

BY STIJN FENS, JAN-WILLEM WITS AND MARC
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

It is still early when we arrive at the service entrance of the Vatican, to the left of Saint Peter's Basilica. The Swiss Guards have been informed of our arrival and let us pass. We head to the Domus Sanctae Marthae, because that is where Pope Francis lives. The Domus Sanctae Marthae is a unique three-star hotel. A large white building where cardinals and bishops reside while serving in or visiting the Vatican, it is also the official residence of the cardinals during the Conclave.

Here, too, they are expecting us. Two ladies behind the reception desk, just like in any hotel, kindly indicate a side door. The meeting room has already been prepared. It is a fairly large space, with a desk, a sofa, tables and chairs, and it is the Pope's meeting room during the week. Then, the wait begins. Marc, a vendor of Street Roots' sister paper *Straatnieuws*, in the Netherlands, is the most patient of us all, waiting, seated in his chair, for what will come.

Suddenly the Pope's official photographer appears. "The Pope is arriving," he whispers.

And before we know it, he walks into the room: Pope Francis, the spiritual leader of 1.2 billion Catholics. He is carrying a large white envelope.

"Please, sit down, friends," he says with a gentle wave of his hand. "How nice to have you here." Close up, he gives the impression of a calm, friendly man who is both energetic and precise. Once seated, he apologized for speaking Italian, rather than Dutch. He forgave him immediately.

International Network of Street Papers: *Straatnieuws* interviews always begin with a question about the street on which the interviewee grew up. Holy Father, what do you remember about that street? What images come into your mind when you recall the streets of your childhood?

Pope Francis: From when I was 1 year old to when I entered the seminary, I always lived on the same street. It was a simple neighborhood in Buenos Aires, with one- and two-story homes. There was a small square, where we played football. I remember that I used to sneak out of the house to play football with the boys after school.

My father worked in a factory that was just a few hundred meters away. He was a bookkeeper. And my grandparents lived within 50 meters. We were all just a few steps from one another. I also remember the names of the people, when as a priest I went to give the sacraments, the final comfort for so many, who called for me and I went, because I loved them. These are the memories that first come to mind.

INSP: Did you play football, too?

Francis: Yes.

INSP: Were you good?

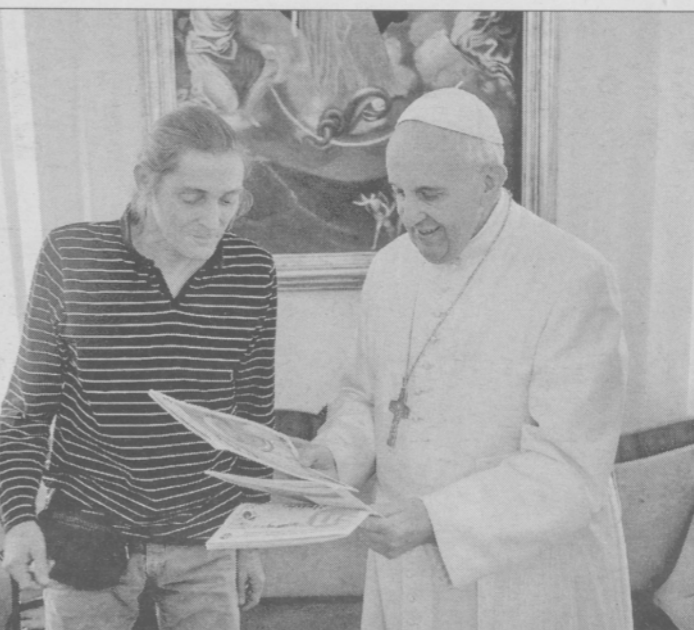
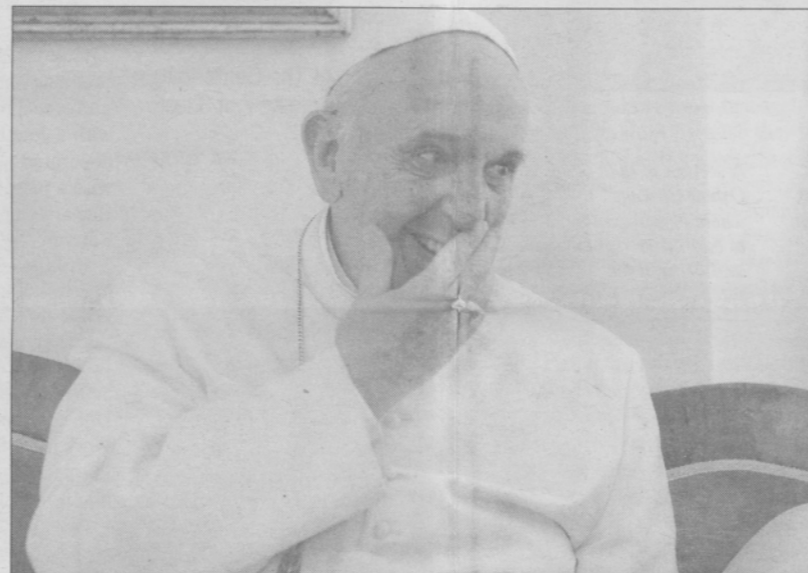
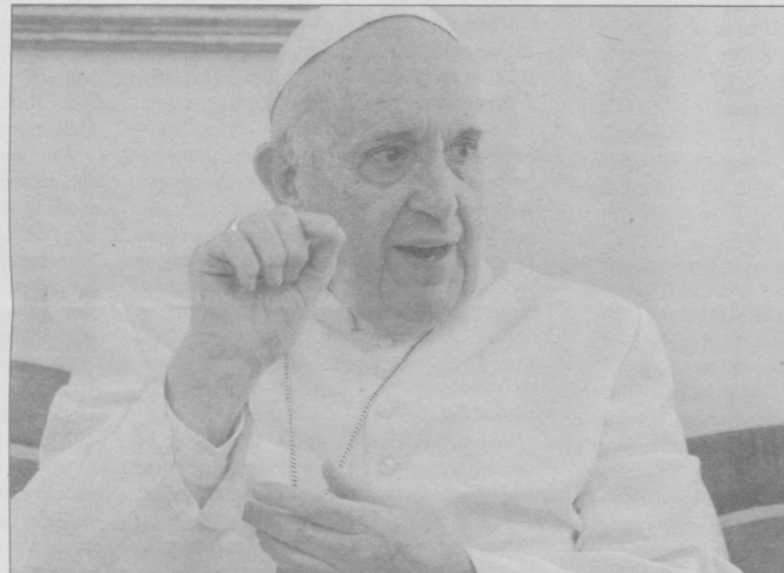
Francis: No. In Buenos Aires, those who played football like me are called *pata dura*. Which means having two left legs! But I played anyway; often I was the goalkeeper.

INSP: How did your personal commitment to the poor begin?

A world with no poverty:

In a rare interview, Pope Francis opens up to street papers about his childhood in Buenos Aires, his life in Rome and his advocacy

'We must always fight'



Pope Francis gives an interview to the International Network of Street Papers. At left, Marc, a *Straatnieuws* vendor, shows the pope copies of the Dutch street paper.

PHOTOS BY FRANK DRIES, STRAATNIEUWS / INSP

Marc would like to invite you to come have a pizza with us. What do you say?

Francis: I would like to, but we wouldn't be able to manage it. Because the moment I leave here, the people would come to me. When I went out into the city to change the lenses in my glasses, it was 7 o'clock in the evening. There was barely anybody in the streets. They drove me to the optician, and as I got out of the car, there was a woman who saw me and cried: "It's the pope!" And then I was inside, and all the people were outside.

INSP: Do you miss contact with people?

Francis: I don't miss it, because the people come here. Every Wednesday, I am in Saint Peter's Square for the General Audience, and sometimes I go to one of the local parishes. I am in contact with the people. For example, yesterday (Oct. 26) more than 5,000 gypsies came to the Paul VI Audience Hall.

INSP: It is evident that you enjoy your appointments in St. Peter's Square during the General Audience.

Francis: It's true. Yes, it's true.

INSP: Your namesake, Saint Francis, embraced radical poverty, and even sold his Gospel book. As pope, and the bishop of Rome, do you ever feel under pressure to sell the treasures of the church?

Francis: That is an easy question. They are not the treasures of the church, but rather the treasures of humanity. For example, if tomorrow I wanted to auction off Michelangelo's *Pietà*, I couldn't, because it is not the property of the church. It is located in a church, but it belongs to all humanity. This is true for all the treasures of the church. But we have begun to sell the gifts and other things that are given to me. And the proceeds from the sales go to Monsignor Krajewski, my Almoner. (Archbishop Konrad Krajewski is in charge of distributing money to the poor.) And then there is the lottery. There were some cars that were sold or given away with a lottery, and the proceeds were used for the poor. There are some things that can be sold, and these are sold.

INSP: You do realize how the wealth of the church might create this type of expectation?

Francis: Yes, if we were to make a catalog of all the church's possessions, we could think: The church is very rich. But with the Concordat with Italy of 1929 on the Roman Question, the Italian government at the time offered the Church a large Roman park. The Pope at the time, Pius XI, said: No, I only want half a square kilometer, in order to guarantee the church's independence. This principle is still valid.

Yes, the church possesses a great deal of real estate assets, but we use them to maintain the church's structures and to fund the many works carried out in needy countries: hospitals, schools.

Yesterday, for example, I had 50,000 euro (\$55,000) sent to the Congo for the construction of three schools in poor villages; education is so important for children. I went to the administration, I made the request, and

"Oh, let's not talk about this anymore. This thing is just too difficult." I understand that the possibility of overload exists, but I do not fear it. I must continue to speak about the truth and about the way things are.

INSP: It is your duty?

Francis: Yes, it is my duty. I feel it inside me. It is not a commandment, but as individuals we all must do so.

INSP: Do you not fear that your support for the homeless and other groups plagued by poverty might be exploited politically? How can the church speak out so that it has influence and, at the same time, manage to steer clear of political posturing?

Francis: There are paths that lead to errors at that point. I would like to call attention to two temptations. The church must speak the truth and also with a testimony: the testimony of poverty. The believer who speaks of poverty or of the homeless, but who lives a life of luxury, that will not do. This is the first temptation.

The second temptation is making agreements with governments. Certainly agreements can be made, but they must be clear agreements, transparent agreements. For example, we manage this building, but the accounts are all closely controlled, in order to avoid corruption. Because the temptation for corruption is always present in public life.

Both political and religious. I remember once that I saw, with great pain - when Argentina under the military regime entered into war with Great Britain over the Falkland Islands - that people donated items to charity, and I saw many people, including Catholics, who were responsible for distributing those things to the needy, and who instead took those items home for themselves. The danger for corruption is always present.

Once I put a question to an Argentine minister, an honest man. One who stepped down from his position because he could not agree with certain things that were not sufficiently transparent. I asked him: When you send assistance, whether it is in the form of meals, clothing or funds, to the poor and to the indigent, of what you send, how much of it arrives to those who need it, of the money

and materials, items that are sent? He said to me: 35 percent. Which means that 65 percent is lost. That is corruption: a bit for me, another bit for me.

INSP: Do you believe that up to now under your pontificate you have been able to achieve a change in mentality, for example in politics?

Francis: I am not sure how to respond. I don't know. I do know that some have said that I was a communist. But that's a category that is a bit antiquated (he laughs). Perhaps today we use different words to say that.

INSP: Marxist, socialist.

Francis: They've said all those, too.

INSP: The homeless have financial problems, but they cultivate their own freedom. The pope has no material needs, but he is considered by some to be a prisoner of the Vatican. Do you ever wish you could trade places with the homeless?

Francis: I remember the book by Mark Twain, "The Prince and the Pauper," when

you can eat every day, you have clothes, a bed to sleep in, a desk to work on and nothing is lacking. You also have friends. But Mark Twain's prince lives in a golden cage.

INSP: Do you feel free here at the Vatican?

Francis: Two days after having been elected pope, I went to take possession of the papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace. It is not a luxurious apartment. But it is wide, and large. After having seen the apartment, it seemed to me to be a bit like an upside-down funnel, so large but with only one small door. That means being isolated. I thought to myself: I can't live here, simply for mental health reasons. It would not be good for me. At the beginning, it seemed a bit strange, but I asked to stay here, at the Domus Sanctae Marthae. And this is good for me, because I feel free here. I eat in the dining hall where all the guests eat. And when I am early, I eat with the staff. I meet people, I greet them, and this makes the golden cage a bit less of a cage. But I miss the street.

INSP: Holy Father, *Straatnieuws* vendor