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The complete interview: Pope Francis: I am not selling out our doctrine, I follow the Council

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Jubilee, ecumenism, the Council: Pope Francis' interview with Avvenire on the eve of the closure of the Holy Door: "The Church is not a football team seeking fans".

"The Jubilee? I did not make a plan. Things have come. I simply let myself be led by the Holy Spirit. The Church is the Gospel, it is not a journey of ideas. This Holy Year on mercy is a process matured in time, from the Council... Also in the ecumenical field the journey comes from afar, with the steps of my predecessors. This is the journey of the Church. It's not me. I have not given it any acceleration. To the extent that we move forward, the journey seems to go faster, it is the *motus in fine velocior* (motion accelerates when the end is near)". Casa Santa Marta, it is mid-day. The conversation with Pope Francis enters directly into the dynamic of an intense ecclesial period, and he couldn't help but to focus in particular on the encounters that have studded even his Apostolic Voyages in this Year of Mercy now ending and on the priority quest for Christian unity, in this historical time torn apart by conflict.

After the trip to Sweden I told him on the telephone that, during the return flight to Rome, dialoging with the journalists on the important encounter reconciled with the Lutherans, one of his glosses was left unanswered and that since that time I had thought to ask him some questions precisely on ecumenism. He caught me wrong-footed telling me that he could have answered me immediately. "But now....?", I ask him, and he grants me a good-natured reply.

At least I arrive early for the appointment. I enter with my son, while outside it rains. But he is already waiting for us at the door. Like in other circumstances, it is on the threshold that I find him, like a father as always, like the first time that I met him, many years ago. Patience in waiting seems to be his fiber, a reason for being, his trade. He takes his glasses and leafs through the series of questions unhurriedly. At the margins he jotted down some notes. While he gets up to arrange the flowers wet from rain, I think of the Holy Year almost over, of the Door of Mercy that is about to close, and I read an observation of fifty years ago from Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras in dialogue with Olivier Clément, which surprises me: "We must scrutinize the fate of Peter in the Gospel more deeply. Peter—St Gregory Palamas wrote—is the prototype himself of the new man, or rather the forgiven sinner. He can be there only to remind the Church that it lives by the forgiveness of God and has no other strength than the cross. If in the Church there is a bishop who is "the analogue" of Peter, then we are a long way from worldly power and glory. And if Peter forgets that his fundamental witness is that of a forgiven sinner then, in the image of Paul at Antioch, prophets will come to oppose him "openly" (Gal 2:11). I look at the Pope in silence, then I ask him:

The Pope: The Church is the Gospel

Father, what has this Holy Year meant for you?

Whoever discovers what it means to be loved begins to get out of a bad loneliness, of separation that leads to hating others and themselves. I hope that many people discover being loved by Jesus and they let themselves be embraced by Him. Mercy is the name of God and is also his weakness, his weak

point. Mercy always opens him to forgiveness, to forget our sins. I like to think that the Omnipotent One has a bad memory. Once he forgives you, he forgets. Because he is happy to forgive. For me this is enough. Like with the adulterous woman of the Gospel “who loved much”. “Because He loved much”. All of Christianity is there.

But it was a “sui generis” Jubilee, with many emblematic gestures....

Jesus does not demand grand gestures, but only surrender and gratitude. St Teresa of Lisieux, who is a doctor of the Church, in her “little way” towards God points to the surrender of the child, who falls asleep unreservedly between the arms of its father and reminds us that charity cannot remain enclosed deep down. Love of God and love of neighbor are two inseparable loves.

Were the intentions for which you called it realized?

But I did not make a plan. I simply did what the Holy Spirit inspired in me. Things have come. I let myself be led by the Holy Spirit. It was only being docile to the Holy Spirit, to leave it to Him to do. The Church is the Gospel, it is the work of Jesus Christ. It is not a journey of ideas, a tool to affirm them. And in the Church things enter in time when the time is ripe, when they are offered.

Also an Extraordinary Holy Year...

It was a process that matured in time, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Before me there was St John XXIII who with *Guadet mater Ecclesia* in the “medicine of mercy” pointed out the path to follow to the opening of the Council. Then Blessed Paul VI, who saw in the story of the Samaritan its paradigm. Then there was St John Paul II, with his second encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, and in the institution of the Feast of Divine Mercy. Benedict XVI said that “the name of God is mercy”. They are all the pillars. Thus the Holy Spirit brought forward the processes in the Church, until completion.

Then the Jubilee was also the Jubilee of the Council, hic et nunc, where the time of reception and the time for forgiveness coincide...

To make the lived experience of forgiveness that embraces the entire human family is the grace that apostolic ministry proclaims. The Church exists only as a tool to communicate to men and women God’s merciful plan. At the Council, the Church felt the responsibility of being in the world as the living sign of the love of the Father. With *Lumen gentium* it went back to the sources of her nature, to the Gospel. This shifts the axis of the Christian concept from a certain legalism, that can be ideological, to the Person of God who was made mercy in the incarnation of the Son. Some—one thinks of certain replies to *Amoris laetitia*—continue to not understand, it is either white or black, even if it is in the flow of life that you must discern. The Council told us this. The historians however say that a Council, to be absorbed well by the body of the Church, needs a century. We are at half way...

In this time, significant encounters and trips are however undertaken. At Lesbos with Patriarch Bartholomew and Hieronymus, at Cuba with the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill, at Lund for the joint commemoration of the Lutheran Reformation. Was it the Year of Mercy that facilitated all these initiatives with the other Christian churches?

I wouldn't say that these encounters are the fruit of the Year of Mercy. No. Because even these are all parts of a route that goes way back. It isn't a new thing. They are only further steps, along a path begun long ago.

Serving the poor is serving Christ

Since the conciliar decree *Unitatis redintegratio* was promulgated, more than 50 years ago, and Christian brotherhood based on one Baptism and the same faith in Christ was recovered, the journey on the path of the search for unity has gone forward by little and large steps and has born fruit. I continue to follow these steps...

Those were completed by your predecessors...

All those were completed by my predecessors. As that conversation of Pope Luciani was a further step with the Russian Metropolitan Nikodim who died in his arms, embraced by his brother bishop of Rome. Nikodim said so many beautiful things about the Church. I remember the funeral of St John Paul II. All the heads of the Oriental churches were there. This is brotherhood. The encounters and the trips help this brotherhood, to make it grow.

You however have encountered all the primates and heads of the Christian churches in less than four years. These encounters span your pontificate. Why this acceleration?

It is the journey of the Council. It intensifies. But it is the journey, it isn't me. This journey is the journey of the Church. I have encountered the primates and the heads, it is true, but even my predecessors met with the these and the other heads. I haven't given it any acceleration. To the extent that we move forward the journey seems to go faster. It is the *motus in fine velocior* to say it according to that process expressed in Aristotelian physics.

How do you personally experience the kindness of the encounters with you brothers of the other Christian churches?

I experience a lot of brotherhood. You feel the brotherhood. Jesus is there in our midst. For me they are all brothers. We bless one another, a brother blesses another. When we went to Lesbos in Greece with Patriarch Bartholomew and Hieronymus, to encounter the refugees there we felt one thing. We were one. One. It was a great joy for me when I went to Patriarch Bartholomew at Phanar in Istanbul for the Feast of St Andrew. In Georgia I encountered Patriarch Ilia who did not go to the Orthodox Council. The spiritual harmony I had with him was profound. I felt as if I were before a saint, a man of God took me by the hand, he told me beautiful things, more with gestures than with words. You see behind a conversation that they are men of prayer. Kirill is a man of prayer. Also the Coptic Patriarch Twardo, who I have met, entering into the chapel took off his shoes and went to pray. Patriarch Daniele of Romania a year ago gave me a volume in Spanish about St Silvestro of Mount Athos. I read the life of this holy monk already in Buenos Aires: "To pray is to shed **prisioni** blood". The saints unite us within the Church, actualizing her mystery. We are in journey with our Orthodox brothers, we love one another, we worry together, they come to study about us and with us. Even Bartholomew studied here.

With Patriarch Bartholomew, the successor of Andrew, you have completed many steps together already, in full harmony in the mutual proclamations. It sustains you in this love that transformed the life of the Apostles: Peter and Andrew were brothers...

At Lesbos while we greeted everyone together, there was a child towards which I was bent down. But the child was not interested in me, she looked behind me. I turned and I saw why. Bartholomew had his pockets full of caramels and he was giving them to the children. This is Bartholomew, a man capable of leading ahead the Great Orthodox Council among so many difficulties, of speaking about theology at a high level, and of simply being with children. When he came to Rome, he occupied the room in which I am now at Santa Marta. The only reprimand he has given me is that he had to change it.

You continue to frequently encounter the heads of the other churches. But shouldn't the bishop of Rome concern himself full time with the Catholic Church?

Jesus himself prays to the Father to ask that his own are one thing only, so that the world might believe. It is his prayer to the Father. As always, the bishop of Rome is called to care for, to seek to serve this unity. We also know that we cannot heal the wounds of our divisions, that tear at the Body of Christ, by ourselves. Then you cannot impose projects or systems to return to unity. To ask for unity among us Christians we can only look to Jesus and ask that the Holy Spirit may work among us. That it is he who makes unity. In the encounter at Lund with the Lutherans, I repeated Jesus' words, when he says to his disciples: "Without me you can do nothing".

What was the significance of commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with the Lutherans in Sweden? Was it you "forging ahead"?

The encounter with the Lutheran Church at Lund was a step further in the ecumenical journey that began fifty years ago and in a Lutheran-Catholic theological dialogue that has borne fruit with the Common Declaration, signed in 1991, on the Doctrine of Justification, that is on how Christ makes us righteous saving us with his necessary Grace, that is the point where they had left *le riflespiro* of Luther. Then, returning to the essentials of the faith to rediscover what unites us. Before my time, Benedict went to Erfurt, and he spoke accurately about this, with much clarity. He repeated that the question on "how can I have a merciful God" had penetrated Luther's heart, and was behind his theological and interior quest. There was a purification of memory. Luther wanted a reform that had to be like a medicine. Then things crystalized, the political interests of the time are mixed in, and it ends up in *cuius regio eius religio* (whose realm, his religion), by which you had to follow the religious confession of whoever had the power.

But some people think that in these ecumenical encounters you want to "sell out" Catholic doctrine. Some have said that you want to "protestantize" the Church...

It doesn't rob me of sleep. I follow on the path of those who preceded me, I follow the Council. As to the opinions, one needs to always distinguish the spirit with which they were said. When there is no evil spirit, they also help the journey. Other times one sees right away that they engage in criticisms here and there to justify an already assumed position. They are not honest. They are formed with an evil spirit to foment division. One sees immediately that certain rigorisms stem from a lack, from wanting to hide inside an armor of their own dissatisfaction. If one sees the film *Babbette's Feast* there is this rigid behavior.

Also with the Lutherans, there was a strong appeal to work together for those who are in a state of need. Do we need then to set aside the theological and sacramental questions to focus only on the common social and cultural commitment?

This is not to set aside something. Serving the poor means serving Christ, because the poor are the flesh of Christ. And if we serve the poor together, it means that we Christians, find ourselves united in touching the wounds of Christ.

Ecumenism? I do not sell out doctrine, I follow Christ

I think of the work that Caritas and charitable Lutheran organizations can do together after the meeting in Lund. It is not an institution, it is a journey. Certain ways of setting “things of doctrine” against “things of pastoral charity” instead are not according to the Gospel and create confusion.

The joint commemoration of Lund has signaled a moment of mutual acceptance and a level of deep mutual understanding. But from here how can we resolve the ecclesiological questions still open and then those in regard to the ministry and the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist, that separate us from the Lutheran Church? How is it possible to overcome these questions to be able to move towards a unity that is visible to the world?

The Joint Declaration on Justification is the basis to be able to continue theological work. Theological study must go forward. There is the work that the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity is doing. The theological path is important, but always together on the path of prayer, doing works of charity together. Works that are visible.

Also, the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill, said that “unity is made walking”, “unity will not come as a miracle at the end, walking together is already making unity”. You repeat it often. But what does it mean?

Unity is not made because we agree among ourselves, but because we walk following Christ. And walking, through the work of He who we follow, we can find ourselves united. It is walking behind Jesus that unites us. Converting means letting the Lord live and work in us. Thus we may discover finding ourselves united even in our common mission of proclaiming the Gospel. Walking and working together, we realize that we are already united in the name of the Lord and that then we do not create unity. We realize that it is the Spirit that pushes us and leads us forward. If you are docile to the Spirit, it will be He to tell you the step you can make, he does the rest. You cannot go behind Christ if he does not lead you, if the Spirit does not push you with his strength. This is why the Spirit is the creator of unity among Christians. Here’s why I say that unity is made in journey, because unity is a grace that you must ask for, and also why I repeat that any proselytism among Christians is sinful. The Church never grows by proselytism but “by attraction”, as Benedict XVI wrote. Proselytism among Christians is in itself a serious sin.

Why?

Because it contradicts the very dynamic of how we become and remain Christians. The Church is not a football team that seeks fans.

What then are the paths to be undertaken for unity?

Doing processes instead of occupying spaces is the key also for the ecumenical journey. In this historic moment, unity is made on three paths: walking together with the works of charity, praying together and then recognizing the common confession as it is expressed in the common martyrdom in the name of Christ, in the ecumenism of blood. There one sees that the Enemy himself recognizes our unity. The

Enemy, in this, is not wrong. And these are all expressions of visible unity. Doing works of charity together is visible. Shared martyrdom in Christ's name is visible.

Nevertheless, among Catholics a sensitivity to seek unity among Christians and a perception of sorrow for the division does not yet seem so alive...

Even the encounter at Lund, like all the other ecumenical steps, was a step forward for understanding the scandal of division, that wounds the Body of Christ and that also before the world we must not allow ourselves. How can we give witness to the truth of love if we fight, if we separate among ourselves? When I was a child you did not speak with the Protestants. There was a priest in Buenos Aires who when the evangelicals with their tents came to preach sent the youth group to burn them. Now the times have changed. The scandal is overcome simply by doing things together with gestures of unity and brotherhood.

When you were in Cuba you encountered Patriarch Kirill. Your first words were: "We have the same Baptism. We are bishops".

When I was bishop of Buenos Aires all the attempts made by so many priests to facilitate the administration of Baptism gave me joy. Baptism is the gesture with which the Lord chooses us, and if recognize that we are united in Baptism it means we are united in that which is fundamental. It is that common source that unites all of us Christians and nurtures each possible new step to return to full communion among us. To rediscover our unity we must not "go beyond" Baptism. Having the same Baptism means confessing together that the Word was made flesh: this saves us. All the ideologies and theories arise from whoever does not stop at this, does not remain at the faith that recognizes Christ come in the flesh, and wants to "go beyond". From there arise all the positions that remove the flesh of Christ from the Church, that "strip the flesh" from the Church. If we look together to our common Baptism, we come are freed from the temptation of Pelagianism, that wants to convince us that we save ourselves by our own strength. And remaining at Baptism also saves us from gnosis. This last one denatures Christianity reducing it to a course on consciousness, that can lessen the real encounter with Christ.

Patriarch Bartholomew in an interview with *Avvenire* said that the root of division was the penetration of a "worldly thought" into the Church. Is this also the cause of division for you?

I continue to think that the cancer in the Church is to give each other glory. If one does not know who Jesus is, or has never encountered him, he can always encounter him. But if one is in the Church and he moves in it precisely because in the environment of the Church he cultivates and feeds his hunger for domination and self-affirmation, he has a spiritual sickness. He believes that the Church is a self-sufficient human reality, where everything moves according to the logic of ambition and power. In Luther's reaction there was this also: the refusal of an image of the Church as an organization doing without the Grace of the Lord, or considering it a foregone possession, guaranteed a priori. And this temptation to build a self-referential Church that leads to opposition and then to division, always returns.

Regarding the Orthodox, you often quote "the Ratzinger formula", enunciated by the theologian who then became Pope: that one according to which "for that which regards the primacy of the Pope,

Rome must demand nothing more from the Orthodox than what was established and experienced in the first millennia". But with a view to the Church of the beginning and of the first centuries, what can you suggest of the essentials, even in the present time?

We must look to the first millennium. It can always inspire us. It is not turning inward in a mechanical manner, it is not simply to do a "reverse gear". There are treasures there valid even today. Before I spoke of self-referentiality, the sinful habit of the Church to look too much to herself, as if she believed in having her own light. Patriarch Bartholomew said the same thing speaking of ecclesial "introversion". The Fathers of the Church of the first centuries had clear that the Church lives moment by moment by the Grace of Christ. This is why—I have already said other times—we say that the Church does not have her own light, and we call it the *mysterium lunae*, the mystery of the moon. Because the Church gives light, but does not shine by her own light. And when the Church, instead of looking to Christ, looks to herself too much, the divisions come as well. It is what happened after the first millennium. Looking to Christ frees us from this habit, and also from temptation of triumphalism and rigorism. And it makes us walk together on the path of docility to the Holy Spirit, who leads us to unity.

In the different Orthodox churches there are resistances to the path towards unity, like those who Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas defines as "Taliban Orthodox". Some resistances may still be there on the part of Catholics. What should be done?

The Spirit brings things to completion, with the times He establishes. This is why we cannot be impatient, disheartened, anxious. The journey requires patience in taking care of and bettering what already exists, which is much more than what divides us. And witnessing to his love for all men and women, so that the world may believe.