

# LETTER TO NON-BELIEVERS

## Pope Francis Responds to Journalist Eugenio Scalfari

*la Repubblica*, September 11, 2013

*Dear Dr. Scalfari,*

I wish to respond, even if only in a general way, to your letter published in *La Repubblica* on 7 July last, in which you offered your personal reflections, further expounded upon in the 7 August edition. First of all, I thank you for your careful reading of the Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, which was conceived and in large measure prepared by my beloved predecessor, Benedict XVI. With gratitude I inherited this work, which seeks not only to confirm in faith those who already believe in Jesus Christ, but also to bring about a sincere and comprehensive dialogue with those who, like you, define themselves as “a non-believer who for many years has been interested in and fascinated by the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth”.

Therefore, it seems very positive, both for us and for the society in which we live, to pause and discuss a reality as significant as faith, which points us to the teachings and person of Jesus. I think that there are two circumstances, in

particular, which make this dialogue necessary and valuable today. As is known, one of the principle objectives of the Second Vatican Council was this dialogue, as desired by Blessed John XXIII and successive Popes, each adding his own insight and contribution, walking the path marked out by the Council.

The first circumstance – recalled at the beginning of the Encyclical – derives from the fact that, throughout the centuries of modernity, a paradox was witnessed: the Christian faith, whose newness and influence on humanity were expressed by the symbol of light, has been often characterized as the darkness of superstition in opposition to the light of reason. Thus, between the Church and Christian inspired culture on the one hand, and modern culture shaped by the Enlightenment on the other, a point was reached where there was no longer any dialogue. The time has now finally come, ushered in by the Second Vatican Council, for a dialogue that is open and free of preconceptions, and which reopens the doors to a responsible and fruitful encounter.

The second circumstance, for one who wants to faithfully follow Jesus, derives from the fact that such a dialogue is not superfluous to the life of the believer, but rather is its profound and indispensable expression. In this context, allow me to refer to a quotation from the Encyclical, which I believe to be very important because it emphasizes the fact that the truth, with the witness of faith, is love: “clearly, then, faith is not intransigent, but grows in respectful coexistence with others. One who believes may not be presumptuous; on the contrary, truth leads to humility, since believers know that, rather than ourselves possessing truth, it is truth which embraces and possesses us. Far from making us inflexible, the security of faith sets us on a journey; it enables witness and dialogue with all” (n. 34). This is the spirit in which I am writing to you.

For me, faith was born of an encounter with Jesus. It was a personal encounter that touched my heart and gave new direction and meaning to my life. At the same time, it was an encounter made possible by the community of faith in which I lived and thanks to which I gained access to understanding Sacred Scripture, to new life in Christ through the Sacraments, to fraternity with all and service to the poor, who are the true image of the Lord. Without the Church – believe me – I would not have been able to encounter Jesus, even with the awareness that the immense gift of faith is kept in the fragile clay jars of our humanity.

From this personal experience of faith lived in the Church, I find myself able to listen to your questions and, with you, to seek the paths along which we may walk together.

Please forgive me if I do not address your arguments step by step as proposed in the 7 July issue. I think it would be more helpful – and it seems to me more appealing – to go to the heart of your thoughts; neither will I follow the methodology of the Encyclical, in which you note the absence of a section dedicated specifically to the historical experience of Jesus of Nazareth.

I would like to state from the outset that such an analysis is not of secondary importance.

Following the logic of the Encyclical, it is important to dwell on the meaning of what Jesus said and ultimately, who Jesus was and is for us. The letters of Saint Paul and the Gospel of Saint John, which are referred to especially in the Encyclical, are founded in fact upon the messianic ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, which reaches its culmination in the Pasch of his death and resurrection.

It is necessary, therefore, to look at Jesus from the point of view of the actual circumstances of his existence, as narrated by the oldest of the Gospels, Saint Mark. There, the “scandal” in others, provoked by the words and actions of Jesus, stems from his extraordinary “authority”. This word, present already in the Gospel of Saint Mark, is not easy to translate accurately in Italian. The Greek word is “*exousia*”, which etymologically refers to that which “comes from being”, from whom one is. It is not something external or imposed, but rather that which comes from within and is self-evident. Jesus, in fact, impacts us, shocks us, and renews us, and this comes, as he himself says, from his relationship with God, whom he refers to intimately as “Abba”, the Father, who confers this “authority” upon him so that he may offer it for humanity’s sake.

In this way, Jesus preaches “as one who has authority”; he heals, he calls the disciples to follow him, he forgives, all of which are realities that in the Old Testament come only from God. The question which arises repeatedly in the Gospel of Mark, “who is this that...?”, concerning the identity of Jesus, arises from the recognition of an authority that is not of this world, one which is not intended to impose itself on others but rather is directed to the service of others, to give them freedom and fullness of life. And this he did even to the extent of risking his own life, of experiencing incomprehension, betrayal, rejection, to the point of being condemned to death, to the point of plummeting into the depths of abandonment on the Cross. Yet Jesus remained faithful to God, to the end.

It is precisely at this moment – as the Roman Centurion exclaims at the foot of the Cross in Saint Mark’s Gospel – that Jesus reveals himself,

paradoxically, as the Son of God, the Son of a God who is love and who desires, with his whole being, that all men and women discover themselves and live as his true children. For the Christian faith, this is confirmed by the fact that Jesus is risen; not to bring the weight of his triumph to bear on those who have rejected him, but to show that the love of God is stronger than death, that the forgiveness of God is stronger than any sin and that it is worth giving one's life to the end in order to bear witness to this immense gift.

The Christian faith professes that Jesus is the Son of God who came to give his life to open the way of love to all people. Thus you are correct, Dr. Scalfari, when you recognize that the Christian faith hinges on the incarnation of the Son of God. Tertullian wrote "*caro cardo salutis*", the flesh (of Christ) is the fulcrum of salvation. Because the incarnation, the Son of God coming in our flesh and sharing the joys and sorrows, the successes and failures of our life, even to crying out on the Cross, experiencing all things with love and fidelity to Abba, testifies to the astonishing love of God for all people, and to the inestimable worth that he sees in them. On account of this, each one of us is called to make Christ's gaze and love his own, and to enter into his way of being, of thinking and of acting.

This is what faith is, with all its expressions as they are accurately employed in the Encyclical. Returning to the editorial of 7 July, you ask me furthermore how to understand the unique identity of the Christian faith in as much as it centres on the incarnation of the Son of God, with respect to other faiths which rest on the absolute transcendence of God.

The uniqueness lies, I would say, in the fact that the faith makes us share, through Jesus, in the relationship he has with God who is Abba, and from this perspective, in the relationship of love which he has with all men and women, enemies included. In other words, the sonship of Jesus, as presented by the Christian faith, is not revealed so as to emphasize an insurmountable separation between Jesus and everyone else; rather, it is

revealed to tell us that in him, we are all called to be children in the one Father and so brothers and sisters to one another.

The uniqueness of Jesus has to do with communication, not exclusion. Of course, what follows from this – and it is no small thing – is the distinction between the religious sphere and the political sphere which is enshrined in "rendering to God the things that are God's, and to Caesar the things that are Caesar's", declared clearly by Jesus and on which the history of the West, not without struggle, has been built. While the Church is called to introduce the leaven and be the salt of the Gospel, that is, the love and mercy of God which reach all men and women, and which point to the heavenly and definitive goal of our destiny, it falls to civil society and political society to articulate and build a life which is more humane, through justice, solidarity, law and peace. For those who live their Christian faith, this does not mean either fleeing from the world or seeking dominance, but rather it denotes service to the person as a whole and to all peoples, starting with those living on the margins, all the while keeping alive the sense of hope that compels us to work for the good of all, looking to the future.

You also asked me, at the end of your first article, what should be said to the Jewish brethren concerning the promise that God made to them: is that an empty promise? This question, believe me, is a radical one for us Christians because with the help of God, especially in the light of the Second Vatican Council, we have rediscovered that the Jewish people remain for us the holy root from which Jesus was born. I too have cultivated many friendships through the years with my Jewish brothers in Argentina and often while in prayer, as my mind turned to the terrible experience of the Shoah, I looked to God. What I can tell you, with Saint Paul, is that God has never neglected his faithfulness to the covenant with Israel, and that, through the awful trials of these last centuries, the Jews have preserved their faith in God. And for this, we, the Church and the whole human family, can never be sufficiently grateful to them. Moreover,

persevering with faith in the God of the Covenant, they remind everyone, including us Christians, that we wait unceasingly as pilgrims for the return of the Lord, and that therefore we should be open to him and not remain entrenched in our achievements.

I now wish to address the three questions from your article of 7 August. I believe that in the first two questions, what interests you is to understand the attitude of the Church towards those who do not share faith in Jesus. Above all, you ask if the God of Christians forgives those who do not believe and who do not seek faith. Given the premise, and this is fundamental, that the mercy of God is limitless for those who turn to him with a sincere and contrite heart, the issue for the unbeliever lies in obeying his or her conscience. There is sin, even for those who have no faith, when conscience is not followed. Listening to and obeying conscience means deciding in the face of what is understood to be good or evil. It is on the basis of this choice that the goodness or evil of our actions is determined.

Secondly, you ask me whether it is erroneous or a sin to follow the line of thought which holds that there is no absolute, and therefore no absolute truth, but only a series of relative and subjective truths. To begin with, I would not speak about “absolute” truths, even for believers, in the sense that absolute is that which is disconnected and bereft of all relationship. Truth, according to the Christian faith, is the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, truth is a relationship. As such each one of us receives the truth and expresses it from within, that is to say, according to one’s own circumstances, culture and situation in life, etc. This does not mean that truth is variable and subjective, quite the contrary. But it does signify that it comes to us always and only as a way and a life. Did not Jesus himself say: “I am the way, the truth, and the life?” In other words, truth, being completely one with love, demands humility and an openness to be sought, received and expressed.

Therefore, we must have a correct understanding of the terms and, perhaps, in order to overcome

being bogged down by conflicting absolute positions; we need to redefine the issues in depth. I believe this is absolutely necessary in order to initiate that peaceful and constructive dialogue which I proposed at the beginning of my letter. In your final question, you ask me if, when man disappears from the earth, will the capacity to contemplate God disappear? Undoubtedly, the greatness of the human person resides in the ability to reflect on God, that is to say, to be able to live in a conscious and responsible relationship with him. But this relationship is between two realities. God – and this is my thinking and experience, shared by many from past and present! – is not an idea even if a lofty one, the fruit of human thought; God is a reality with a capital “R”. Jesus reveals to us that this reality is a Father of infinite goodness and mercy, in relation with whom, he lives. Furthermore, when earthly human existence ends – and for the Christian faith, at any rate, this world as we know it is destined to pass – men and women will not cease to exist and, in a way that we do not understand, this is also true of the universe created with them. Scripture speaks of a “new heaven and a new earth” and states that at the end, God will be “all in all”, in a time and in a manner that lie beyond us, but towards which we progress in faith with expectation and desire.

Dear Dr. Scalfari, I conclude my reflections, which are a response to your thoughts and questions. Please receive them as a preliminary reply, but one which is sincere and full of hope, along with the invitation to walk this path together. The Church, despite all of the sluggishness, infidelities, errors and sins that are committed and are still being committed by her members, has no other meaning or purpose than to live and witness to Jesus: he who has been sent by Abba, “to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19).

*With fraternal good wishes,*  
Francis