

Pope Francis: 'Jesus was popular and look how that turned out'

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(RNS) In two wide-ranging new interviews, the pontiff discusses matters both weighty and personal, such as: the perils of his popularity, his plans to welcome divorced and remarried Catholics, and his fear that the church has locked Jesus up like a prisoner.

Speaking on Sunday (September 13) to the Argentine radio station, FM Milenium, Francis lamented those who posed as his friends to exploit him, and decried religious fundamentalism.

And speaking to Portugal's Radio Renascenca in an interview that aired on Monday, Francis put his own popularity into perspective: "Jesus also, for a certain time, was very popular, and look at how that turned out."

He said that a priest comes to hear his confession every 15 to 20 days: "And I never had to call an ambulance to take him back in shock over my sins!"

Here are excerpts from the FM Milenium interview provided in English translation by Vatican Radio and the *National Catholic Reporter*:

**On false friends:** "Friendship is something very sacred. . . . But the utilitarian sense of friendship—to see what I can get out of being close to this person and making myself his friend—this pains me. I have felt used by some people who have presented themselves as 'friends' whom I may not have seen more than once or twice in my lifetime, and they used this for their own gain. But this is an experience which we have all undergone: utilitarian friendship."

**On religious fundamentalism:** "In any confession there will be a small group of fundamentalists whose work is to destroy in the interests of an idea, not of a reality. Reality is superior to an idea. God, whether in Judaism, in Christianity, or in Islam, in

the faith of those three peoples, accompanies God's people with his presence. In the Bible we see it, Muslims in the Quran. Our God is a God of nearness, which accompanies. Fundamentalists push God away from the companionship of his people; they dis-incarnate him, they transform him into an ideology. Therefore, in the name of this ideological God, they kill, attack, destroy, and calumniate. Practically, they transform this God into a Baal, into an idol."

**On legalistic priests:** "When a priest isolates himself, in his solemn or legalistic posture, or in the posture of a prince . . . when he distances himself, he embodies in a certain way those persons to whom Jesus dedicates the whole of chapter 23 of the Gospel of Matthew. . . . Those legalists, Pharisees, Sadducees, doctors of the law that feel themselves among the pure."

Here are excerpts from an English translation of the Portuguese interview provided by Radio Renascença:

**On playing it safe or taking risks:** "Life without problems is dull. It's boring. Man has, within him, the need to face and solve conflicts and problems. . . . Run risks and always set goals!"

**On today's self-centered culture:** "We demand our rights, but not our obligations towards society. I believe that rights and obligations should go hand in hand. Otherwise we are creating a mirror education; because education in front of a mirror is narcissism and today we are living in a narcissistic civilization."

**On the 'god of money' behind today's refugee crisis:** "These poor people are fleeing war, hunger, but that is the tip of the iceberg. Because underneath that is the cause, and the cause is a bad and unjust socio-economic system, in everything, in the world. Speaking of the ecological issue, within our socio-economic structure, within politics, at the center there must always be the person. And today's dominant economic system has replaced the person at the center with the god of money, the idol."

**On his own immigrant history:** "I am the son of emigrants and I belong to the emigration of 1929 [from Italy to Argentina]. . . . It is true that, in those days there was work, but the ones from my family—who had jobs when they arrived in 1929—by 1932, with the economic crisis of the '30s, were out on the street, with nothing. My grandfather bought a warehouse with 2,000 pesos which he borrowed, and my father, who was an accountant, was selling goods out of a basket. So they

had the will to fight, to succeed. . . . I know about migration!”

**On the need for the Catholic Church to change:** “If somebody has a room in his house which is closed for long periods, it develops humidity and a bad smell. If a church, a parish, a diocese, or an institute lives closed in on itself, it grows ill . . . and we are left with a scrawny church, with strict rules, no creativity. Safe, more than safe, insured by an insurance agency, but not safe! On the contrary—if it goes forth—if a church and a parish go out into the world, then once outside they might suffer the same fate as anybody else who goes out: have an accident. Well, in that case, between a sick and a bruised church, I prefer the bruised, because at least it went into the street.”

**On the church keeping Jesus locked up:** “In the Bible, in the book of the Apocalypse, there is something extremely beautiful about Jesus . . . in which he is speaking to a church and says: ‘I am at the door and I knock. . . . If you open the door I will come in and share a meal with you.’ But, I ask, how often, in church, has Jesus knocked on the door, but on the inside, so as to be let out to proclaim the kingdom. Sometimes we appropriate Jesus just for us and we forget that a church which is not going out into the world, a church which does not go out, keeps Jesus imprisoned.”

**On why he was elected pope:** “You have to ask the Holy Spirit!”

**On why he streamlined the annulment process:** “to simplify . . . ease people’s faith. And that the church might be like a mother.”

**On whether the church can welcome couples whose relationships don’t line up with church teachings, such as those who are divorced and remarried:** “At the synod [next month’s Vatican summit of bishops from around the world] we will be speaking about all the possible ways to help these families. But one thing should be very clear—something Pope [Emeritus] Benedict XVI left quite clear: people who are in a second union are not excommunicated and should be integrated into church life. This was made crystal clear. I also said this quite clearly: drawing closer to the mass, to catechesis, their children’s education, charity. . . . There are so many different options.”

**On his own popularity:** “I often ask myself what my cross will be like, what my cross is like. . . . Crosses exist. You can’t see them, but they are there. Jesus also, for a certain time, was very popular, and look at how that turned out. So nobody has

their happiness guaranteed in this world.”

**On trying to break out of the papal bubble:** “Yes, I need to get out, but it’s still not quite time. . . . But little by little I have some contact with people on Wednesdays [at the public general audience in St. Peter’s Square] and that helps me a lot. What I miss most about Buenos Aires is going out and walking in the street.”

**On what keeps him awake at night:** “The truth? I sleep like a rock!”

**On what motivates him:** “Having lots of work to do.”

**On how often he goes to confession:** “Every 15 or 20 days. I confess to a Franciscan priest, Father Blanco, who is kind enough to come here and confess me. And I never had to call an ambulance to take him back in shock over my sins!”

**On how and where he would like to die:** “Wherever God wants. Seriously . . . wherever God wants.”

**On what he imagines eternity to be like:** “When I was younger I imagined it would be very dull. [laughs] Now, I think it is a mystery of encounter. It is almost unimaginable, but it must be very beautiful and wonderful to meet with God.”