear -- something Pope Benedict left quite clear: people who are in a second union are not excommunicated and should be integrated into Church life."

In Sunday's interview with the Argentine station, Francis spoke about his rapport to the so many people who are so excited to see him at his audiences, saying he feels a need to get close to them because they help revitalize him.

"When I embrace the people, it is Jesus embracing me!" the pope says in that interview. "I receive a content life, happy, a witness."

Continuing on that subject, the pontiff says that priests should not isolate themselves.

"When a priest isolates himself, in his solemn or legalistic posture, or in the posture of a prince ... when he distances himself, he embodies in a certain way those persons to whom Jesus dedicates the whole of chapter 23 of the Gospel of Matthew," states Francis. "Those legalists, Pharisees, Sadducees, doctors of the law that feel themselves among the pure."

The pontiff also spoke extensively in that interview on his message for the care of creation, saying he remembers one political leader who said: "It is not a matter of taking care of creation to make a better world for our children, because there will not be one."

"If we continue this rhythm, there will not be one," says Francis. "It means taking care of creation at this moment. We are facing the irreversible, and it is tragic."

"On the other hand, it is not invincible," he continues. "Because even if catastrophe arrives, I believe in a new Heaven and a new Earth. I have hope and I know that creation will be transformed."

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