

Pope Francis' March 31 interview with Belgian youth

By Alan Holdren and Kerri Lenartowick

Vatican City, Apr 7, 2014 / 04:29 am (CNA).- Pope Francis recently gave an interview at the Vatican to some youth from Flanders, Belgium, accompanied by the Bishop of Ghent, Luc Van Looy. The Holy See Press office has released the text of the March 31 interview in Italian. The young people posed their questions in English and the Pope responded in Italian.

Below is Catholic News Agency's translation, done by the agency's Alan Holdren and Kerri Lenartowick.

They are part of a group of young people that began during World Youth Day in Rio, because in Rio they wished to communicate also to the other young Flemish what they had done there; and they are a group of 12 - the others are here outside, by the way - they also came with...

Well I would like to say hello to them, the others, afterwards, yes!

Well we can organize that ... And they are truly carrying out this task of entering, penetrating into media as young people, starting with their Christian inspiration. It is also in that sense that they would like to pose some questions to you. She, on the other hand, is not a believer - they are thus four from that group - she is not a believer, but it seemed important to us also, because we are a very secular society in Flanders, and we know that we have a message for everyone. So, she was very happy...

I like it! We are all brothers and sisters!

Truly, indeed. The first question is: Thank you for having accepted our request, but why did you do so?

When I hear that a young man or woman is restless, I feel that it is my duty to serve these young people, to give a service to this restlessness, because this restlessness is like a seed, and later it will go on and give fruit. And, in this moment I feel that with you I am doing a service to that which is most precious, in this moment, which is your restlessness.

(Boy) Everyone in the world seeks to be happy. But we asked ourselves, are you happy? And, why?

Absolutely, absolutely, I am happy. I'm happy because ... I don't know why ... maybe because I have a job, I am not unemployed, I have work, a job as a shepherd! I am happy because I found my path in life and walking this path makes me happy. And it is also a serene happiness, because at this age it is not the same happiness as that of a young person, there is a difference. A certain interior peace, a great peace, a happiness that also comes with age. And also with a journey that has always had problems, even now there are problems, but this happiness doesn't go away with the problems, no. It sees the problems, it suffers them

and then moves on. It does something to resolve them and moves ahead. But in the depths of the heart, there is this peace and this happiness. It is a grace of God, for me, truly. It is a grace. I don't deserve it at all.

(Boy) You have shown your great love of the poor and the wounded in many ways. Why is this so important for you?

Because this is the heart of the Gospel. I am a believer. I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

And, the core of the Gospel is the proclamation to the poor. When you read the Beatitudes, for example, or you read Matthew 25, you see there how Jesus is clear in this. The core of the Gospel is this. And Jesus says of himself, "I came to announce to the poor, freedom, health, the grace of God..." To the poor. Those who need salvation, that need to be welcomed in society. Then, if you read the Gospel, you see that Jesus had a certain preference for the marginalized. The lepers, the widows, orphaned children, the blind... marginalized people. And also the great sinners... and this is my consolation! Yes, because He is not even scared of sin! When he came across a person like Zaccheus, who was a thief, or like Matthew, who was a traitor to his heritage (*patria*) for money, He was not afraid! He looked at them and he chose them. Also this is a poverty: the poverty of sin. For me, the heart of the Gospel is of the poor. I heard two months ago that someone said, for this reason (he is) speaking of the poor,



Pope Francis rides through St. Peter's Square after Mass on April 28, 2013. Credit: Stephen Driscoll / CNA.

because of this preference: "This Pope is a communist." No! This is a banner of the Gospel, not of Communism: of the Gospel! But poverty without ideology, poverty... And for this reason I believe that the poor are at the center of the proclamation of Jesus. It's enough just to read it. The problem is that then this attitude toward the poor sometimes, in history, has been ideologized. No, it is not like that: ideology is another thing. It is like this in the Gospel: it is simple, very simple. Also in the Old Testament, you see this. And it's for this reason that I always place it at the center.

(Girl) I don't believe in God, but your actions and your ideals inspire me. Perhaps you have a message for all of us, for the young Christians, for people who don't believe or have other beliefs or believe in a different way?

For me, one must seek, in a way of speaking, authenticity. And for me, authenticity is this: I am speaking with my brothers. We are all brothers. Believers, non-believers, or those of one religious confession or another, Jews, Muslims... we are all brothers. Man is at the center of history, and this for me is very important: man is at the center. In this moment of history, man has been thrown out of the center, he has slipped out towards the periphery, and at the center - at least at this point - is power, money. And we must work for people, for man and woman, who are the image of God. Why young people? Because the young - I go back to what I said at the beginning - are the seed that will bear fruit along the path. But also in relation to that which I was saying now: in this world, where at the center is power, money, young people are chased away. Children are chased away - we don't want kids, we want fewer of them, small families. Children aren't wanted. The elderly are chased away. So many elderly die by way of a hidden euthanasia, because they are not cared for and they die. And now young people are chased away. Think that in Italy, for example, youth unemployment from 25 years or younger is almost 50 percent. In Spain, it is 60 percent. And, in Andalusia, in the south of Spain, it is nearly 70 percent... I don't know what the unemployment rate in Belgium might be...

... a bit less: 5-10 percent.

That's small. It is small, thanks be to God. But you think about what a generation of young people who don't have work means! You can say to me, "But they can eat, because their society feeds them." Yes, but this is not sufficient, because they don't have the experience of the dignity of bringing bread home. And this is the moment of the "passion of the youth." We have entered into a culture of waste. That which does not serve this globalization is discarded. The elderly, children, young people. But in this way one discards the future of a people, because in the children and youth and elderly is the future of a people.

The children and the young people, because they will carry history forward: the elderly are those who must give us the memory of a people, how the path of a people has gone. If they are discarded, we will have a group of people without strength, because they will not have many young people and children, and (they will be) without memory. And, this is very grave! And, for this I believe that we must help young people so that they might have the role in society that in this difficult historical moment is needed.

But do you have a specific, very concrete message for us, so that we - perhaps - might inspire other people as you do? Even people who don't believe?

You've said a very important word: "concrete." It is an extremely important word, because in the concreteness of life you move forward. With ideas alone, you don't move forward! This is very important. And, I believe that you young people must move forward with this concreteness in life. Often also with actions tied to situations, because you must take this, this... but also with strategies... I will tell you something. I have spoken, for my work, also in Buenos Aires, with so many young politicians who came by to say hello to me. And I am happy because they - whether from the left or the right - they spoke a new music, a new style of politics. And, this gives me hope. And, I believe that youth, in this moment, must take the tempo and move ahead. Be courageous! This gives me hope. I don't know if I responded: concreteness in actions.

(Boy) When I read the newspapers, when I look around, I ask myself if the human race is truly capable of taking care of this world and of the human race itself. Do you share my doubt? (Translator) ... We discard, as you said. Do you also feel sometimes, like doubting and saying to yourself, "But, where is God in all of this?"

I ask myself two questions about this question: Where is God and where is man? It's the first question that, in the Gospel account God poses to man, "Adam, where are you?" It is the first question to man. And, also I ask myself now, "You, man of the 21st century, where are you?" And, this makes me think of another question, "You, God, where are you?" When man finds himself, he seeks God. Maybe he is unable to find him, but walks on a path of honesty, seeking truth, on a path of goodness and a path of beauty. For me, a young person who loves truth and seeks it, love goodness and is good, is a good person, and seeks and loves beauty, is on the good path and will surely find God! Sooner or later, he will find him! But the path is long and some people do not find it, in life. They don't find it in a conscious way. But they are so true and honest with themselves, so good and so loving of beauty that in the end they have a very mature personality, capable of an encounter with God, which is always a grace. Because the encounter with God is a grace. We cannot make the path... Some find it in other persons... It is a path to take up...

Everyone must find it personally. God is not found by being heard of (from a distance) nor can you pay to find God. It is a personal path. We must find him this way. I don't know if I have responded to your question...

We are all human and we make errors. What have your errors taught you?

I have erred, erred... In the Bible, it says, in the Book of Wisdom, that the most just man errs seven times a day! ... That is to say that everyone errs... They say that man is the only animal that falls twice in the same place, but he doesn't learn immediately from his errors. One can say, "I don't err," but he doesn't improve. This takes you to vanity, arrogance, pride... I think that the errors also in my life have been and are great teachers of life. Great teachers: they teach you so much. They humiliate you also because you can think yourself to be a superman, a superwoman, and then you make a mistake, and this humiliates you and puts you in your place. I wouldn't say that from all of my mistakes I have learned. No, I believe that from some I haven't learned because I am stubborn, and it isn't easy to learn. But from so many errors I have learned, and this has done me good. It has done me good. And also recognizing errors is important. I erred here, I erred there, I err there... And also being attentive not to return to the same error, to the same water-well... It is a good thing, the dialogue with our own errors, because they teach us. And the important thing is that they help you to become a bit more humble, humility does so much good, so much good to people, to us, it does us good. I don't know if this was the answer...

(Translator) Do you have a concrete example of how you learned from an error? She (the girl who asked the question) ventures...

No, I will tell you. I wrote it in a book, it is public. For example, in guiding the life of the Church. I was appointed superior very young, and I made so many errors with authoritarianism, for example. I was too authoritarian, at 36 years old... And then I learned that one must dialogue, you must listen to what the others think... But you don't learn once and for all, no. It is a long road. This is a concrete example. And, I learned from my slightly authoritarian attitude, as a religious superior, to find a path to not be so much like that, or to be more... but I still err! Is she happy?... Does she want to venture to say something else?

(Girl) I see God in others. Where do you see God?

I seek - seek! - to find him in all of life's circumstances. I seek... I find him in the reading of the Bible, I find him in the celebration of the Sacraments, in prayer and also in my work I seek to find him, in the people, in different people... Most of all, I find him in the sick. The sick do me good, because I ask myself, when I am with a sick person, why this one yes and me no? And with those in prison I

find him. Why is this person incarcerated and not me? And I speak with God, "You always make injustices, why to this person and not to me?" And, I find God in this, but always in dialogue. It does me good to look for him during the entire day. I am unable to do it, but I try to do this, to be in dialogue. I am not able to do it precisely like that. The saints did this well, I still don't ... but I am on the path.

(Girl) Since I don't believe in God, I am unable to understand how you pray or why you pray. Can you explain how you pray, in your role as Pontiff, and why you pray? The most concrete way possible...

How I pray... Often I take the Bible, I read it a bit, then I leave it and I let myself be looked at by the Lord. That is the most common idea in my prayer. I allow myself to be looked at by Him. And I feel - but it isn't sentimentalism - I feel deeply the things that the Lord tells me. Sometimes he doesn't speak... nothing, empty, empty, empty... but patiently I am there, and I pray this way... I am seated, I pray seated, because it hurts me to kneel, and sometimes I fall asleep in prayer... It is also a way of praying, as a son with the Father, and this is important. I feel like a son with the Father. And why do I pray? "Why" as a cause or for whom do I pray?

Both...

I pray, because I need to. This I feel, which pushes me, as if God called me to speak. The first thing. And I pray for people, when I meet people that strike me because they are sick or have problems, or there are problems that... for example, war... Today I was with the Nuncio of Syria, and he showed me photographs... and I'm sure that this afternoon I will pray for this, for those people... I was shown photographs of those who have died of hunger, their bones were like this... at this time, I cannot understand this, when we have (everything) necessary to feed the entire world, that there are people dying of hunger- for me it's terrible! And this makes me pray, precisely for these people.

I have my fears. What are you afraid of?

Of myself! Fear... Look, in the Gospel, Jesus repeats often, "Do not be afraid! Do not be afraid!" So many time he says it. And, why? Because he knows that fear is a, I would say, normal thing. We are fearful of life, we are afraid before the challenges, we are afraid before God... All of us are afraid, everyone. You should not be worried about being afraid. You must feel this but not be afraid and then think, "Why am I scared?" And, before God and before yourself, seek to clarify the situation or ask help of another. Fear is not a good counselor, because it gives you bad advice. It pushes you onto a path that is not right. For this reason, Jesus said so often, "Do not be afraid! Do not be afraid!" Then, we must know ourselves, all of us. Everyone must

know himself and seek where the zone is in which we may err the most, and have a bit of fear of that area, because there is bad fear and good fear. Good fear is like prudence. It is a prudent attitude. "Look, you are weak in this, this and this, be prudent and don't fall." Bad fear is that which you say and which nullifies you a bit, erases you. It nullifies you, it doesn't allow you to do something. This is bad and it must be thrown out.

***(Translator)* She (the girl) has posed this question because sometimes it is not easy in Belgium, for example, to speak of one's own faith. This was for her also a way, because so many don't believe, and she said, "I want to pose this question because I also want to have the strength to bear witness."**

There it is, now I understand the root of the question. Bearing witness with simplicity. Because if you go with your faith as a flag, like the crusades, and you go out and proselytize, that doesn't work. The best way is testimony, but humble, "I am like this," with humility, without triumphalism. That is another sin of ours, another bad attitude, triumphalism. Jesus was not triumphalist and also history teaches us not to be triumphalist, because the great triumphalists were defeated. Testimony: this is a key, this question. I give it with humility, without proselytizing. I

offer it. It is so. And this is not scary. You are not going on the crusades.

***(Translator)* There is a final question...**

The last one? It is the terrible one, the last one, always...

Our last question, do you have a question for us?

The question I want to ask you is not original. I take it from the Gospel. But I think that after hearing it, maybe it will be the right one for you in the this moment. Where is your treasure? This is the question. Where does your heart rest? On what treasure does your heart rest? Because there where your treasure is will be your life. The heart is attached to the treasure, to a treasure that all of us have: power, money, pride, so many... or goodness, beauty, the will to do good... There can be so many treasures. Where is your treasure? This is the question I would like to ask you, but you will have to give the response yourselves, alone! At your home...

They will let you know by letter...

Have them give it to the bishop... Thanks! Thank you, thanks! And pray for me.