

LA CROIX

- ***In your speeches in Europe, you refer to the "roots" of the continent without ever describing them as Christian. Rather, you define "European identity" as "dynamic and multicultural." In your view, is the expression "Christian roots" inappropriate for Europe?***

Pope Francis: We need to speak of roots in the plural because there are so many. In this sense, when I hear talk of the Christian roots of Europe, I sometimes dread the tone, which can seem triumphalist or even vengeful. It then takes on colonialist overtones. John Paul II, however, spoke about it in a tranquil manner.

Yes, Europe has Christian roots and it is Christianity's responsibility to water those roots. But this must be done in a spirit of service as in the washing of the feet. Christianity's duty to Europe is one of service. As Erich Przywara, the great master of Romano Guardini and Hans Urs von Balthasar, teaches us, Christianity's contribution to a culture is that of Christ in the washing of the feet. In other words, service and the gift of life. It must not become a colonial enterprise.

– ***On April 16, you made a powerful gesture by bringing back the refugees from Lesbos to Rome. However, does Europe have the capacity to accept so many migrants?***

Pope Francis: That is a fair and responsible question because one cannot open the gates wide unreasonably. However, the deeper question is why there are so many migrants now. When I went to Lampedusa three years ago, this phenomenon had already started.

The initial problems are the wars in the Middle East and in Africa as well as the underdevelopment of the African continent, which causes hunger. If there are wars, it is because there exist arms manufacturers – which can be justified for defensive purposes – and above all arms traffickers. If there is so much unemployment, it is because of a lack of investment capable of providing employment, of which Africa has such a great need.

More generally, this raises the question of a world economic system that has descended into the idolatry of money. The great majority of humanity's wealth has fallen into the hands of a minority of the population.

A completely free market does not work. Markets in themselves are good but they also require a fulcrum, a third party, or a state to monitor and balance them. In other words, [what is needed is] a social market economy.

Coming back to the migrant issue, the worst form of welcome is to 'ghettoize' them. On the contrary, it's necessary to integrate them. In Brussels, the terrorists were Belgians, children of migrants, but they grew up in a ghetto. In London, the new mayor (Editor: Sadiq Khan, the son of Muslim Pakistanis) took his oath of office in a cathedral and will undoubtedly meet the queen. This illustrates the need for Europe to rediscover its capacity to integrate.

I am thinking here of Pope Gregory the Great (Editor: Pope from 590 – 604), who negotiated with the people known as barbarians, who were subsequently integrated. This integration is all the more necessary today since, as a result of a selfish search for well-being, Europe is experiencing the grave problem of a declining birth rate. A demographic emptiness is developing. In France, at least, this trend is less marked because of family-oriented policies.

– ***The fear of accepting migrants is partly based on a fear of Islam. In your view, is the fear that this religion sparks in Europe justified?***

Pope Francis: Today, I don't think that there is a fear of Islam as such but of ISIS and its war of conquest, which is partly drawn from Islam. It is true that the idea of conquest is inherent in the soul of Islam. However, it is also possible to interpret the objective in Matthew's Gospel, where

Jesus sends his disciples to all nations, in terms of the same idea of conquest.

In the face of Islamic terrorism, it would therefore be better to question ourselves about the way in an overly Western model of democracy has been exported to countries such as Iraq, where a strong government previously existed. Or in Libya, where a tribal structure exists. We cannot advance without taking these cultures into account. As a Libyan said recently, “We used to have one Gaddafi, now we have fifty.”

Ultimately, co-existence between Christians and Muslims is still possible. I come from a country where they co-habit on good terms. Muslims come to venerate the Virgin Mary and St George. Similarly, they tell me that for the Jubilee Year Muslims in one African country formed a long queue at the cathedral to enter through the holy door and pray to the Virgin Mary. In Central Africa, before the war, Christians and Muslims used to live together and must learn to do so again. Lebanon also shows that this is possible.

– ***The significance of Islam in France today, like the nation’s Christian historical foundation, raises recurring questions concerning the place of religion in the public arena. How would you characterize a positive form of laicity (Editor: ‘laicity’ refers to the French system of separation of Church and state)?***

Pope Francis: States must be secular. Confessional states end badly. That goes against the grain of History. I believe that a version of laicity accompanied by a solid law guaranteeing religious freedom offers a framework for going forward. We are all equal as sons (and daughters) of God and with our personal dignity. However, everyone must have the freedom to externalize his or her own faith. If a Muslim woman wishes to wear a veil, she must be able to do so. Similarly, if a Catholic wishes to wear a cross. People must be free to profess their faith at the heart of their own culture not merely at its margins.

The modest critique that I would address to France in this regard is that it exaggerates laicity. This arises from a way of considering religions as sub-cultures rather than as fully-fledged cultures in their own right. I fear that this approach, which is understandable as part of the heritage of the Enlightenment, continues to exist. France needs to take a step forward on this issue in order to accept that openness to transcendence is a right for everyone.

– ***In a secular setting, how should Catholics defend their concerns on societal issues such as euthanasia or same-sex marriage?***

Pope Francis: It is up to Parliament to discuss, argue, explain, reason [these issues]. That is how a society grows.

However, once a law has been adopted, the state must also respect [people's] consciences. The right to conscientious objection must be recognized within each legal structure because it is a human right. Including for a government official, who is a human person. The state must also take criticism into account. That would be a genuine form of laicity.

You cannot sweep aside the arguments of Catholics by simply telling them that they "speak like a priest." No, they base themselves on the kind of Christian thinking that France has so remarkably developed.

– ***What does France mean to you?***

Pope Francis: It is the eldest daughter of the Church, but not the most faithful! (Laughs) However, during the 1950s, they also spoke of "France, the mission country." In that sense, it remains a periphery to be evangelized. However, to be fair to France, the Church there does have a real creative capacity.

France is also a land of great saints, great thinkers such as [Jean] Guitton, [Maurice] Blondel, [Emmanuel] Levinas, who was not Catholic, and [Jacques] Maritain. I am also thinking of the depth of its literature.

I also appreciate how French culture is impregnated with Jesuit spirituality compared to the more ascetic Spanish current. The French current, which began with Pierre Favre, gave it another flavor, while continuing to emphasize discernment of spirits.

There have also been great French spiritual figures such as (Louis) Lallemant, or (Jean-Pierre) de Caussade. And the great French theologians who helped the Society of Jesus so much, namely Henri de Lubac and Michel de Certeau. I really like the last two. Two Jesuits who are creative.

Overall, that's what fascinates me about France. On one hand, that exaggerated laicity, the heritage of the French Revolution, and on the other hand, so many great saints.

– ***Who is your favorite?***

Pope Francis: Saint Therese of Lisieux.

– ***You have promised to come to France. When might such a trip be possible?***

Pope Francis: I recently received an invitation from President François Hollande. The episcopal conference has also invited me. But I don't know when the trip will take place because next year is an election year in France, and in general, the policy of the Holy See is not to organize such trips during these periods.

Last year a few hypotheses emerged regarding such a trip, including a visit to Paris and its suburbs, to Lourdes and to a city that no pope has yet visited, such as Marseille, which represents an open door to the world.

– ***As elsewhere, the Church in France is experiencing a serious crisis of priestly vocations. How is it possible to manage today with so few priests?***

Pope Francis: Korea provides a historical example. That country was evangelized by missionaries from China who later left. Then, for two hundred years, Korea was evangelized by lay people. It is a land of saints and martyrs that now has a strong Church.

So there is not necessarily a need for priests in order to evangelize. Baptism provides the strength to evangelize. And the Holy Spirit, received at baptism, prompts one to go out, to take the Christian message with courage and patience. The Holy Spirit is the protagonist of whatever happens in the Church, its motor. Too many Christians are ignorant of this.

On the other hand, the opposite danger for the Church is clericalism. This is a sin committed by two parties, like the tango! The priest wants to clericalize lay people and lay people request to be clericalized because it's easier.

In Buenos Aires, I knew many good priests who, whenever they saw a capable lay person, immediately exclaimed "let's make him a deacon!" No, let him remain a lay person.

Clericalism is particularly significant in Latin America. If popular piety is strong, it is precisely because it is the only lay initiative that has not been clericalized. This is not understood by the clergy.

– ***The Church in France, particularly in Lyon, has been shattered recently by historical pedophilia scandals. What should be done about this situation?***

Pope Francis: It is true that it is not easy to judge the facts decades later in a different context. Reality is not always so clear. Nevertheless, there can be no statute of limitations for the Church in this field. As a result of these abuses, a priest, whose vocation is to lead a child to God, destroys him. He disseminates evil, resentment, distress. As Benedict XVI said, there must be zero tolerance.

Based on the information that I have, I believe that Cardinal Barbarin in Lyon took the necessary measures and that he has matters under control. He is courageous, creative, a missionary. We now need to await the outcome of the civil judicial proceedings (Editor: As opposed to canon law proceedings).

– ***So Cardinal Barbarin does not need to resign?***

Pope Francis: No, that would be a contradiction, imprudent. We will see after the conclusion of the case. At the moment, however, that would amount to an admission of guilt.

– ***On April 1, you received Bishop Bernard Fellay, superior-general of the Priestly Fraternity of St Pius X. Is the re-integration of the Lefebvrists into the Church again under consideration?***

Pope Francis: In Buenos Aires, I often spoke with them. They greeted me, asked me on their knees for a blessing. They say they are Catholic. They love the Church.

Bishop Fellay is a man with whom one can dialogue. That is not the case for other elements who are a little strange, such as Bishop Williamson or others who have been radicalized. Leaving this aside, I believe, as I said in Argentina, that they are Catholics on the way to full communion.

During this year of mercy, I felt that I needed to authorize their confessors to pardon the sin of abortion. They thanked me for this gesture. Previously, Benedict XVI, whom they greatly respect, had liberalized the use of the Tridentine rite mass. So good dialogue and good work are taking place.

– ***Would you be ready to grant them the status of a personal prelature?***

Pope Francis: That would be a possible solution but beforehand it will be necessary to establish a fundamental agreement with them. The Second Vatican Council has its value. We will advance slowly and patiently.

– ***You have already convoked two synods on the family. In your view, has this long process changed the Church?***

Pope Francis: This process was started by the consistory (Editor: The consistory of February 2014) where it was introduced by Cardinal Kasper, prior to an Extraordinary Synod in October the same year which was followed by a year of reflection and an Ordinary Synod.

I think that we all came out of the various processes different from the way that we entered. Including me.

In the post-synodal exhortation (Editor: Amoris Laetitia, April 2016), I sought to respect the Synod to the maximum. You won't find canonical prescriptions there about what one may or may not do.

It is a serene, peaceful reflection on the beauty of love, how to educate the children, to prepare for marriage… It emphasizes responsibilities that could be developed by the Pontifical Council for the Laity in the form of guidelines.

Beyond this process, we need to think about genuine synodality, or at least the meaning of Catholic synodality. The bishops are cum Petro, sub Petro (Editor: with Peter and under Peter). This differs from Orthodox synodality or that of the Greek Catholic Churches, where the Patriarch only counts as a single voice.

The Second Vatican Council set out an ideal of synodal and episcopal communion. This still needs to be developed, including at parish level, with respect to what is required. There are parishes that still do not have a pastoral council, nor a council for economic affairs, even though these are obligations under canon law. Synodality is also relevant at this level.

Interviewed by Guillaume Goubert and Sébastien Maillard (in Rome)

Photo: L'Osservatore Romano