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Francis: To care for the poor is not communism, It is the Gospel

Interview with the Holy Father: "The Gospel's message is for everyone, the Gospel does not condemn the wealthy, but the idolatry of wealth, the idolatry that makes people indifferent to the call of the poor"

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The director of La Stampa's Vatican Insider, Andrea Tornielli, has teamed with the Italian daily's Vatican beat reporter, Giacomo Galeazzi, to write a book profiling the social teaching of the Church under the direction of Pope Francis. The Italian language volume, titled Papa Francesco. Questa economia uccide – "Pope Francis: this economy kills" – closes with an interview with the Holy Father, which the authors conducted in October of 2014, ample excerpts of which appeared in the Sunday edition of La Stampa just ahead of the book's scheduled January 13th release date.

'Marxist', 'Communist', 'Pauperist'. Francis' words on poverty and social justice, as well as his frequent calls for concern for the needy, have drawn criticism and accusations, sometimes expressed with harshness and sarcasm. How does Pope Francis feel about this? Why is the theme of poverty so prevalent in his teachings?

Your Holiness, is the capitalism of the last decades, in your opinion, an irreversible system?

'I would not know how to answer this question. I recognise that globalisation has helped many people rise out of poverty, but it has also damned many others to starve to death. It is true that global wealth is growing in absolute terms, but inequalities have also grown and new poverty arisen. What I have noticed is that this system sustains itself through a culture of waste, which I have already discussed various times. There is the politics, the sociology and even the attitude of waste. When money, instead of man, is at the centre of the system, when money becomes an idol, men and women are reduced to simple instruments of a social and economic system, which is characterised, better yet dominated, by profound inequalities. So we discard whatever is not useful to this logic; it is this attitude that discards children and older people, and is now affecting the young. I was shocked to learn that, in developed countries, there are many millions of young people under 25 who are jobless. I have dubbed them the 'neither-nor' youth, because they neither study nor work. They do not study because they do not have the opportunity to do so, they do not work because there are no jobs. But I would also like to highlight an aspect of the culture of waste; that which leads people to discard babies through abortion. I am shocked

by the low birth rates here in Italy; this is how we lose our link to the future. The culture of waste also leads to a hidden euthanasia of older people, who are abandoned. Instead of being considered as our memory, our link to our own past and a source of wisdom for the present. Sometimes I ask myself what the next waste will be. We need to stop before it is too late. Let us stop, please! Therefore, in an attempt to answer your question, I would say that we should not consider this state of things as irreversible. Let us not resign ourselves to it. Let us try and build a society and an economy where man and his welfare are at the centre, instead of money'

Can more ethics in economics bring about change, in the form of an increased consideration for social justice, or is it also right to speculate about structural changes to the system?

'First of all, we need to remember that we need ethics in the economy, and we also need ethics in politics. More than once, various heads of State and political leaders, whom I have met since my election as bishop of Rome, spoke to me about this. They told me that we, the religious leaders, need to help them and give them ethical indications. Yes, the pastor can make his appeals, but I am convinced that we need, as Benedict XVI recalled in his encyclicals *Caritas in Veritate*, men and women with their arms raised in prayer to God; conscious that the love and sharing, which engender genuine development, are not a product of our hands, but a gift to ask for. At the same time I am convinced that we need these men and women to commit themselves on every level, in society, politics, institutions and the economy, to work for the common good. We cannot wait any longer to deal with the structural causes of poverty, in order to heal our society from an illness that can only lead to new crises. The markets and financial speculation cannot benefit from absolute autonomy. Without a solution to the problems of the poor, we will not solve the problems of the world. We need projects, mechanisms and processes to implement better distribution of resources, from the creation of new jobs to the integral promotion of those who are excluded.'

*Why do Pius XI's strong and prophetic words, in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, against the international imperialism of money, sound, to many – even Catholics – so radical and extreme today?*

'Pius XI only sounds extreme to those who feel struck by his words and hit where it hurts by his prophetic condemnations. But the Pope was not exaggerating, he told the truth after the economic and financial crisis of 1929, and, as a good mountaineer, he saw things as they were, he could look far. I am afraid that those who still feel called to question by Pius XI's rebukes are the ones who have gone too far...'

*Are both the pages of the *Populorum Progressio*, where it says that private property is not an absolute right but rather subordinate to the common good, and the pages of the *Catechism of St. Pius X*, who lists, among the sins that cry to Heaven for vengeance, the oppression of the poor and defrauding labourers of their wage, still valid?*

'Not only are they still valid, but the more time goes on, the more I find they have been proved by experience.'

Your words about the poor as the 'flesh of Christ' have shocked many people. Are you bothered by the

accusation of 'pauperism'?

'Before Francis of Assisi came, there were the 'Pauperists'; there were many Pauperist streams in the Middle Ages. Pauperism is a caricature of the Gospel and of poverty itself. Instead, St. Francis helped us discover the deep connection between poverty and the way of the Gospel. Jesus states that we cannot serve two masters, God and wealth. Is this pauperism? Jesus tells us what the 'protocol' is, on which we will be judged. It is the one we read in chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel: I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was in prison, I was sick, I was naked and you helped me, clothed me, visited me, took care of me. Whenever we do this to one of our brothers, we do this to Jesus. Caring for our neighbour; for those who are poor, who suffer in body and in soul, for those who are in need. This is the touchstone. Is it pauperism? No, it is the Gospel. Poverty takes us away from idolatry and from feeling self-sufficient. Zacchaeus, after he met Jesus' merciful gaze, gave half of his fortune away to the poor. The Gospel's message is for everyone, the Gospel does not condemn the wealthy, but the idolatry of wealth, the idolatry that makes people indifferent to the call of the poor. Jesus said that, before we offer our gift upon the altar, we must reconcile with our brother to be in peace with him. I think that, by analogy, we can extend this request to being in peace with these poor brothers.'

You highlighted the continuity with the tradition of the Church in its concern for the poor. Can you give us some examples of this?

'A month before he opened the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII said 'The Church shows itself as it wishes to be, everyone's Church, and particularly the Church of the poor.' In the following years, this preferential treatment of the poor entered the official teachings. Some may think it a novelty, whilst instead it is a concern that stems from the Gospel and is documented even from the first centuries of Christianity. If I repeated some passages from the homilies of the Church Fathers, in the second or third century, about how we must treat the poor, some would accuse me of giving a Marxist homily. 'You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich.' These were St. Ambrose's words, which Pope Paul VI used to state, in *Populorum Progressio*, that private property does not constitute an absolute and unconditional right for anyone, and that no one is allowed to keep for their exclusive use things superfluous to their needs, when others lack basic necessities. St. John Chrysostom stated that 'not sharing your goods with the poor means robbing them and taking away their life. The goods we own are not ours but theirs'. (...) As we can see, this concern for the poor is in the Gospel, it is within the tradition of the Church, it is not an invention of communism and it must not be turned into an ideology, as has sometimes happened before in the course of history. The Church, when it invites us to overcome what I have called 'the globalisation of indifference', is free from any political interest and any ideology. It is moved only by Jesus' words, and wants to offer its contribution to build a world where we look after one another and care for each other.'