

# Italy

Jörg Nies interviewed **Bartolomeo Sorge**.

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**Nies:** Dear Bartolomeo Sorge, thanks for being here, and for agreeing to give us this interview for The European Archive of Voices. The purpose of this series of interviews is to collect the stories of people who lived during the development of a European community. You were born in 1929 on the Isle of Elba; you joined the Society of Jesus (sometimes called the Jesuits) in 1946; you're a religious leader and priest. You studied at various universities and were the editor of the magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica* [periodical published by the Jesuits in Rome, Italy, published since 1850, oldest of Catholic Italian periodicals] for more than ten years. Later, you founded the Institute of Political Formation in Palermo. After that, you edited a magazine called *Aggiornamenti Sociali* [Magazine and think tank of the Italian Jesuits]. Today, you live in a Jesuit community in Gallarate (Italy), which is where we're doing this interview. My name is Jörg Nies, from Germany, also a Jesuit. You and I met for the first time almost three years ago when I was completing an Italian course in Milan. In the meantime, I did a licentiate at the Pontifical Gregorian University and began a doctorate in theology at the same university. Thanks again for being here.

**Nies:** What do you remember about your childhood? What was the environment that you grew up in?

**Sorge:** Look, I think that, rather than remembering my distant childhood, it'd be worth talking about what I saw when I was older. I've seen the world change, and I didn't just read about it in books; I experienced it first-hand. Various cities: in Rome, at the *Civiltà Cattolica*, which is the oldest and most important magazine of the Jesuits; it's written in collaboration with the Holy See; there's a direct relationship with the Pope. I was there for 25 years.

Then I was in Palermo, where my superiors sent me because of the dramatic social situation. Everything in the city was controlled by organised crime. There was a Jesuit study centre that didn't take off and they told me "Go and see what we can do, otherwise we'll close the centre". I stayed there for 12 years. I experienced organised crime right up close; it didn't hesitate to kill to ensure that *it*, rather than the state, was in control.

Then I was sent to Milan, where I edited the other two magazines of the Italian Jesuits: *Aggiornamenti Sociali*, which deals with sociological, social, economic, and political topics, and the international magazine *Popoli*, which is currently no longer being published.

I was able to follow the social, cultural and political changes of our continent first-hand, because I always had contacts in all the various countries. I basically gave lectures in

every city in every European country, in America several times, and in Central and South America. It had been almost 70 years of very intense activity until a disease, an embolism, forced me to stop. Now I'm old.

What I would like to say, as a general impression of a whole life in the trenches: We have witnessed a change in civilisation with very particular repercussions in Europe. At university you study cultural anthropology, which is to do with our relationship with life, with history. You distinguish two types of crisis: there's economic crisis and there's structural crisis.

When I explain this difference to students, I explain it this way: imagine a house. The foundation of the house, the floor, is the culture of a people. When there's a homogeneous culture, structures are built, i.e. the walls of the house. And these are influenced by the values of the people.

Then there's the roof; the structure of the house is finished and can last for a long time. I can make many changes inside the house, but those are economic crises. In other words, the economic situation changes, the internal balance changes: instead of two rooms I make three, instead of a staircase I make two, but the structure of the house remains the same. What's happened in Europe and in the world is not only an internal, economic, but also a structural change: it's the model of society that no longer holds up. The year 2000 essentially marked the disappearance of industrial civilisation, which lasted 300 years - starting in 1700, more or less - with its values, with its floor, its culture. As long as it lasted, industrial culture held up the walls, which are the political institutions of the world of work, family, school. These are the great institutions of a model of society. When the floor breaks, the structures come down. Then the crisis is no longer just economic, but structural instead: the model of society must be rethought. So industrial society, which is gone, is like a house. Industrial culture was homogeneous; the national and international structures were what we knew for many years. With the crisis of the floor, values have changed: people are divided on values and customs, the floor of the house. The crisis is no longer economic: then the internal equilibrium changes, but the model remains the same. Instead, it's the model that needs to be rethought now.

If we take a look at history books, practically every historical period is an economic crisis. There is a government and a government comes, one falls, a new one is created. Culture has one fashion, then another - but all within the structure. Structural crisis is a change of civilisation, because civilisation is nothing more than an institutionalised culture, and the models - family, work, politics, political parties, poetry, art - are the walls that hold the structure up. When the floor changes, when values and customs enter into crisis, walls and structures also come down, and then the model has to be reconceived.

According to my studies - which aren't very thorough, because I'm not a historian - this crisis that we are experiencing is perhaps the fourth or fifth one, as a change of civilisation that has occurred in the past two thousand years. For example, when the Roman Empire gave way to the Christian Empire, the structure, the walls, the law on

slavery, the economy, changed, everything changed. It was a change of civilisation. When Christopher Columbus discovered America there was another change of civilisation, from the agricultural to the commercial: ships began to cross the oceans and so Europeans began to exploit Latin America with the Conquista, and everything changed, like customs and laws. There was another crisis of civilisation, the end of one, the beginning of another: the French Revolution, which essentially changed the model of society, values such as equality, fraternity, justice. These things weren't known before. Today we're experiencing a crisis. The economic crisis, produced by industrialisation, has been a change of civilisation. There was the introduction of the machine, of the machines that have taken away physical work. Today we're experiencing the fourth or fifth crisis of civilisation: One died and another was born. The problem of those who live through this transition - and we've lived it, we're still living it - is that we don't have models, because yesterday's model is no longer needed and tomorrow's isn't here yet.

So, for the "transition generation" of a structural crisis, or a crisis of civilisation, the trick is to invent new ways - and that's the difficulty. This is where Europe's meaning came from: after years of wars of opposition, it was a new path to find a common path in a world that was becoming globalised. So, the new post-industrial, post-modern civilisation is technological civilisation, the civilisation of globalisation, in which we are forced to speak to each other and to unite with each other. I always say the challenge of the twenty-first century is "to live together, respecting our differences", because right now in globalisation we need a new humanism, superior to past humanisms - to the industrial one, to the Renaissance one and those humanisms of the Roman Empire one and French Revolution. However, we need to build this humanism. The future's uncertain. We don't have the model of the new house to be built. But it's a commitment - a common house. The Europe we had built at the end of the first industrial civilisation has suddenly become old, because the structural crisis has sent the values which had united us into crisis. It demands that the structures and institutions of a new Europe be reviewed in a globalised world, in which for example the Silk Road, which the Chinese are recreating for global trade, might be one component. That, then, is the beauty and difficulty of life today.

The economic crisis is the consequence of the fall of the walls. Because in the new model of Europe and society we don't work in the manner we did before. We don't have assembly lines for cars anymore. Today, everything's automated: all it takes is somebody on the computer to manage the assembly line, and he produces more perfect cars, and more of them, than when a hundred people each did their own job. We don't work like we did 20 years ago anymore, so an industrial crisis is inevitable. We have to think about new technologies and we are experiencing the same difficulty that we experienced when machines were introduced after the agricultural era. In school we were taught that the trade unions took workers with hammers to break cars and cranes because they did their job too well: instead of digging a mine with 100 people, all you now needed was operator with a crane. What were the other 99 supposed to eat? That's what happens today with technology. Our generation doesn't

understand it, so what do we do? There's unemployment, which is no longer just cyclical economic unemployment, which we used to study at university: demand grows, demand falls, inflation rises, inflation falls. This is structural unemployment, which means we need to rethink work.

This is how we get the political crisis: the parties are all in crisis and movements appear, because the form of the party is outdated, it belongs to an ideological era that no longer exists. Parties will always be around, because parties are important to get citizens involved in political life in representative democracy and have a say in national politics. But we have to completely rethink the form: and so the Five Star Movement is born. The movements, which aren't parties anymore, are born: they replace the parties with new forms for political organisation, and there's confusion, because we don't have models for this.

This is what I experienced of the general crisis in my years of study and work. I remember the years in which I saw the birth of Europe - I was already an adult when De Gasperi, Adenauer, Schumann came to power – the joy we felt after the World War at agreeing to build a common home from humanism. And then I saw the difficulties that arose within European political and economic life. Not out of malice, but because there's been a structural crisis of which the European crisis has been a part. We shouldn't give up on the idea of Europe, we have to live together, respecting our differences in the process of globalisation. It's important to start again from the floor up. So let's start again from a new humanism, from those common values that are found in Asia, in Africa, in Europe, in Latin America, because they are part of the *consciousness* of humankind. And from these values we begin to rebuild a new model of humanity. This is the challenge that has thrilled me in these years of work. But it's a problem that's very much beyond my ability to solve on my own. It's a global problem to which everyone can make a small contribution.

**Nies:** Thank you. You've touched on so many interesting points. It'd also be interesting to reflect a little bit on how the idea of "home" has changed. You said that the house becomes Europe. What can we learn from this development? What were the values of the post-war world, and what does this say for us today?

**Sorge:** Yes. Look, I think that in the current crisis, which is structural and not just an economic that comes and goes, we have to have the courage to start again from values; in other words, from the floor. I can't build a new house starting with the roof. The laws can be as amazing as you like, but if there's no floor to support them, then they don't hold. Jean Monnet, who was the great architect of Europe, said this before his death, and it made a big impression on me: "if I were to start building Europe again, I would start from values", in other words, from ideals. When politics loses its values, it's like a living being that loses its soul. Living beings, large or small, have a tension within them, which is the soul, spiritual and transcendent. If this is no longer the case, the organism deteriorates, rots and corrupts. The same thing happens in politics, and it's the same in Europe. If there's a grand ideal, a soul, an ethical tension, then it develops. The day the ethical tension and values are lost, Europe also rots.

Corruption, which is what happens to the body when it loses its soul, also occurs at a political level – in fact, if you watch the TV, the crisis in all countries today is a crisis of ideals. The great mass ideologies that produced moral tension in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are finished. When that was over, politics was reduced to self-interest, and so it's become rotten, and corrupt. If there's no moral tension you become corrupt, and today corruption eats away at even our most advanced democracies.

**Nies:** So morality is obviously an important value, or it can represent values. Do you have an idea of what today's values should be?

**Sorge:** Yes.

**Nies:** Or do we still have to discover them?

**Sorge:** No, no, I do (laughs). I'd refer to the speech John Paul II made at the UN on the fiftieth anniversary of its founding in 1995. There were hundreds of people in the audience in front of him, white, black, with straight eyes, yellow almond-shaped eyes, believers, atheists, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists and Catholics. How did this Pope speak to all these people? He used an expression that I like a lot, and that I used in one of my books. He said: "Let's start with the common ethical grammar that is inscribed in the conscience of all humanity". Black people, white people, the Chinese, Buddhists, atheists, Muslims, Catholics; all have an ethical grammar with certain fundamental values.

There are the great UN charters, such as the one on human rights, but there are lots of rights that not all agree on, although many countries have signed up to them. The Pope pointed out three or four specifically, which are found in all modern democratic constitutions.

Firstly, the dignity of the person. You won't find any human being who doesn't admit the dignity of the person. The idea of how to defend it is different, but not the principle.

The other value: solidarity. The human person is essentially a *being in relation*. No one can live alone. Not only as children who need food and everything else, but also as an adult. To be human is to be in relationships with one another. If we lose these relationships, we destroy the dignity of the person. This is what's happening in many families today, where, for example, the parental relationship between children and parents has broken down. Then family and society suffer, the children suffer. So, solidarity is another value that is inscribed in the conscience of all men and women of the world.

Then there's subsidiarity, which means that we shouldn't do at a higher level what we can do at a lower one. In other words, subsidiarity is about active participation. For example, the teacher shouldn't replace the pupil. Instead, they must help them. The adult, the educator, shouldn't replace the student, the child. They should help them grow, accompany them. The head of state shouldn't replace the democratic bodies of government. The regions, the intermediate bodies, all need the principle of subsidiarity, so that everyone is valued for what they can do. I can't replace what my inferior has to do and can do. I can only do it in their place if they can't do it.

Then there's the common good; that is to say, there are common goods which we either all reach together, or we all die. The ecological problem, that is, the problem of safeguarding creation, is an example of this. It's a question of life or death, because the house belongs to everyone. Either we look after the house, or we all die, because it's the only house that we all have.

If one keeps these four or five principles of a common ethical grammar in mind, they can be the foundation of the new globalised humanism of a new world united in plurality. Then little by little, as civilisation grows, there can be other values. The constitutions of each people can have other values unique to their own nation; this isn't a problem. But we must find a *floor* for that new house that the structural crisis has forced us to build, because the model of the previous house is no good anymore. It has collapsed.

**Nies:** Yes. You say that values are important, but today it seems hard to work out what they are. You lived through a difficult period, various difficult periods. Can you explain how you worked out what your personal values were, especially during and after the war?

**Sorge:** Yes, yes. So you see, the structural crisis has brought down the institutions because values have changed. It's not enough to just *have* values. To build Europe you need a charter of values, a conscience, a community of culture, and then you need the institutions.

So the institutions that we have, Parliament and the various European institutions that we know, also have to be changed on the basis of this new awareness, especially regarding participation and subsidiarity. Today we no longer tolerate what we tolerated yesterday: Strasbourg deciding and everyone else following. In other words, we have to participate. We have the various nations accepting limits to their sovereignty regarding the economy and politics; not foreign policy yet, although we have to get there. We have to renew the institutions. So far, we've had these very defensive, very inflexible institutions, especially the economic ones: the euro, and then the economic programmes. This by itself is no longer enough and has to be reviewed. We need to revise the existing agreements, renew them, especially given the influx of migrants. It is a new problem typical of the third millennium. One needs to rethink the institutions.

But not even institutions are enough! We need values, and we do have them, because the European peoples more or less agree on these cultural values. Therefore, I would actually be slow about enlarging the borders of Europe. There's the challenge of Turkey and other countries that would like to enter. I'd go slowly, because even the fact that the former communist countries joined without discussion about values caused problems. I don't know if they were ready in terms of the *floor*, if the time was right for integration. Anyway, let's build from the floor up, let's remake the institutions!

Then we need the *inhabitants*. We made the institutions, but we didn't make the Europeans. We made Europe, the house, but we didn't make the inhabitants. This means that the Germans must remain German, but they must accept the common culture, those values that allow us to build common walls together. So education,

fiscal, and foreign policy; these are all problems that we have not been able to deal with because we have not been ready, and this depends on the people. It's less important to make Germany, Italy, and France European; we have to make the Italians, the Germans, and the Spaniards into Europeans. And so the real task is the formation of humans, because in politics, in economics, in life, in history, what counts is humans; humans change history.

If we have statespeople of great value they will lead history, they see the way ahead and they push. If we have a mediocre political class, no matter how great the institutions are, there'll be no *water* – they [i.e. the institutions] will be like very modern canals which don't carry any water. *Human intelligence* is water. If someone were to ask me, "Father, what, in a single word, is the most important thing to do in this structural crisis?", I'd say *education*. If we don't train in terms of technology, new forms of work, and in terms of culture, if we don't train up a new ruling class we'll never succeed in winning the battle for a modern united Europe in the third millennium. Everything that nations invest in training provides a future. If we don't train, even if we make the most modern, up-to-date laws, they'll be no good; they're perfect canals, but without *water*.

**Nies:** Was there a crucial point in you becoming a European? When did the concept of Europe become important to you?

**Sorge:** Well, I became one *practically* more than *theoretically*. I've been to all the different countries, and even though I don't speak all the languages well, I did get to know the culture of the individual nations. However, I must say, I did give a lecture in Frankfurt in Germany, in German! The President of the United States was there. I remember it was an invited lecture on the foreign policy of the Vatican. I had help in the debate later on, but the lecture itself was in German. I was in England, in Spain for a long time, I know France, and then I even went as far as Beijing; I was in Russia more than once for guest lectures. I saw that they have problems very similar to ours. And on my third trip, my last, to what's it called, Leningrad.

**Nies:** St. Petersburg.

**Sorge:** Yes, they've changed the name now (laughs). The state university invited me to give this lecture. Russia needs Europe and Europe needs Russia. There was another, private, university that accepted its credit and courses, and whose degrees were recognised by the state. It's the only one that's still there after the fall of the wall in St. Petersburg. I was speaking to all the professors and students at the state university, and there were some very interesting questions. We were talking about the need for the formation of a new political class. They chose this topic because some interviews of mine. When I arrived in Palermo the first thing I did was to travel around the island of Sicily, to see the problems. I saw that there were many wonderful, intelligent young people. And I said: "We have to form the new ruling class", and the Pedro Arrupe political school was founded; it's still there after 30 years, still working, very well in fact. The goal was to form a new ruling class. For me the key is education. I said this in Moscow too and I said it in St. Petersburg. I was struck by the fact I was

able to give this lecture at the state university in St. Petersburg. That was a milestone. I don't know any Russian, but I'd read that Lenin's name was written somewhere there. And so I asked the professor that was accompanying me, who spoke good Italian: "What does it say here?" It said something like: "Lenin entered through this door for the day of the Soviet Revolution to train ...". My goodness, if he knew that a Jesuit had passed through that door he would die all over again (laughs). But he said to me, "It amazes me that they didn't take it down, because after the fall of the wall we took away all the memories of communism".

**Nies:** You've already spoken a bit about Palermo. After living in Rome as a journalist for such a long time, with lots of lectures, and a very, let's say, technical sort of job, you became director of the Pedro Arrupe centre in Palermo that you mentioned. Arrupe was the superior general of the Jesuits at that point, and his name is also associated with the so-called Palermo Spring. You were talking a bit about this challenge, especially given Italy's very unique political situation, which is unfortunately well known to the outside because of the mafia, and corruption.

**Sorge:** Yes, very good. So, you see, them sending me to Palermo was as unexpected as the first time they sent me to Rome to the *Civiltà Cattolica*, right after I finished my studies, because I had entered as a Jesuit in the northern province, Venice-Milan. And when I'd finished in Rome they'd called me to Milan, saying: "Come and direct *Aggiornamenti Sociali*; we'll send Father Salvini to the *Civiltà Cattolica*". In Rome my superiors said "No, Father Sorge is going to Palermo". I said: "I didn't realise that Palermo's in Lombardy! [laughs]. "What am I going to do there?" They said to me, "We don't know either!" This is what superiors say even when they do know. "Go and see. There's this cultural centre in Palermo, see if anything can be done about it". For me, going to Palermo was like the second step of my formation, a European formation as well, because first I'd done 25 years of research, lectures, meetings. I'd absorbed so much, non-European things too, and I formed my conscience.

Then I found myself in the streets. Before, I frequented palaces: the Vatican Palace, the Quirinal Palace - I met three presidents of the Republic, the Popes; that was my environment! The next day I found myself in the streets in Palermo, where all those people were killed by the mafia. They killed someone every day, like animals. They used *incaprettamento* [lit. "goating"], which was where they tied the victim up by the legs and arms like they do with goats, and by the throat, so that the victim would choke trying to free themselves. I asked myself, "What sort of a place is this?" So this is the political question that I asked myself, which can also be asked at the national and international level: "What can we do to help Palermo to be free and return to the rule of law?" Train, educate. We had a house, and we turned it into a school. We had a selective admissions system, with an entry exam. I wanted to make sure that all the students who came already had a degree, and that they wanted to go into politics afterwards, that it wasn't just a fun way to pass the time.

It was a 2-year program, with exams, and a degree. It was a very serious thing. And it really had an impact, because it introduced a new conscience into civil society. If we



want to change the world we have to start with the people, not the palaces, because you've got a whole different mentality in the palace. This was the Palermo Spring for me. There was a mayor [in Palermo], a brave guy named Leoluca Orlando, and we started a civil society, not a party! There's a structural crisis, and so we had to start from the neighbourhoods, the people, the movements, the cultural centres, the political parties, the simple citizens, the believers and the non-believers, the right and the left. It wasn't a party; it was the whole of the city that was willing to fight against organised crime to restore rule of law to Palermo. This was the beginning of what was called the Palermo Spring, which lasted three or four years. It turned out to be just a parenthesis, but it wasn't useless, because it changed lots of things. While before the mafia had economic power in its hands, after the Spring this changed. Politics has its highs and lows, and so it didn't make

**Nies:** Summer arrived.

**Sorge:** Then I went to Milan as well. I came to understand there that if we also want change at the European level, then European elections aren't enough to change the political class, the parliament. We need to change the people, the Italians, the Germans, the French, the Spaniards and all the others, because only a new popular conscience can give a real nudge to the ruling class, and this needs to be formed. Things won't improve by chance; you need a framework. That's what I looked for with the young people who came. I never asked for faith in the political process. We discovered after a year that one of the students was a member of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, the successor to the fascist party in Italy. Nobody had noticed, but when they found out all his classmates made fun of him, the poor boy. But I didn't ask anyone what party they were from. I just asked, "Do you want to do politics? Do you want to work for the common good? Do you have a vocation? Come. We offer a formation according to the social teaching of the Church".

So we say it immediately, from the beginning, and we all respect it. And so it is this union of everybody, this conscience, this ethical grammar that can unite all men of good will that then creates a new ruling and legal class; and that's where the Palermo Spring came from. When I arrived, I was surprised to learn that the papers had already said "Father is coming". They knew me, I was on television. A woman stopped me and said, "Are you Father Sorge?" "Yes, yes"; "Thank you for what you do." "Well, madam, I don't do anything, I've just arrived"; "The mere fact that someone would come to live in Palermo while people are running away from Palermo is an act of trust for us, because here," she told me, then she looked around to see if anyone was listening, and she lowered her voice, "the mafia's here". She didn't have the courage to say the word "mafia" out loud. When, after the killing of Falcone and Borsellino, I saw a human chain of three kilometres - young and old, men and women, rich and poor, all holding hands - across the city and the centre of Palermo shouting "Enough with the mafia! Enough with the mafia!", I remembered that little woman who on the first day of my arrival was scared to say it out loud - and they were shouting it.

And I saw families in the working-class areas put white sheets on the windows as a gesture of defiance to the mafia; the mafia knew who lived there. I said: "It's the end", because the Palermo Spring is a spring; what we sowed will bear fruit, although I don't know when. But the important thing was to awaken consciences, starting again from values. We preached in theatres and schools, in the street, until they killed Don Puglisi. So I was there in the terrible years, but I saw that it's possible to renew politics even in times of structural crisis, you see. By going to Palermo, I had a historical verification of theoretical research. I had studied these ideas at a theoretical, historical level; I saw them there at a political level. I took this lesson with me here too. I insist on this in my most recent books, on having confidence in a future that depends on us, on training, on ideals, on learning to live together respecting those who are different. Then Pope Francis came along, and he's pushed us more on this: The Church going out into the world.

**Nies:** Thank you. It certainly wasn't easy in Palermo; and that sort of work also required great sacrifices in your personal life. There were points where you were scared for your life.

**Sorge:** Yes, yes. They were the most difficult, but the most beautiful, years of my long life. In fact, one day the police chief called me and said, "Father, I have to give you an escort," because the mafia had sentenced me to death (laughs) for the lectures I was giving. I didn't want one; I said "But that sends the wrong message, a priest with an escort"; "It's an order". So they gave me five men with two armoured cars for seven years. So I was under protection from '87 to '94; then I came to Milan and found freedom (laughs), but it was an amazing experience. It was worth it, because it really is the path to the resurrection of a city, of a people.

**Nies:** But the climate at the time was one of fear.

**Sorge:** Exactly. Terrible. Imagine, I was in the first car, bulletproof, all armoured, steel - from the outside you couldn't see, and the driver was armed. There was another car behind me with three men in it. In the most difficult phase, the second car kept a door open with a submachine gun ready, because there could be an attack at any minute. It was the order for everyone, not just for me; everyone had an escort. But there have been years when the mafia kissed a mayor, a magistrate, or a politician every day. These were times of terror. Then Pope John Paul II came, and in Agrigento [in Sicily] he shouted prophetically: "You will be judged". Then the attacks followed in Florence and Rome. It was terrible. Now it's changed; I'm not saying that the problem is resolved, but by forming new generations and new politicians, we made a contribution. I was happy to move from theory to practice. Do we have to pause here?

**Nies:** Father Sorge, after the war you entered the Society of Jesus. I don't know how common this was and what it meant for your siblings, for your family. Could you describe what it's like to be a Jesuit nowadays, and tell us a bit about your training ("formazione")? How has being a Jesuit changed in today's world?

**Sorge:** Yes. So, I knew the Jesuits but I didn't like them [laughs]. I would have preferred to become a Franciscan, or a Carmelite, because I saw they walked around

barefoot with a bit of rope around their waist; they seemed more evangelical [laughs]. Instead, because of a number of things that happened, and a powerful spiritual experience, I joined the Society at age of 17. The training I had was very intense – 17 years of formation. It was before the Second Vatican Council [1962-65], so the training was a bit traditional, both in terms of [the] devotion [it required] and in its vision of religion.

**Nies** Can you tell me a bit about what it was like before the Council?

**Sorge:** Yes. We had this great event, wanted by Pope John [XXIII], which we call the Second Vatican Council, and it was the twentieth Council in the history of the Church. It was a Council, meaning all the Bishops in the world came, that was different to all the others. In general, a Council was to condemn a heresy, or affirming a truth or a dogma, or sorting out a schism. This time it wasn't for any of these reasons. The reason Pope John gave: we must translate the Gospel into modern language and culture. We need to explain the Gospel using the language of our times. So it's almost revising the concept of Christianity: What is this this phenomenon of *Christianity*, which has produced so many stories for two thousand years, has had so many saints, and crooks too (laughs), and sinners? It was about revising the evangelical message in the light of modern culture, and so this Council was revolutionary.

It wasn't like any of the other ones, where once truth had been defined, that was it, and goodnight! This was about re-proposing the truth – as we believe – contained in the Gospel to the men and women of today. But it wasn't just a question of language; if it had been, a dictionary would have been enough. It was a question of our understanding of the truth, too, because we've realised that history illuminates the Gospel. That is, we today, after two thousand years, understand better what the Gospel says, but at the same time the Gospel allows us to better understand history, because it makes us look beyond mere tangible things. I experienced this myself.

Once an Italian TV journalist did a long interview with me, about 45 minutes, and he said exactly that to me: "Father, you study a lot, but isn't the Christian faith, with its dogmas, an impediment? Doesn't it hold you back? You're not free to think what you want, because you have to think about the truth of the Gospel. Tell me: didn't you find this hard?" I said: "If I found it hard I'd tell you, but what I found was that it helped me, because faith in the word of the Gospel has helped me to understand history better". I said: "I'll give you an example: the fall of the Berlin Wall. Historians say "The communist ideology had no cement, history had proven it false, and so the wall fell" – and it's true. So one can, at a historical level, find reasons to explain the fall of the Berlin Wall, on an economic and political level. My faith didn't impede me in this, because I can see the historical reasons too; but faith makes me go beyond this, and to ask "what's the significance of the fall of the Berlin Wall?", and so it helps me to understand history better.

I ask: if an ideology founded on tanks, totalitarianism, and war wasn't able to change the world, then *why*? So faith allows me to understand the fall of communism better, and I don't stop at saying that there was no cement, that the ideology had been

falsified; I can see the construction too. What does the fall of the wall mean? After a while another wall fell; it's called Wall Street; capitalism's wall fell. With the 2007-2008 crisis of capitalism in America, and the whole world - which we're still feeling the effects of - faith doesn't make me deny the evidence, the economic reasons of the crisis, but it makes me understand where the world is heading: We need fraternity, unity, to come up with a new model of development which isn't just further development of capitalism. I remember that when the Berlin Wall fell, Pope John Paul (II) wrote an encyclical [Pastoral letter written by the pope for the whole Roman Catholic church on matters of doctrine, morals, or discipline], and one of the chapters had a very, very short title: "1989". He said: "Lots of people have said that communism has fallen, and therefore capitalism has won, but you can't say that!". He said this in light of his faith; faith let him understand that the fall of communism was not a victory for capitalism. If he'd lived a few years more, he would have seen that in 2008 capitalism died, too.

So my faith helps me to understand the path of history, gives meaning, toward work, toward suffering. This is valuable, because it's constructive. So the first part of education, before the Council rethought the Christian message in these modern terms, was more theoretical, abstract. They were very beautiful truths, they consoled the heart, but they didn't really allow me to understand the problems of history that I was experiencing. The Council led me to be immersed in history. Pope Paul used that great word – the word of his pontificate – “dialogue”: The church walks with the *world*. It's not us, the believers, in, and all the others out; we're with the others! If it rains, believers and non-believers get wet together, and if there's a war, believers and non-believers suffer together. If there's joy, believers and non-believers rejoice together. We walk with everyone, we have the same difficulties, we breathe the same air, we live in a common house - the ecological problem. This is the incarnation of the Christian in history today. For me this was a revolution, because after the theoretical studies I had done, in which we discussed *de esse et essentia*, following the Aristotelian categories “I'm right, you're wrong, enemies, theses...” I now immersed myself in the story of humanity. I realised that the problem of unemployment can be illuminated by my faith, that the problem of war, hate, egoism, can be overcome with the Christian message. And now, since the Council, the Church has been walking *with* the world. This scandalised a lot of people.

What happened since then? Paul the VI, the Pope of dialogue, died: His first encyclical is still a beautiful text. If you read it, it feels like it was written today: We need to have dialogue with everyone, believers and non-believers, without barriers. And then Pope Wojtyla arrived. He's a saint, already canonised [Declared a saint]. He was a giant because he preached the Gospel to the whole world. He spoke to Muslims, atheists, Buddhists, Catholics. He was an exceptional Pope but with a culture, a cultural sensibility, very different than Pope John (XXIII), and, even more, to Paul VI. With him dialogue [with the world] continued but it slowed down a bit, because the Council had told to the Catholic Church: "You have two paths to follow in the future. One is internal; you have to change, renew the Church, the Vatican, the structures; and the other is *ad extra*, dialogue with the world. You have to open up and seek dialogue without risk

of excommunication, without fights or religious wars, as had happened before. These popes together: Pope John Paul (II) and Pope Ratzinger - Pope John Paul was Pope for 26-27 years and adding up the eight years of Ratzinger, that's 35 years in which dialogue with the world and with other religions developed greatly.

At the European level there were also bodies of unification, of walking together, with the Protestants, the Evangelicals, with the Muslims, with the other religions, that came into being, because the Council had recommended this dialogue not only between cultures, but also between religions. Religion is an essential dimension of humanity. The sense of religion and of God can't be taken away from humanity's heart. I was struck by this for the first time I went to Moscow, which was a few days before the fall of the Berlin Wall – that happened all on its own by the way, it wasn't me (laughs). I visited a few Orthodox churches and I noticed lots of young people, lots of twenty-year-olds, kneeling in front of religious icons for a long time, and I said to myself: "But they were taught scientific atheism here in Russia!" Leaders tried to remove humanity's religious dimension scientifically, and after seventy years of communism I saw young people in their twenties kneeling in front of an icon for half an hour. Religion can't be torn from humanity's heart. That would mean tearing the human heart.

I'd like to tell a personal story: I was still in Palermo, and I received an invitation to go to Moscow with a delegation of Italian professors. There were sixty of us in all, 30 Italians and 30 from the Soviet Academy of Sciences; Gorbachev was still in power. It was a beautiful, week-long gathering. I had never been to Moscow. I felt the joy of these Soviets - former Soviets - saying: "We can finally travel without asking permission from the state; we can finally read European texts that used to be banned". A certain professor Svetlana - I don't remember her surname - said: "None of us were allowed to read Heidegger. The only problem is", she said, "that now that we can read these texts, we're not used to them, we don't have the hermeneutics to read them". In short, she said: "Finally, we're discovering these values, freedom of thought". Then I, being a good Jesuit - I was the only priest there - threw a pebble into the pond, and said: "But why do these absolute values exist, if they're not based on the Absolute?" I was afraid to say the word "God", because I'd never been to Russia. If I say "God", who knows what'll happen, I thought! So I said, "The Absolute". Then a professor of modern philosophy from Moscow, a smart man, said: "No, I will respond to the Father. With the end of communism we rediscovered God". It was him that said it! And how ashamed I was! Look at me, I'm a priest, and I didn't have the courage to say the word "God". He said it to me. But he said: "I don't have a dogmatic religion like yours". So I defended myself: "No, I wasn't talking about the Immaculate Conception (laughs); I was talking about religion as a human facet". There was perfect simultaneous Russian-Italian interpretation but he spoke French, and so afterwards we continued to discuss. It was beautiful to see how every time that humankind loses God, that is, it ignores its religious dimension, then it loses itself, up to the point where, in the Soviet Union, humankind lost all its rights and its freedom. But when humankind finds itself again, it also finds God. I was struck by this: these great Russians had rediscovered

human dignity, freedom of thought, freedom of movement; they had rediscovered God. Humanity and God are together. I understood this in light of the Council.

There was dialogue with other cultures, with other religions, with other Christian churches, but the internal transformation of the Church that the Council had asked for too was neglected; *ad extra* to the world, *ad intra* to the Church. Pope Ratzinger continued the mission of Pope Wojtyla.

I can understand Pope Wojtyla, because the Council [message] arrived very late to Poland. In the early 2000s, when I was already in Milan, I was invited by the Polish Episcopal Conference to the Social Week of Polish Catholics, and I had to give two reports. What struck me was that the debate that they were having was the one we had in Italy in 1948 – and it was 2000. It's because they had a communist regime; the Church had to defend herself against communism, and she didn't have time to take the Council on board. When Wojtyla became Pope, he brought to the role the militant spirit typical of his [Polish] church, which had to fight against communism.

Not all Poles were Catholics, but a Pole told me something beautiful once: "Father, here the only way to shout 'Down with Jaruzelski [Polish army general and political leader who served as premier (1981–85), chairman of the Council of State (1985–89), and president (1989–90) during the final years of communist rule in Poland] is to join a procession and shout 'Long live Mary'. So he said "If we're religious, it's because religion offers us the only possibility we have of rebelling against communism". When he became Pope, he brought with him the idea of a militant Church that fights for indisputable, absolute principles.

So there was also a period in which there was a kind of normalisation. Pope Ratzinger is a "doctor" of the Church, too, because he has this exceptional theological depth in his encyclicals, and he's a holy man. Regarding pastoral or relational sensibility, he'd been at the side of Pope Wojtyla for many years; when he became Pope, he followed him. He, too, still doubted the liturgical reform, the mass held in individual languages, and almost wanted to go back. The great merit of Pope Benedict [i.e. Ratzinger] was that by resigning he opened the way to Pope Francis. Pope Francis truly is the Council! He doesn't want us to call it the Church of Pope Francis - it's the Church of the Council! He's the only one who, after 27 or 35 years [i.e. since Pope John Paul II], had the courage to face *internal* renewal, *ad intra*. He continues *ad extra* with his travels, dialogue with the Muslims, but *ad intra*!

He started changing structures – because the current crisis is structural, and the structures of the Church are old, too. We can't do catechism [Manual of religious instruction usually arranged in the form of questions and answers used to instruct the young, to win converts, and to testify to the faith] like we did twenty years ago anymore. We can't preach like we preached ten years ago, because culture and values have changed. Pope Bergoglio [i.e. Pope Francis] has shown courage by taking on all the attacks of the extremist Catholics who've stayed loyal to the ideas of the Council of Trent and haven't accepted the Second Vatican Council. This is why it's important that the laity too know what the Second Vatican Council was: a historical event that lasted

three years, which changed the presence of the Church in the modern world. Without the Second Vatican Council you *can't* understand the path of the Church today, which is towards the future! We no longer look to the past.

The Gospel helps us to understand history, but history helps us to understand the Gospel. There are so many truths of the Gospel that Saint Peter and all the apostles, whom I love so much, couldn't understand. If I were to meet Saint Peter and say to him: "Could you tell me what collegiality is, what is synodality? [Pope Francis is proposing a synodal model of Church, with focuses on collegiality, conciliarity, participation, dialogue and debate] " he'd look at me and say "Never heard of it!".

Today the agenda of Pope Bergoglio's pontificate, unity in diversity, is exactly what the world needs. We discussed this earlier, speaking about the cultural crisis of the model of society. We said that the challenge of the twenty-first century was how to live together while respecting our differences. It's what the Church is doing today, with other religions, with other cultures, with white people and black people, fighting for integration, and it's Providence [protective care or influence of God] that sent us this man. It is being attacked by all those who would like to turn back time, who don't want to move. And he says: "Take the Church out into the world! Out on the streets, out! Let's not lock ourselves in our churches". "But the churches are empty!". "It doesn't matter!". His speech yesterday [31/03/2019] to the priests in Morocco was beautiful. He said: "It doesn't matter that there's not many of you; what's important is to be salt [to be salt in Christianity means to deliberately seek to influence the people in one's life by showing them the unconditional love of Christ through good deeds] and to respect others. So no proselytism [act or fact of religious conversion, or actions inviting this], no clericalism, but proclamation and witness of the Gospel!", and he insists: "It is more important to live than to speak". I often think about what St. Francis said to his friars: "Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel by your example; use words if necessary". We'd come to a point where everyone was speaking, "Blah blah blah blah", and no one was living it out. Then Pope Bergoglio arrives: "Let's return to the Gospel! Testify through your life. We go hand in hand with all men of good will. There are no evil men and women before God, the merciful Father of all. Let's build a common house: We're in the world; let's build the world together, faithful to the Gospel".

This makes you sigh deeply, and it's the fruit of a journey that I've witnessed. In the Society of Jesus, they taught me in a fairly old-fashioned way: We're Catholics, we're blessed by God, and the others are outside the Church. When Pope Bergoglio arrived he knocked down all the walls with the Council. The doors are open; anyone can enter the church and anyone can leave. As you wish. The important thing is love, because God is love.

This is in harmony with some of the great insights of Pope Ratzinger, who today is often considered to be opposed to Francis. There's a phrase in one of his encyclicals, which I'll use out of context for effect; I'll say the whole passage afterwards. Pope Ratzinger said: "Christians know when it's good and necessary to speak about God,

and when it's better not to speak of God". I'll interrupt here: "Holiness, you can't say these things! How can a Christian not speak about God?" "Wait; [continuing with the first quotation] ... and let God speak about Himself through love." This is the message.

If I go to a terminally ill man who's about to die and say to him "Son, my brother, prepare for death; let me remind you of the ten commandments", so the first, second, etc., the seven precepts. He'll die even sooner! (laughs). Shut up, shake his hand, make him feel that you love him, and it will be God himself who will speak to him, because God is love, and where there is love, there is God. And if an atheist acts out of love, God is there in the atheist's act of love.

Can you see the new horizons we have? Do you understand why we can't despise non-believers? You understand why we have to build the world with Buddhists too, with Muslims, with non-believers, build the common house. Because where there's love, there's God. And if an atheist or unbeliever, who doesn't believe in anything, does an act of love for a needy person, for a brother or sister, he doesn't know, but in that act of love there's God, and we can communicate through love. This is the new life, the new air of the [second Vatican] Council that many don't accept, because they were used to fighting, to the crusades, to the wars of religion: "We have the truth, the others are wrong about everything. We go to heaven, the others go to hell". The Pope tells us: "God died on the cross for everybody. Let's act with mercy". This is the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. It would be good if the laity studied it too, to get an idea of the Church of today and tomorrow. If they want to get an outdated idea of the Church they should read yesterday's stories but that's gone now, and the Spirit makes all things new, beginning with the Church.

**Nies:** Could you go into more detail about the Second Vatican Council? Were there signs, or was it a complete surprise? Also, as you said, today we can understand the development of history better, and faith helps with that – why does faith seem less important in today's Europe? Were mistakes made? How can we confront these problems?

**Sorge:** What essentially happened is that Europe came to the end of the process of secularisation that began in the sixteenth century with the so-called Renaissance, which was the revolution of that time, and was continued by positivism, materialism, and the various ideologies. As a result, Europe is no longer Christian the way it was in the days of the Christian empire. This is a grace from God, because all the Church's problems started with Constantine, may he rest in peace and rise in glory. When Constantine granted freedom of religion to all in 313 he did a good thing, but then he transformed the Church into a state, which still exists - the Vatican City - with its soldiers; it's all against the Gospel! The Church is not a territory, it's not a state; that's a diversion from the right path, and it cost a lot, it led to wars, and to the misuse of office, even by the Popes of the Church. The bishop was a Count, and the way of dressing, the luxury!

When I was younger, before the Council, I once went to church in St. Peter's (Basilica in the Vatican) when there were cardinals present. Each cardinal wore a heavy six-



metre train of cloth. It took two stout clerics to hold it. If there were ten cardinals concelebrating [officiate jointly at (a Mass)] with the Pope, there would be sixty metres of train, with all the rings, the gold, the golden crosses, the pearls. Imagine someone asking "Who are these people?!". "How do you not know? These are the successors of the fishermen of Galilee!" "*Ammáppate*" [Blimey], as they say in Rome, "look how the fishermen of Galilee are dressed". What was left of the apostles, who were dirty, with calloused hands, used to pulling fishing nets? How come Constantine make the Church a kingdom, make it take on imperial form?

Thanks be to God that the Council surpassed that concept of Christianity. The first to use the scissors was Paul VI, who cut off the tails of all the cardinals (laughs). There were so many other things to cut, too. Pope Bergoglio is carrying on cutting away, starting with the apartment where he no longer lives and with what he wears. These things are not the important things though. The religious dimension is the important aspect to look at. It is essential to the history of Europe because Europe's roots are Christian. Look at the works of art: if you erase the Bible, you erase all the masterpieces of Raphael, Michelangelo; all the great sculptors of every language showed their faith in their painting. Or culture: we only have the manuscripts of Virgil, of the first great Roman poets, because of the monks who copied secular things down in their manuscripts too. Culture, art, music; everything is rooted in Christianity.

The only problem is that we've remained where we were; we have to be able to express the modern and the postmodern - it's the future! So we have to walk together with all men of good will to build a globalised world, which has now become a single family. If you go to big cities, even here in Italy, if you go to Milan, on the street you see all religions: Shintoists, Buddhists, Protestants. There are still some Catholics, but my point is that nowadays the world is pluralistic in culture, religion, races. Either we live together defending diversity, or we all die.

So the Church walks with the world, and the post-Council Church becomes one element - as we've also seen in these last international journeys - that's accepted by non-believers too: even Muslims manage to make common declarations of universal fraternity. This is the world that awaits us;

To conclude, the way to proclaim the Gospel, of going on missions, is not proselytism, trying to convert as many as possible. Pope Benedict said a beautiful thing: "Christianity grows not through proselytism, but through attraction and through witness." We bear witness to Jesus, Son of God. We don't impose it on anyone. We testify through love, and in love there is our brother, and in love there is God.

**Nies:** So how can the Church help in the world today, especially in terms of the development of unity in Europe? Faith hasn't had as important a role after the Council and in European integration, and as you said, secularisation took place. What is the new crisis, what is the right path to take, and what should we expect from the future? What advice would you give to a new generation?

**Sorge:** Yes. I'd like to think in terms of an image: Since the crisis is structural, we have to rethink the model of the house. The Church has to bring the cement to glue together

the new bricks of the house, bricks which represent love. I believe the service of the Church to help build a united Europe, a united world, is not by suggesting laws to the European parliament. It is that of loving everybody and inviting everyone to help each other, as brothers; the time for it has come.

Here a parable comes to mind, which I could use as a final story. It occurred to me when I was in Palermo [at a gathering of] a thousand young people, all in their twenties, from all over the island. I gave a talk about the fight against the mafia: "We'll get there!" One [young person] said to me: "Father, you tricked us all for an hour, because you made us dream that it is possible to overcome selfishness, to overcome divisions, to overcome the mafia. You know that this isn't true; when I leave through this door I'll find the same selfishness as always, the same divisions as always, the same mafia as always. What can I do to change Europe, to change the world? I'm a student, my mum's a housewife - go and tell all this to Andreotti<sup>1</sup>," - Andreotti was Prime Minister at the time - "it's the ones in Rome that have the power! What can I do as a mere citizen?"

It was one of those difficult moments where everything was up in the air, and poetry came to my aid; I said to him: "Young man, do you know of anything in nature more fragile than a snowflake? Snowflakes are light; if the wind blows, they go all over the place. If you hold them between two fingers they become droplets of water". "Father, I'm a snowflake; how can I change the rocky mountainsides, the mafia; it's useless!"; "Wait! Put, young man, this snowflake together with a thousand snowflakes, and make a good, compact snowball. Roll it along the sides of the mountain until it becomes an avalanche; tell me, dear boy, if you can think of a force in nature that can withstand an avalanche. Avalanches change even the rocky mountainsides!" And then we cried out: "Let's make an avalanche!" We're all snowflakes - let's get stuck in, all the honest people that want to change this situation, this world. We'll make an avalanche, and even the mafia won't be able to stop us." I still use this parable of the snowflake (laughs); I stumbled across it, and have used it in lots of different situations since. It's beautiful: when I can't do something alone – when not even the Church can do something alone - we can help to make an avalanche. Let's all help each other, black and white, rich and poor, to change the world with the power of our hearts, ethics, education, professionalism - and the better world that we hope for will come. It's not a dream; it's the fruit of our common effort, which we all have to commit ourselves to.

**Nies:** That's just it. What are your hopes? Well, I think they are quite clear? You're still a great optimist. But what are your more concrete expectations regarding the challenges of a united Europe, Italy too – what do you see as a really promising path?

**Sorge:** I have seen how, in recent times, the city squares have been filled with people who want to commit and change things. When civil society starts moving, that's when change happens. I saw it in Palermo. This was the *Palermo Spring*: until the city moving, all those sermons, the heroic acts of murdered policemen and mayors were in vain. When the people stood up, that's when the *Spring* happened. These days it's

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<sup>1</sup> 41st Prime Minister of Italy (1972–1973, 1976–79 and 1989–92)

200,000 people in Milan protesting against racism. There's also some confusion of ideas, but at least people are standing up. This is a sign of hope. Humanity is rational and there is reason in political life too. Certain laws which are against basic humanity will have to be changed eventually. A day will come when we will turn back, as is happening in various countries. China - as everyone knows - had a law saying each family could give birth to only one child. Recently they said: "No, they can have two" - because they could not continue the policy any longer. The law can't change the seasons. It can't change nature. False decisions made by a superficial culture, or those that impede unity because they put people against each other, will then be overcome by human reason. Nobody can stop history. It can be steered, but it can't be stopped.

What's happening today is that they can't direct the movement of history. The mass ideologies - liberalism, communism, Catholic populism - are over, we can't guide history anymore but there's a basic reason that will emerge. I think that Europe, with its cultural heritage of two thousand years of life, can be a crucial force for global unity, which, in spite of everything, is still progressing. You can direct, but you can't stop. Globalisation will go on, the Silk Road (laughs) will go on, even if people oppose it. The best thing is to try to direct the common values of a global humanism and the formation of new elites by addressing ethical challenges. This is a prospect that makes me optimistic.

**Nies:** Father Sorge, thank you so much for this interview.