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SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

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Interview with the Holy Father Francis for the Belgian Catholic weekly, "Tertio"

The following is the full text of the interview the Holy Father granted to the Belgian Catholic weekly publication "Tertio", on the occasion of the conclusion of the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

[(Interviewer)

Representative of the bishops for means of communication ...

(Pope Francis)

You once brought me some young people who asked good questions

(Interviewer) There is a Pope who gives good answers...

(Pope Francis)

I'll wait a moment ... I want to see the questions, because I haven't seen them...]

QUESTION - In our country we are going through a moment in which national politics wishes to separate religion from public life: for example, in education. It is the opinion that, in a time of secularisation, religion should be reserved to private life. How can we be at the same time a missionary Church, outbound towards society, and live this tension created by this public opinion?

POPE - Well, I do not want to offend anyone, but this is an old-fashioned mindset. This is the legacy that the Enlightenment has left to us - is it not? - in which every religious phenomenon is a subculture. It is the difference between laicism and secularism. I have spoken about this with the French. ... Vatican Council II tells us about the autonomy of things, of processes and institutions. There is a healthy secularism, for instance, the secularism of the State. In general, a secular State is a good thing; it is better than a confessional State, because confessional States finish badly. But secularism is one thing, and laicism is another. Laicism closes the doors to

transcendence, to the dual transcendence: both transcendence towards others and, above all, transcendence towards God; or towards what is beyond us. And openness to transcendence is part of the human essence. It is part of man. I am not speaking about religion, I am speaking about openness to transcendence. Therefore, a culture or a political system that does not respect openness to the transcendence of the human person “prunes” or cuts down the human person. Or rather, it does not respect the human person. This is more or less what I think. Therefore, sending to the sacristy any act of transcendence is a form of “asepsis”, which has nothing to do with human nature, which cuts from human nature a good part of life, which is openness.

QUESTION - You are concerned about the interreligious relationship. In our times we live with terrorism and with war. At times it can be seen that the roots of the current wars reside in the difference between religions. What can be said about this?

POPE - Yes, I believe that this opinion exists. But no religion as such can foment war. Because in this case it would be proclaiming a god of destruction, a god of hatred. One cannot wage war in the name of God or in the name of a religious position. War cannot be waged in any religion. And for this reason terrorism and war are not related to religion. Religion is distorted to justify them, this is true. You are witnesses of this, you have experienced it in your homeland. But they are distortions of religion, that do not relate to the essence of the religious fact, which is instead love, unity, respect, dialogue, all these things. ... But not in that aspect, or rather, we must be categorical about this, no religion proclaims war for the fact of religion. Religious distortions, yes. For example, all religions have fundamentalist groups.

All of them, we do too. And they destroy, starting from their fundamentalism. But these are small religious groups that have distorted and have “sickened” their religion, and as a result they fight, they wage war, or they cause division in communities, which is a form of war. But these are the fundamentalist groups we have in all religions. There is always a small group ...

QUESTION – Another question on war. We are currently commemorating the centenary of the First World War. What would you say to the European continent about the post-war message, “No more war!”?

POPE - I have spoken to the European continent three times: twice in Strasbourg and once last year, or this year, I do not remember, when there was the Charlemagne Prize [6 May 2016]. I think that “No more war!” has not been taken seriously, because after the First there was the Second, and after the Second there is this third war we are experiencing now, piecemeal. We are at war. The world is conducting a third world war: Ukraine, Middle East, Africa, Yemen ... It is very grave. Therefore, we say the words “No more war!”, but at the same time we manufacture weapons and sell them, and we sell them to those who are fighting, as arms producers sell them to this and that, to those who are at war with each other. It is true. There is an economic theory that I have not tried to confirm, but which I have read in several books: that in the history of humanity, when a State saw that its accounts were not in good shape, waged war to balance its budget. That is, it is one of the easiest ways to produce wealth. Certainly, the price is very high: blood.

“No more war!” was something that Europe said sincerely, I believe: Schumann, De Gasperi, Adenauer ... they said it sincerely. But afterwards ... Nowadays there is a lack of leaders; Europe is in need of leaders, leaders who go ahead. ... Well, I do not want to repeat what I said in the three speeches.

QUESTION - Is there any chance that you will come to Belgium for this commemoration of the war?

POPE - It is not planned, no ... I used to go to Belgium every year and a half when I was the provincial [superior], because there was an association of friends of the Catholic University of Córdoba. And so I used to go there to speak. They did the [spiritual] Exercises, and I used to go to thank them. I became fond of Belgium. For me the most beautiful city in Belgium is not yours, but rather Bruges [laughs].

[Interviewer: I have to tell you that my brother is a Jesuit.]

Pope: Really? I didn't know!

Interviewer: So, apart from being Jesuit, he's a good person.

Pope: I was about to ask you if you were Catholic ... (laughter)]

QUESTION – We are about to conclude the Year of Mercy. Can you tell us how you lived this Year, and what you expect when the Year comes to an end?

POPE – The Year of Mercy was not an idea that came to me unexpectedly. It takes its cue from Blessed Paul VI. Paul VI had already taken a number of steps to rediscover God's mercy. St. John Paul II then placed great emphasis on this with three facts: the Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, the canonisation of St. Faustina, and the Feast of Divine Mercy on the Octave of Easter; he died on the eve of that feast day. He introduced the Church onto this road in this way. I felt that the Lord wanted this. It was ... I don't know how the idea formed in my heart. One fine day I said to Msgr. Fisichella, who had come about matters related to his Dicastery, "How I would like to hold a Jubilee, a Jubilee of Mercy". And he said, "Why not?" And that is how the Year of Mercy began. It is the best assurance that it was not a human idea, but rather that it came from on high. I believe that it was inspired by the Lord. And evidently it went very well. In addition, the fact that the Jubilee was held not only in Rome, but all over the world, in all dioceses and within each diocese, created a lot of movement, a lot of movement ... People were very active. There was a lot of activity and people felt called to reconcile themselves with God, to encounter the Lord again, to feel the caress of the Father.

QUESTION – The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the distinction between cheap grace and costly grace. So, what does cheap or costly mercy mean to you?

POPE – Cheap mercy or costly mercy: I do not know Bonhoeffer's text, I don't know when he explains this. .. But it is cheap because there is nothing to pay; one doesn't have to buy indulgences, it is a pure gift. And it is costly because it is the most precious gift. There is a book based on an interview I gave, entitled "*The name of God is Mercy*". It is precious because it is the name of God: God is merciful.

It reminds me of that priest I had in Buenos Aires, who continued to celebrate Mass and to work, and he was 92 years old! At the beginning of Mass he would always give certain warnings. He is very energetic, 92 years old, preaches very well, the people go to listen to him. "Please, switch off your mobile phones". And during the Mass, the Offertory began, and a telephone began to ring. He stopped and said, "Please, switch off your mobile phones". And the altar boy, who was next to him, said, "Father, it is yours". And he took out his phone and answered: 'Hello!'" [Laughter]

QUESTION – To us, it seems that you are indicating Vatican Council II for our times. You are showing us ways of renewal in the Church. The Synodal Church. ... In the Synod you explained your vision of the Church of the future. Could you explain this for our readers?

POPE - The "Synodal Church", let me take this word. The Church is born from the community, it is born from the foundation, it is born from Baptism, and it is organised around a bishop, who brings it together and gives it strength; the bishop who is the successor of the Apostles. This is the Church. But in all the world there are many bishops, many organised Churches, and there is Peter. Therefore either there is a pyramidal Church, in which what Peter says is done, or there is a synodal Church, in which Peter is Peter but he accompanies the Church, he lets her grow, he listens to her, he learns from this reality and goes about harmonising it, discerning what comes from the Church and restoring it to her. The richest experience of all this was that of the last two Synods. There all the bishops of the world were heard, during preparation; all the Churches of the world, the dioceses, worked. All this material was worked on during the first Synod, which gave its results to the Church, and then we returned a second time – the second Synod – to complete all this. And from there *Amoris Laetitia* emerged. It is interesting to see the rich variety of nuances, typical of the Church. It is unity in diversity. This is synodality.

Do not descend from high to low, but listen to the Churches, harmonise them, discern. And so there is a post-Synodal exhortation, which is *Amoris Laetitia*, which is the result of two Synods, in which all the Church worked, and which the Pope made his own. It is expressed in a harmonious way. It is interesting that all that it contains [*Amoris Laetitia*], in the Synod it was approved by more than two thirds of the fathers. And this is a guarantee. A synodal Church means that there is this movement from high to low, high to love. And the same in the dioceses. But there is a Latin phrase, that says that the Churches are always *cum Petro et sub Petro*. Peter is the guarantor of the unity of the Church. He is the guarantor.

This is the meaning. And it is necessary to progress in synodality, which is one of the things that the Orthodox have conserved. And also the Oriental Catholic Churches. It is a richness of theirs, and I recognise it in the Encyclical.

QUESTION - It seems to me that the Second Synod made the passage from the method of “seeing, judging and acting” towards “listening, understanding and accompanying”. It is very different. These are the things that I am constantly saying to people. The passage of the Synod is from seeing, judging and acting, and then to listening to the reality of the people, understanding well this reality and then accompanying people on their path...

POPE - Because each person said what he thought, without fear of feeling judged. And everyone had the attitude of listening, without condemning. And then we discussed, like brothers, in the groups. But it is one thing to debate like brothers and another to condemn *a priori*. There was great freedom of expression. And this is beautiful!

QUESTION - In Krakow, you gave valuable inspiration to the young. What could be a special message to the young people of our country?

POPE - Not to be afraid, not to be ashamed of faith; not to be ashamed to seek out new ways. And to the young who are not believers: do not worry, search for the meaning of life. To a young person, I would give two pieces of advice: seek out horizons and do not go into retirement at the age of 20. It is very sad to see a young pensioner at 20, 25 years of age, isn't it? Seek out horizons, go ahead, continue to work in this human task.

QUESTION - A final question, Holy Father, regarding the media: a consideration regarding the means of communication...

POPE – The communications media have a very great responsibility. Nowadays they have in their hands the possibility and the capacity to form opinion: they can form a good or a bad opinion. The means of communication are the builders of a society. In and of themselves, they are made to build, to interchange, to fraternise, to make us think, to educate. In themselves they are positive. It is obvious that, given that we are all sinners, also the media can – we who use the media, I am using a means of communication here – become harmful. And the communications media have their temptations. They can be tempted by calumny, and therefore used to slander, to sully people, especially in the world of politics. They can be used as a means of defamation: every person has the right to a good reputation, but perhaps in their previous life, or ten years ago, they had a problem with justice, or a problem in their family life, and bringing this to light is serious and harmful; it can annul a person. In slander we tell a lie about a person; in defamation, we leak a document, as we say in Argentina, “*Se hace un carpetazo*” – and we uncover something that is true, but already in the past, and which has already been paid for with a jail sentence, with a fine, or whatever. There is no right to this. This is a sin and it is harmful. A thing that can do great damage to the information media is disinformation: that is, faced with any situation, saying only a part of the truth, and not the rest. This is disinformation. Because you, to the listener or the observer, give only half the truth, and therefore it is not possible to make a serious judgement. Disinformation is probably the greatest damage that the media can do, as opinion is guided in one direction, neglecting the other part of the truth. And then, I believe that the media should be very clear, very transparent, and not fall prey – without offence, please – to the sickness of coprophilia, which is always wanting to communicate scandal, to communicate ugly things, even though they may be true. And since people have a tendency towards the sickness of coprophagia, it can do great harm. Thus, I would say that there are these four temptations. But they are builders of opinion and can construct, and do immense good, immense.

QUESTION – To conclude, a word for priests. Not a speech, because they say we have to conclude. ... What is most important for a priest?

POPE – It is a rather Salesian answer, but it comes from the heart. Remember that you have a Mother who loves you, and never cease to love your Mother, the Virgin. Secondly, let yourself be looked at by Jesus. Third: seek out the suffering flesh of Jesus in your brothers: there you will encounter Jesus. This as a basis. Everything comes from here. If you are an orphan priest, who has forgotten that he has a Mother; if you are a priest who has drifted away from He Who called you, from Jesus, you will never be able to carry the Gospel. What is the way? Tenderness. May they have tenderness. Priests should never be ashamed of having tenderness.

May they caress the suffering blood of Jesus. Today there is a need for a revolution of tenderness in this world that suffers from “cardiosclerosis”.

QUESTION - Cardio...?

POPE – Cardiosclerosis.
