

"Freedom Scares Us": Pope Francis' conversation with Slovak Jesuits



Bratislava, Sunday September 12, 2021, 5:30 p.m. – Pope Francis has just concluded a meeting in the Nunciature with representatives of the Ecumenical Council of Churches. There is time to arrange the chairs after the previous encounter, then 53 Slovak Jesuits take their places. Francis enters and greets them: "Good evening and welcome! Thank you for this visit. I didn't know there were so many Jesuits here in Slovakia. The 'plague' is spreading everywhere." The group bursts into laughter. Francis asks for questions because, he says, provoking laughter again, "I really do not feel like giving a talk to Jesuits."

The provincial of the Slovakian province addresses some words of greeting to the pope: "Holy Father, thank you wholeheartedly for this invitation. It came as a surprise and is an encouragement for our community and pastoral work. In Slovakia there are many Jesuits. I want to confirm that the Society is at your disposal for the needs of the Church."

The pope replies with humor: "Thank you. The idea of inviting Jesuits to

meet me on my apostolic journeys is Fr. Spadaro's because it gives him material for La Civiltà Cattolica. They always publish these conversations!" He continues: "Now I wait for your questions. Take a shot at the goalkeeper. Come on!"

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A Jesuit asks, "How are you?"

He replies "Still alive, even though some people wanted me to die. I know there were even meetings between prelates who thought the pope's condition was more serious than the official version. They were preparing for the conclave. Patience! Thank God, I'm all right. Undergoing that surgery was a decision I didn't want to make. It was a nurse who convinced me. Nurses sometimes understand the situation more than doctors because they are in direct contact with the patients."

A Jesuit who worked for almost 15 years at Vatican Radio asks what Jesuits should hold to heart in their pastoral work in Slovakia.

"One word always comes to mind for me: 'closeness.'

Closeness to God, first of all: Don't abandon prayer! True prayer, prayer of the heart, not the formal prayer that does not touch the heart. Prayer that struggles with God, and that experiences the desert where you feel nothing. Proximity to God who is always waiting for us. We might be tempted to say: I can't pray because I'm busy. But God is busy too. God is

busy being close to you, waiting for you.

Second: *closeness among you*, love among the brothers: the austere love of the Jesuits that is very fine, charitable, but also austere: love of men. It hurts me when Jesuits or other priests mistreat each other. It is a stumbling block; it doesn't let us go ahead. But these problems were there from the beginning of the Society. Think, for example, of the patience Ignatius showed with Simon Rodriguez. It's difficult to be a community, but closeness between you is really important.

Third: *closeness to the bishop*. It's true there are bishops who don't want us; it's true, yes. But let's have no Jesuits speaking ill of a bishop! If a Jesuit thinks differently from the bishop and has courage, then let him go to the bishop and tell him what he is thinking. And when I say bishop, I also mean the pope.

Fourth: *closeness to the people of God*. You must be as Paul VI told us on December 3, 1974: wherever there are crossroads, wherever there are ideas, Jesuits are there. Read well and meditate on that speech of Paul VI to the thirty-second General Congregation: it is the most beautiful thing that a pope has said to the Jesuits. It's true that if we are men who really go to the crossroads and the frontiers, we will create problems. But what will save us from falling into stupid ideologies is closeness to the people of God. This allows us to go forward with an open heart. Of course, it may be that some of you become enthusiastic and then the provincial arrives to stop you, saying to you: "No, this doesn't work." And then you have to go forward with the willingness to be obedient. The closeness to the people of God is so important because it "places" us. Never forget where we are drawn from, where we come from: our people. If we detach ourselves and go toward an ethereal universality, then we lose our roots. Our roots are in the Church, which is the people of God.

So, here I ask you to be close in four ways: close to God, close among yourselves, close to the bishops and the pope, and close to the people of

God, which is the most important.

A Jesuit takes the floor and recalls that there are about twenty religious present who were ordained priests clandestinely, as he was. He affirms that it has been a beautiful experience for them to be brought up in the world of work...

Work to earn bread... manual or intellectual work is health, it is work. And God's people, if they don't work, don't eat...

One of those present begins by saying: "I am two years younger than you" and the pope replies jokingly: "... but you don't look it! You're wearing makeup!" The others laugh. He continues: "In 1968 I entered the Society of Jesus as a refugee. I was a member of the Swiss Province for 48 years, and have now been here for 5 years. I have lived in very different Churches. Today I see that many people want to go back or seek certainties in the past. Under communism I experienced pastoral creativity. Some even said that a Jesuit could not be formed during communism, but others disagreed and we are here. What vision of Church can we follow?"

You said something very important, which identifies the suffering of the Church at this moment: the temptation to go backward. We are suffering this today in the Church: the ideology of going backward. It is an ideology that colonizes minds. It is a form of ideological colonization. It is not really a universal problem, but rather specific to the churches of certain countries. Life scares us. I'll repeat something I said to the ecumenical group I met here before you: freedom scares us. In a world that is so conditioned by addictions and virtual experiences it frightens us to be free. In the previous meeting I took Dostoevsky's *The Great Inquisitor* as an example. He finds Jesus and says to him: "Why did you give us freedom? It is dangerous!" The inquisitor reproaches Jesus for having given us freedom: a bit of bread would have been enough and nothing more.

That is why today we look back to the past: to seek security. It frightens us to celebrate before the people of God who look us in the face and tell us the truth. It frightens us to go forward in pastoral experiences. I think of the work that was done – Father Spadaro was present – at the Synod on the Family to make it understood that couples in second unions are not already condemned to hell. It frightens us to accompany people with sexual diversity. We are afraid of the crossroads and paths that Paul VI spoke of. This is the evil of this moment, namely, to seek the path in rigidity and clericalism, which are two perversions.

Today I believe that the Lord is asking the Society to be free in the areas of prayer and discernment. It is a fascinating time, a beautiful moment, even if it is that of the cross: it is beautiful to bring forward the freedom of the Gospel. Freedom! You can experience this turning back to the past in your community, in your province, in the Society. It is necessary to be attentive and vigilant. My intention is not to praise imprudence, but I want to point out to you that turning back is not the right way. Instead, we should go forward in discernment and obedience.

A Jesuit asks how he sees the Society today. He speaks of a certain lack of fervor, of a willingness to seek security rather than to go to the crossroads, as Paul VI asked, because it is not easy.

No, it certainly isn't easy. But when you feel that fervor is lacking, you have to make a discernment to understand why. You have to talk about it with your brothers. Prayer helps us to understand if and when fervor is lacking. You have to talk about it to your brothers, to your superiors, and then you have to make a discernment to see if it is only your desolation or if it is a more communal desolation. The Exercises give us the possibility of finding answers to questions like this. I am convinced that we do not know the Exercises well enough. The annotations and the rules of discernment are a real treasure. We need to know them better.

One of those present recalls that the pope often speaks of diabolical

ideological colonizations. He refers, among others, to that of "gender."

Ideology always has a diabolical appeal, as you say, because it is not embodied. Right now we live in a civilization of ideologies, that's true. We need to expose them at their roots. The "gender" ideology of which you speak is dangerous, yes. As I understand it, it is so because it is abstract with respect to the concrete life of a person, as if a person could decide abstractly at will if and when to be a man or a woman. Abstraction is always a problem for me. This has nothing to do with the homosexual issue, though. If there is a homosexual couple, we can do pastoral work with them, move forward in our encounter with Christ. When I talk about ideology, I'm talking about the idea, the abstraction in which everything is possible, not about the concrete life of people and their real situation.

A Jesuit thanks the pope for his words dedicated to Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The dialogue goes on. It is imperative that there are no interruptions, that the dialogue does not break down, that it not be interrupted by misunderstandings, as sometimes happens.

One of the participants tells the pope about the situation of the Slovak Church and the internal tensions. "Some even see you as heterodox," he says, "while others idealize you. We Jesuits try to overcome this division." He asks: "How do you deal with people who look at you with suspicion?"

There is, for example, a large Catholic television channel that has no hesitation in continually speaking ill of the pope. I personally deserve attacks and insults because I am a sinner, but the Church does not deserve them. They are the work of the devil. I have also said this to some of them.

Yes, there are also clerics who make nasty comments about me. I sometimes lose patience, especially when they make judgments without

entering into a real dialogue. I can't do anything there. However, I go on without entering their world of ideas and fantasies. I don't want to enter it and that's why I prefer to preach, preach... Some people accuse me of not talking about holiness. They say I always talk about social issues and that I'm a communist. Yet I wrote an entire apostolic exhortation on holiness, *Gaudete et Exsultate*.

Now I hope that with the decision to stop the automatism of the ancient rite we can return to the true intentions of Benedict XVI and John Paul II. My decision is the result of a consultation with all the bishops of the world made last year. From now on those who want to celebrate with the *vetus ordo* must ask permission from as is done with biritualism. But there are young people who after a month of ordination go to the bishop to ask for it. This is a phenomenon that indicates that we are going backward.

A cardinal told me that two newly ordained priests came to him asking him for permission to study Latin so as to celebrate well. With a sense of humor he replied: "But there are many Hispanics in the diocese! Study Spanish to be able to preach. Then, when you have studied Spanish, come back to me and I'll tell you how many Vietnamese there are in the diocese, and I'll ask you to study Vietnamese. Then, when you have learned Vietnamese, I will give you permission to study Latin." So he made them "land," he made them return to earth. I go ahead, not because I want to start a revolution. I do what I feel I must do. It takes a lot of patience, prayer and a lot of charity.

A Jesuit talks about the widespread fear of refugees.

I believe that we must welcome migrants, but not only that: we must welcome, protect, promote and integrate. All four steps are needed to truly welcome. Each country must know how much it can do. Leaving migrants without integration is leaving them in misery; it is equivalent to not welcoming them. But we need to study the phenomenon well and understand its causes, especially the geopolitical ones. We need to

understand what is happening in the Mediterranean and what are the interests of the powers whose countries border that sea in terms of control and domination. And we must understand the reasons for migration and consequences.

Monsignor Datonou, the person responsible for organizing the trip, comes to tell the pope that it is time to go. Francis looks at his watch and is about to get up and say good-bye when a Jesuit says: "Holy Father, one last thing: St. Ignatius says that one must feel and taste things internally. Dinner is waiting for you. Taste something of the Slovak cuisine!" The pope laughs and says he would see what they had prepared for dinner.

Photographs follow. The group is large and therefore the Jesuits are divided by community and each community takes a photo with Francis. The meeting ends with a "Hail Mary" and the final blessing.

On September 14, there is a second, very brief meeting with the Jesuits in Prešov, immediately after the celebration of Mass. Francis, at the invitation of a Jesuit he met in the Nunciature in Bratislava, visits the staff of the house of Spiritual Exercises who could not attend the celebration because they were busy preparing for the arrival of the bishops. At the end, standing on the porch, Francis greets the Jesuits who make up the local community.

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