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In latest sensation, Francis writes nonbeliever to urge dialogue

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 11, 2013 The Francis Chronicles

Although the big Vatican story in the English-speaking media today is based on comments by Archbishop Pietro Parolin [1], the new Secretary of State, on celibacy and democracy, attention in Italy is focused instead on the latest sensation from Pope Francis himself: a personal letter to a renowned journalist and nonbeliever, splashed across the front page of *La Repubblica*, the country's most widely read daily.

In the letter, Francis makes three points that have all been said before, including by popes, but rarely with such clarity or in this kind of venue:

- God has never abandoned the covenant with the Jewish people, and the church "can never be grateful enough" to the Jews for preserving their faith despite the horrors of history, especially the *Shoah*, the Hebrew word for the Holocaust.
- God's mercy "does not have limits" and therefore it reaches nonbelievers, too, for whom sin would not be the lack of faith in God, but rather, failure to obey one's conscience.
- Truth is not "variable or subjective," but Francis says he avoids calling it "absolute" -- truth possesses us, he said, not the other way around, and it's always expressed according to someone's "history and culture, the situation in which they live, etc."

Popes have engaged in exchanges with journalists before, including John Paul II's interview book with Vittorio Messori, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, in 1994, and Benedict XVI's conversation with Peter Seewald that became 2010's *Light of the World*.

This is apparently the first time, however, that a pope has personally responded to questions put to him in two newspaper editorials. Eugenio Scalfari, one of the founders of *La Repubblica*, penned the essays in early July and again in early August, musing about questions he'd like to ask Pope Francis if he ever had the chance.

Scalfari's point of departure was the recent encyclical *Lumen fidei*, which said that "to the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find," nonbelievers "are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith."

Scalfari is a well-known figure on the Italian left, active at different points in his career in both the Socialist and Radical parties. He's also publicly declared himself to be an atheist nonbeliever and has often been critical of the church's role in Italian politics.

In his response to Scalfari, Francis wrote that he believes dialogue between the church and non-believers is important for two reasons.

The first, the pope wrote, is the historical breach between the church and the culture inspired by the Enlightenment.

"The time has come, and Vatican II inaugurated this season, for an open dialogue, without preconceptions,

which reopens the doors for a serious and fruitful encounter," Francis writes.

Second, Francis says, from the point of view of the believer, dialogue with others is not a "secondary accessory" but rather something "intimate and indispensable."

One parallel for the exchange between Francis and Scalfari cited in Italian commentary is the celebrated correspondence between Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan, who died in August 2012, and Italian novelist Umberto Eco, author of *The Name of the Rose*, who, like Scalfari, is a nonbeliever. The letters between Martini and Eco were published in Italy in 1996 and in English in 2000.

In his own essay in *La Repubblica* today, Scalfari thanked Francis for the response and promised to publish reflections tomorrow on the substance of what the pope had to say. So far, the text of Francis' lengthy letter is available only in Italian.

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