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The Pope grants an interview to “Scarp de’ tenis”, a Milan street magazine

Pope Francis has granted an interview to “Scarp de’ tenis”, a monthly Milan-based street magazine. It is an editorial and social project supported by Caritas Ambrosiana and Caritas Italiana. The interview precedes the Pope’s visit to the archdiocese of Milan this upcoming 25 March.

The following are extensive extracts from the interview:

Holy Father, let us speak about the invisible populations, homeless people. A few weeks ago, at the beginning of winter and with the arrival of the big chill, you ordered that they be received in the Vatican, that church doors be opened to them. How was your appeal received?

Pope Francis: “The Pope’s appeal was heard by many people and many parishes. Many of them listened. In the Vatican there are two parishes and each of them hosted a Syrian family. Many parishes in Rome opened their doors to receive them, and I know that others, which did not have any space in the church, collected money to pay rent for people and families in need for a full year. The aim to be reached must be that of integration, and therefore it is important to accompany them for the initial period. In many parts of Italy much was done. The doors were opened in many Catholic schools, in convents, in many other structures. Therefore, I say that the appeal was heard. I know that many people offered money to pay rent for homeless people”.

In the past, everyone wrote about the Pope’s shoes, the shoes of a worker and a walker. Recently you went to a shop to buy a new pair. Why so much attention? Perhaps because today we find it so difficult to put ourselves in other people’s shoes?

Pope Francis: “It is very hard to put oneself in other people’s shoes, because often we are enslaved by our own selfishness. At a first level we can say that people prefer to think about their own problems without wanting to see the suffering and difficulties of others. There is another level, though. Putting oneself in the shoes of others means having a great capacity for understanding, to understand the moment and difficult situations. ... If we think of the existences that are often made up of loneliness, then putting ourselves in the shoes of others means service, humility, magnanimity, which is also the expression of a need. I need someone to put himself in my shoes. ... How often I come across people who, after having sought comfort in a Christian, be they a layperson,

a priest, a nun, a bishop, say to me, 'Yes, they listened, but they didn't understand'. Understanding means putting oneself in other people's shoes".

Your Holiness, when you meet a homeless person, what is the first thing you say to him?

Pope Francis: "'Hello. How are you?'. ... People who live on the streets understand immediately if there is true interest on the part of the other person or when there is, I do not want to say that sentiment of compassion but certainly of suffering. It is possible to see a homeless person and look at him as a person, or as if he were a dog. And they are aware of this different way of looking at them. In the Vatican there is a well-known story of a homeless person, of Polish origin, who was generally found in Piazza del Risorgimento in Rome, and never spoke to anyone, not even the Caritas volunteers who brought him a hot meal in the evening. Only after a long time were they able to make him tell his story. "I am a priest, I know your Pope well, we studied together in the seminary". The word reached St. John Paul II, who heard the name, confirmed that he had been with him in the seminary, and wanted to meet him. They embraced after forty years, and at the end of an audience the Pope asked to be confessed by the priest who had been his companion. "Now it is your turn", said the Pope. And the companion from the seminary was confessed by the Pope. Thanks to the gesture of a volunteer, of a hot meal, a few words of comfort, a kind look, this person was able to rise again and resume a normal life that led him to become the chaplain of a hospital".

Many people wonder if it is right to give alms to people who ask for help on the street; what would you reply?

Pope Francis: "There are many arguments to justify oneself when you do not give alms. 'But what, I give money and then he spends it on a glass of wine?' If a glass of wine is the only happiness he has in life, that is fine. Instead, ask yourself what you do secretly. What 'happiness' do you seek in private? Or, on the contrary to him, you are more fortunate, with a house, a wife, children, which leads you to say, 'Take care of him yourselves'. Help is always right. Certainly, it is not a good thing just to throw a few coins at the poor. The gesture is important, helping those who ask, looking them in the eyes and touching their hands. Tossing the money without looking in the eyes, that is not the gesture of a Christian. Teaching in charity is not about offloading one's own sense of guilt, but it is touching, looking at our inner poverty that the Lord understands and saves. Because we all have inner poverty".

The Pope has repeatedly come to the defence of migrants, inviting their acceptance and charity towards them. Milan in this sense is a capital of welcome. However, there are many who wonder whether we should truly welcome everyone indiscriminately, or if it is not necessary to impose limits.

Pope Francis: "Those who arrive in Europe are fleeing from war or hunger. And we are in a way to blame, because we exploit their lands but do not make any type of investment to enable them to benefit. They have the right to emigrate and they have the right to be received and helped. This, however, must be done with that Christian virtue which is the virtue that should be typical of governors, namely prudence. What does this mean? It means receiving all those who 'can' be received. And this is with regard to numbers. But it is equally important to reflect on 'how' to receive, because receiving means integrating. This is the most difficult thing, because if migrants do not integrate, they are ghettoized. ... To integrate, then, means to enter into the life of the country, to respect the law of the country, to respect the culture of the country but also to ensure that one's own culture and one's own cultural riches are respected. Integration is a very difficult task. To receive, welcome, console, and immediately integrate. It is precisely integration that is missing. Every country must then see what number it is able to receive. It is not possible to receive if there is no chance of integration".

In your family history, there is the crossing of the ocean by your grandparents, with your father. How does one grow up, as the son of migrants? Did you ever feel a little uprooted?

Pope Francis: "I never felt uprooted. In Argentina we are all migrants. Therefore down there, interfaith dialogue is normal. At school there were Jews who arrived mostly from Russia, and Syrian and Lebanese Muslims, or Turks with Ottoman Empire passports. There was great brotherhood".

What do you miss most about Buenos Aires? Friends, visits to the slums, football?

Pope Francis: “There is only one thing I miss a lot: the opportunity to go out on the street. I like visiting parishes and meeting people. I don’t have any particular nostalgia”.

Milan is ready to welcome you at the end of the month of March. Let us start with the charitable organisations, voluntary associations, those who are occupied with giving the homeless a place to spend the night, food, healthcare, the opportunity for redemption. In Milan we claim we manage to do this quite well. Is it enough? What are the needs of those who end up on the streets?

Pope Francis: “As for migrants, very simply, these people are in need of the same thing: that is, integration. Certainly, it is not simple to integrate a homeless person, because each one has a particular story. Therefore, we must approach each one, find the way to help them and to lend them a hand”.

You often repeat that the poor can change the world. But it is difficult for solidarity to exist where there is also poverty and misery, such as in the outskirts of cities. What do you think?

Pope Francis: “Here too I offer my experience in Buenos Aires. In the slums there is more solidarity than in the city centre quarters. In the slums there are many problems, but often the poor are more united among themselves, because they are aware that they need each other. I have found more selfishness in other quarters, I would not say wealthier because that would be to qualify by disqualifying, but the solidarity we see in poorer neighbourhoods and in the slums is not found in other areas, even if there life is more complicated and difficulty. In the slums, for example, drug use is more visible, but only because in other quarters it is more covert, it is done wearing ‘white gloves’”.

We have recently tried to interpret Milan in a different way, starting from the least and from the streets, and with the eyes of the homeless people who attend a Caritas Ambrosiana day centre. With them, we have published a guide to the city as seen from the street, from the point of view of those who live there every day. Holy Father, what do you know about the city, and what do you expect from your imminent visit?

Pope Francis: “I do not know Milan. I have been there only once, for a few hours, in the distant 1970s. ... But I strongly wish to do so; I hope to meet many people. This is my greatest expectation: yes, I hope to meet a lot of people”.
