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Pope Francis' latest bombshell interview

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 1, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Pope Francis delivered another bombshell interview [1], this time with Eugenio Scalfari of *La Repubblica*. It is, in its way, even more stunning than the longer interview with the Jesuit journals in part because the pope is here speaking with a man who does not share the faith of the Church yet that fact does not once produce a breakdown in communication and Francis displays in his dialogue exactly what he means by a culture of encounter.

Scalfari writes:

And here I am [at the pope's apartment]. *The Pope comes in and shakes my hand, and we sit down. The Pope smiles and says: "Some of my colleagues who know you told me that you will try to convert me."*

It's a joke I tell him. My friends think it is you want to convert me.
He smiles again and replies: "Proselytism is solemn nonsense, it makes no sense. We need to get to know each other, listen to each other and improve our knowledge of the world around us. Sometimes after a meeting I want to arrange another one because new ideas are born and I discover new needs. This is important: to get to know people, listen, expand the circle of ideas. The world is crisscrossed by roads that come closer together and move apart, but the important thing is that they lead towards the Good."

"Solemn nonsense." It is a phrase I wish I had coined myself. It is certainly an experience many of us have shared, listening to a priest or deacon preach who is one hundred percent certain he has all the answers, the world is going to hell in a handbasket because it does not listen to his answers, etc. One suspects that Francis has had the experience too. Indeed, a few questions on he states: "It also happens to me that when I meet a clericalist, I suddenly become anti-clerical."

I do not know if the phenomenon of "John Paul II priests" wears the same patina in Latin America that it does in the United States. Sadly, in my experience here in the states, too many of our "John Paul II priests" would be quite hostile to these words of Pope Francis. They are clericalists. They do not believe they have been set apart to serve the People of God. They believe they were set apart to be better than the People of God. They do engage in the kind of proselytism the pope here labels "solemn nonsense." They like being on the pedestal. Again, I do not want to lay this at the feet of Pope John Paul II. I wonder how that significant pontiff, whose canonization date was announced yesterday, is understood by those who were not told to see John Paul II through the lens provided by George Weigel and Richard John Neuhaus.

This clerical culture has long been a temptation in the life of the Church. Its most distinguishing characteristic is its secularism: The transformation wrought by ordination gives power and authority, it does not require a transformation of the soul into that of a spiritually mature disciple. The Church in France, bowing to this temptation, created the "First Estate." Cardinals and bishops built lavish residences and held out their hands for their rings to be kissed. Not for nothing are cardinals called "princes of the Church." When the ontological change that ordination brings is unaccompanied by a spiritual change, the appeal of ordination becomes its tolerance for dysfunction and, sadly, we have seen much of that in our own day here in the U.S. Eventually, this clerical culture results in a self-understanding among clerics that they are accountable to no one, and that lack of

accountability has been the source of the greatest scandal in the history of the Church.

Against this clericalist, secular vision of the priesthood, and of leadership in the Church, the Holy Father has proposed a "culture of encounter." This was announced yesterday as the theme of the World Day of Communications. And, in this interview, Pope Francis gives a ready-made example of what he means by a "culture of encounter." I love the way he answers a question with a question at several points during the interview. "What do you think?" he replies to the question whether he, the pope, has a mystical vocation.

Those who believe that Vatican II furnished a rationale for a headlong rush to adopt the ways of the world will not find an ally in Pope Francis. When asked which are his favorite saints, he mentions Paul, Augustine, Benedict, Thomas, Ignatius and Francis. Scalfari asks which of these saints he feels closest to and the pope replies: "You're asking me for a ranking, but classifications are for sports or things like that. I could tell you the name of the best footballers in Argentina. But the saints..." He understands that there are many mansions in his Father's heaven, but he understands too, that the key thing about those mansions is that they belong to the Father.

Those who believe Vatican II was, in some way, not an invitation to engage the world will be very, very disappointed with the pope's interview. Here, he is explicit:

I believe I have already said that our goal is not to proselytize but to listen to needs, desires and disappointments, despair, hope. We must restore hope to young people, help the old, be open to the future, spread love. Be poor among the poor. We need to include the excluded and preach peace. Vatican II, inspired by Pope Paul VI and John, decided to look to the future with a modern spirit and to be open to modern culture. The Council Fathers knew that being open to modern culture meant religious ecumenism and dialogue with non-believers. But afterwards very little was done in that direction. I have the humility and ambition to want to do something.

The words make one want to be a better Christian, yes? And the mission he sets forth for the Church ? restore hope to the young, help the old, be open to the future, spread love, be poor among the poor ? is so deeply rooted in the Gospels, and so transparent in this pope's own life decisions, it makes you want to follow. This, my friends, is the New Evangelization. In spades.

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