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# **THE CHURCH AT 30,000 FEET:**

## **Appreciating Pope Francis's Interviews with Journalists**

*by*

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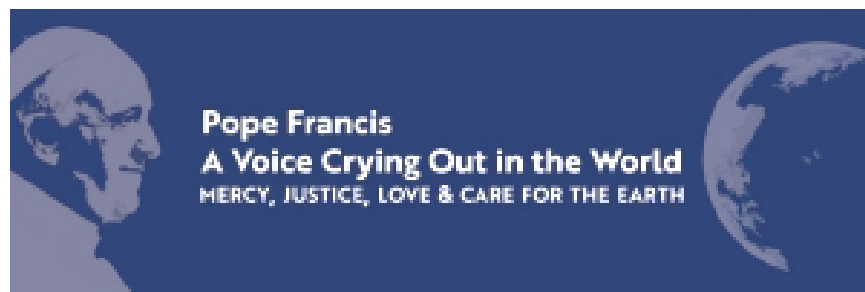
for concurrent session I  
on Friday, **April 13, 2018**

in Group #5  
*on Francis and the Media*

at the conference on  
***Pope Francis, A Voice Crying Out in the World:  
Mercy, Justice, Love and Care for the Earth***

sponsored by  
*The Institute for Catholic Social Thought at Villanova University*

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We gather together in a conference that seeks to examine the current pontificate as "**a voice crying out in the world.**" A prominent medium for carrying that global voice is the press conference that the pope holds with journalists accompanying him on every apostolic voyage outside of Italy.

To-date, there have been twenty-five of these media events during the current pontificate. What I propose is that we examine them not in terms of particular questions or answers, but as a single phenomenon, through which we come to see Pope Francis's understanding of the Church in both word and deed.

Admittedly, press conferences may not be the best source for an analysis of papal theology.<sup>1</sup> But I submit that they do hold a value in this undertaking because they disclose four key features of this pope's ecclesiology: (1) as a means of *accompaniment*, (2) as an expression of *dialogue*, (3) as an opportunity for *discernment*, and (4) as an experience of *encounter*. And I suggest that, taken together, these four elements make the papal press conference a missionary medium particularly well-suited for the Church in today's digital world.

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### (1) Pastoral **Accompaniment**

John Allen, Jr. once described the pope's press conferences as spectacular in-flight entertainment! The pope, of course, has a different view. For Francis, interacting with the press has a decidedly pastoral value, as a distinct way of communicating his papal ministry.<sup>2</sup>

Pastoral concern is the primary reason why the pope travels to the peripheries of the world.<sup>3</sup> But it is also evident in his interactions with the media during those trips. He personally greets each of the journalists on the outbound flights. Then, for the press conference on the homeward-bound flights, he usually begins by expressing his wish to be "at their disposal," and he always concludes by thanking them for their work.

During those media moments, we see a pope and a press corps who have developed friendly yet professional relationships. The journalists engage him with the curiosity of tourists, as they seek to know his impressions or memories about each trip.<sup>4</sup> They even express concern for his well-being when something goes awry, as when he fell in Poland and in Columbia.

For his part, Pope Francis reciprocates with concern for them, as when he apologized for taking them into a heat wave in Myanmar. Often there's a bit of self-deprecating humor, as when he responded to a question about challenges to the reform of the Curia by saying, "Well, the first obstacle is me!"<sup>5</sup> Sometimes he shares more personal insights, such as his "neuroses" about taking a vacation<sup>6</sup> or the "healthy dose of recklessness" he has regarding his own security.<sup>7</sup> And he appears to enjoy telling biographical stories to help him make a point.<sup>8</sup>

In these interactions we see a pastor close to his flock. They happen to be corralled on a plane, but their mutual mirth witnesses to a level of familiarity that facilitates conversation. And the innocuous comments from the pope make him personable, thereby reducing some distance from his interlocutors.

But the light-heartedness does not, by any means, turn these in-flight encounters into some sort of love-fest between the pontiff and the "hacks in black."<sup>9</sup> By now, the pope seems to have overcome his fear of walking into a "lion's den" of reporters.<sup>10</sup> But he knows full well that being with them puts him in jeopardy. "I know that I must be prudent, and I hope I am," he says. And "I know that this can render me vulnerable, but it's a risk that I must run."<sup>11</sup>

Taking that risk is what a pastor does in the Church according to Francis. It's a first step in accompanying others in their work. His willingness to interact with reporters is a step toward building trust with them. With trust as a foundation, they can tackle the serious questions and concerns that constitute the bulk of their conversation.

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## (2) Experiential **Dialogue**

The conversational nature of the press conference gives to this medium a new and defining character. What we see and hear onboard the papal plane is a different kind of magisterium, on that takes the form of an experiential dialogue.

The journalists traveling with the pope are not there simply to banter. They have a job to do, namely to dig and prod, sometimes to seek and always to find what is newsworthy about these papal trips. In this regard, they eagerly bring up subjects of concern to their own audiences, including hot-button topics, such as clergy sexual abuse<sup>12</sup> or the politics of Donald Trump.<sup>13</sup>

No question is off limits. Nor are the papal responses constrained by unwritten protocol. For better or worse, with Pope Francis, "what you see is what you get."<sup>14</sup>

What the media get is a world leader who dares to ponder out loud, one who admits that he simply says "what comes to mind."<sup>15</sup> He responds off-the-cuff to a wide range of issues, from international terrorism<sup>16</sup> to the Roman Curia.<sup>17</sup> When he does not know something, he humbly admits it; when he speaks in error, he openly apologizes for it.<sup>18</sup> All in all, as the pope puts it, "I say what I know, and what I don't know I don't say because I don't know. I don't make things up."<sup>19</sup>

Beyond honest responses, what the media also get is a speaker unafraid to turn the tables on his questioners. Francis doesn't hesitate to correct them when they mistake opinion for news,<sup>20</sup> or chide them when they mislead their readers about his previous responses.<sup>21</sup> He even enumerated three "sins" their profession commits, namely disinformation, calumny, and defamation.<sup>22</sup>

In these and other examples, we see how, whether extemporaneous or exasperated, Pope Francis speaks with a boldness that reflects his sense of being in open dialogue with the media. His comments may surprise those who question him or confound those who later read what he said. But they come with an authority born of his deep personal spirituality and vast pastoral experience.

The fact that the pope speaks while standing in front of the seated media contributes to and reflects the dialogic character of his communication. It may be a limitation of the airplane's configuration, but in those close quarters, Francis answers the media's questions without prefabrication or prevarication. As Fr. Antonio Spadaro describes it, the pope's "immediate, direct, and intuitive way" of speaking presents his message

not only as doctrine but also as experience. And this is the radical cipher of being pastoral. The Pope as pastor of the Church senses that it is time that the word of preaching be truly an "abased" word, that is, capable of assuming the same posture of the words of Christ which were never announced from a throne of glory, but by the Son who had emptied himself.<sup>23</sup>

Critics may recoil from this approach and the jarring headlines it sometime creates. Troubled by Francis's use of homespun examples and down-to-earth idioms, they seem to prefer more pontifical sensibility and less mundane musing.

But Francis chooses to speak in a voice that resonates with people, through a medium that easily reaches the masses. Likening his conversations with the media to his daily homilies in St. Martha's Chapel, the pope says, "I try to respond in a spontaneous way, in a conversation that I wish to be understandable, and not with

rigid formulas. I even use a simple, popular language. For me the interviews are a dialogue, not a lecture."<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, even with this informal approach, Pope Francis still speaks to and for the universal Church. The press conferences provide a unique opportunity for him to raise his voice (figuratively) as a teacher, who educates the media and, by extension, the world that learns from them.

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### (3) Pedagogical **Discernment**

Clearly, the journalists who interact with the pope are not trained in theology. Then again, most people in the Church are not. But since so much of what people think these days is formed, or at least informed, by what the media report, Francis seizes the opportunity to school them in a manner that shows a discerning mind at work.

By now, everyone is aware that this pope has his own lexicon!<sup>25</sup> With the media he spends time explaining what he means by "ideological colonization" or "responsible paternity"<sup>26</sup> or other creative terminology. But he also goes beyond the words to educate them in how to think about those ideas.

To that end, this pope reminds the media (and us) about the importance of making necessary distinctions which they tend otherwise to overlook. For example, on the question of Islamophobia, he notes that one cannot directly associate violence with any religion, rightly pointing out that "there should always be a distinction between what a religion proposes and the concrete practice of that proposal by any specific government."<sup>27</sup>

Ever the Jesuit philosopher, he also emphasizes the need for adopting universal principles that go beyond the particular situation about which the media ask. When a reporter inquires, for instance, about ecumenical dialogue, the pope addresses specific issues like a common date for Easter,<sup>28</sup> but he also refers more generally to the importance of spiritual ecumenism or an ecumenism of blood that can be widely shared with other churches and faiths.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond the broader principles, Francis encourages greater discernment by inviting the media to consider contexts that go beyond the situations about which they ask. An example of this can be seen in his response to a question about legitimizing the use of condoms to prevent HIV-infection. He flatly said:

the question is too narrow, even one-sided. ... The problem is bigger than that. ... The big wound is social injustice, environmental injustice, the injustice I mentioned with exploitation and malnutrition. This is injustice. I don't like to descend to this kind of casuistry while people are dying from lack of water, food or housing.<sup>30</sup>

At other times, he challenges the journalists to reflect personally on the issues they face on these trips, so that they might better grasp the situation at hand and the papal positions on which they report. For example, on the return flight from Korea, he said to them: "Cruelty and torture. I would like it very much if you, in your media, would reflect on these things. How do you see these things today? What is the level of mankind's cruelty? What do you think about torture? I think it could benefit all of us to reflect on this."<sup>31</sup>

With these pedagogical approaches, Pope Francis grapples with the media's questions; in so doing, he leads the media to see the faith convictions that result from his discerning mind. Those convictions about the Christian meaning of life are spoken in verbal images and constructs that may not be fully formulated. But that gives to his message a dynamism befitting the living, breathing mission of the Church to tell the Good News to all the world.

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#### (4) Missionary **Encounter**

That dynamic message is shared via conversation, dialogue and teaching that coalesces into a true "encounter" with the media. For Francis, such an encounter is the Church *in vivo*. Consequently, these media moments become a missionary medium.

In keeping with his emphasis on "encounter," Pope Francis recognizes that the in-flight press conferences are not simply about him. Rather, he appreciates that the media have a crucial role to play in the work of evangelization.

On the one hand, he regularly invites the media to share in the apostolic mission of the trips they undertake together. On the way to Egypt, for example, he reminded them that "people follow us" and, therefore, theirs "will be a job to help many people understand the journey, to know what has been done, what has been talked about, many things."<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, he also recognizes that the questions raised during the press conferences are questions that go beyond the interest of the journalists who ask them. He realizes that they reflect what is on the minds of people around the world. For this reason, he thanks the media "for the questions, for the things that I have learned from your questions."<sup>33</sup>

From his encounters with journalists, and with the readership they represent and reach out to, Pope Francis has come to appreciate a medium he once steadfastly avoided. He now willingly participates in these press conferences as a living expression of the Church. Speaking of his work with media, he says:

I desire a Church that knows to insert itself in people's conversations, that knows to dialogue. It is the Church of Emmaus, in which the Lord "interviews" the disciples who walk along the way discouraged. For me the interview is part of this conversation of the Church with people of today.<sup>34</sup>

In the papal press conferences, that conversation takes place at a rather high altitude, literally and figuratively. Whether specifically ecclesial or more generally cultural, the topics discussed there cover a wide range of globally significant issues. In the papal commentary about them, we see that, for Francis, theology is ever in-progress. We learn by walking, as he would say. We understand him and his thinking about the Church by traveling with him "along the way."

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In this respect, the press conferences that have become a staple of the pope's apostolic journeys reflect what Fr. Spadaro calls "a form of expression particularly suited to the dynamic forms of this pontificate." In these encounters with the media, where "there is always the 'background noise' of life, in one way or another," Pope Francis's voice makes a profound difference.<sup>35</sup> And in my view, that voice is particularly well-suited to communicating a vision of the Church in the digital age, even if the pope himself dismisses the notion of his being a global media "star."<sup>36</sup>

For one thing, this pope's answers to reporters' questions are succinct yet significant. That makes it easy to share his views via new media, while at the same time inviting, and often requiring, further reflection about what he says.

For another thing, his commentary is image-forming and headline-generating. For better or worse, that elicits widespread interest in his words, while at the same time instigating further discussion of his thought.

What the world today seeks and what new media rewards is interactivity born of genuineness and leading to social engagement. With courage in answering questions and boldness in saying what he thinks, all the while demonstrating the "normalcy" that is his hallmark – this is what makes Pope Francis a voice of real, not fake, news.

In the end, the interactive encounters that are the papal press conferences bear witness to a thoroughly pastoral view of the Church. They are evidence of this pope's determination to be a herald crying out in the world. For Pope Francis, the story of faith – the Gospel story of joy and mercy – is one worth telling, through the media, to all who will listen.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Allen, "A potpourri of nuggets from a week on the Vatican beat," CRUX (9/17/2017): "if you're trying to measure the relative importance of various positions and possibilities in the pope's own mind, the press conferences probably aren't the first place you'll want to go."

<sup>2</sup> In the Preface to *Papa Francesco, con Antonio Spadaro, Adesso Fate le Vostre Domande, Conversazioni sulla Chiesa e sul mondo di domani* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana /Rizzoli, 2017), Francis writes: "the interviews always have a pastoral value. All that I do has a pastoral value, in one way or another. If I would not have this faith, I would not grant interviews; for me it is quite clear. It is a way of communicating my ministry" (p. 6).

<sup>3</sup> On the return trip from Azerbaijan (10/2/16), Francis responded to a comment about why he travels to such small countries by saying, "So why do I go there? For the Catholics, to go to the periphery of a Catholic community, which really is on the periphery; it is small. . . . And I told you: we understand reality better and see it better from the periphery than from the centre. This is why I choose to go there."

<sup>4</sup> This is especially so with the initial questions, which are usually asked by journalists from the countries just visited.

<sup>5</sup> On the return flight from the Holy Land (5/2/14), responding to the French group.

<sup>6</sup> On the return flight from Korea (8/18/14), responding to Deborah Ball.

<sup>7</sup> On the transfer flight from Sri Lanka to the Philippines (1/15/15), responding to Ignazio Ingrao.

<sup>8</sup> For example, on the flight from Sri Lanka to the Philippines (1/15/15), he told of his grandmother's saying something good about Protestants (responding to Christoph Schmidt), and on the return flight from the Philippines (1/19/15), he narrated his experience of corruption with a story about two functionaries in Buenos Aires seeking a financial payoff, at which point he thought to "give them a kick where the sun doesn't shine" (responding to Carla Lim).

<sup>9</sup> See the blog post so titled by Trisha Thomas, which describes her experience covering the papal trip to Cuba and the USA ([mozzarellamamma.com/2015/hacks-in-black-on-the-papal-plane-with-pope-francis](http://mozzarellamamma.com/2015/hacks-in-black-on-the-papal-plane-with-pope-francis)).

<sup>10</sup> In his first airborne encounter with the media, on the flight to Brazil (7/22/13), the pope said: "Good morning to all of you. I heard you say something a little strange: "You are not saints to whom I have a devotion", "I am here among the lions", but not particularly fierce ones, is that right? Thank you. It is true that I do not give interviews, but why, I do not know, I can't, it's just like that. For me it is quite an effort to do so, but I thank all of you here."

<sup>11</sup> Preface to *Adesso Fate le Vostre Domande*, p. 6. On the return flight from Asunción (7/12/15), Cristina Cabrejas asked if he feared having his words manipulated; he responded, "Every word, every sentence can be exploited. . . ."



Phrases can always be manipulated. At times some news stories take a phrase out of context. I am not afraid. I am simply saying: look at the context! If I make a mistake, with some shame I will ask for forgiveness, and move forward."

<sup>12</sup> On the return flight from the Holy Land (5/26/14), in response to the English language group, on the return flight from Philadelphia (9/27/15), in response to David O'Reilly, and on the return flight from Peru (1/21/18), in response to Nicole Winfield.

<sup>13</sup> On the return flight from Mexico (2/17/16), in response to Phil Pulella.

<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Ines San Martin, "Meet the man who helped build the pope's brand on Twitter," CRUX (9/21/17), Gustavo Entrala identifies this as one of two defining qualities of the pope's leadership.

<sup>15</sup> For example, on the flight from Sri Lanka to the Philippines (1/15/15), in response to Juan Vicente Boo, he said: "Perhaps what I am about to say may sound somewhat disrespectful, but it is what comes to mind. I believe that behind every suicide attack there is a certain imbalance, a lack of normal human equilibrium. I do not know if it is mental or not, but it is a human imbalance. Something is not right in that person. He or she is unbalanced with regard to the meaning of life, his or her own life and the life of others."

<sup>16</sup> On the return flight from Poland (7/31/16), responding to Antoine-Marie Izoard, the pope said: "Terrorism is everywhere! ... Terrorism - I don't know if I should say it because it's a bit risky - increases whenever there is no other option, when the global economy is centred on the god of money and not the human person, men and women. This is already a first form of terrorism. You've driven out the marvel of creation, man and woman, and put money in their place. This is a basic act of terrorism against all humanity. We should think about it."

<sup>17</sup> On the return flight from Rio de Janeiro (7/28/13), responding to Philip Pulella, the pope admitted: "I've never said this before, but I have come to realize it - I think that the Curia has fallen somewhat from the level it once had, in the days of the old curialists ... the profile of the old curialist, faithful, doing his work."

<sup>18</sup> As on the return flight from Peru (1/21/18), in a lengthy response to Juan Pablo Iglesias.

<sup>19</sup> On the return flight from the Central African Republic (11/30/15), by way of conclusion.

<sup>20</sup> On the return flight from Mexico (2/17/16), in a lengthy response to Jean-Louis de la Vaissière.

<sup>21</sup> On the return flight from Armenia (6/26/16), responding to Cécile Chambraud, the pope recounted: "That's what I said [in a dialogue with women religious]. 'Can it be studied?' 'Yes, I will tell the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to set up this commission'. The next day [the headlines read]: 'Church opens the door to women deacons!' To tell the truth, I was a little annoyed with the media because this is not telling people the whole truth."

<sup>22</sup> On the return flight from the Central African Republic (11/30/15), responding to Philip Pulella of Reuters, the pope said: "a professional press has to tell the whole story: without falling into the three most common sins: disinformation - telling half the truth and not the other; calumny - when an unprofessional press throws mud at people, true or not; and defamation - saying things that ruin a person's reputation, things perhaps from the past which have have (*sic!*) little to do with the present... These are the three faults which detract from the professionalism of the press."

<sup>23</sup> Introduction to *Adesso Fate le Vostre Domande*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Preface to *Adesso Fate le Vostre Domande*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> See Joshua McElwee and Cindy Wooden (eds.), *A Pope Francis Lexicon* (Liturgical Press, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> On 1/19/15, first responding to Jan-Christoph Kitzler, then to Christoph Schmidt.

<sup>27</sup> On the return flight from Istanbul (11/20/14), in response to Yasemin Taskini. See also his response to Antoine-Marie Izoard on the return flight from Poland (7/31/16), when he states: "I don't like to speak of Islamic violence because every day when I open the newspapers I see acts of violence ... I believe that it is not right to identify Islam with violence. It is not right and it is not true."

<sup>28</sup> On the return flight from the Holy Land (5/26/14), in response to the German language group.

<sup>29</sup> As on the return flight from Turkey (11/30/14), in response to Alexey Bukalov.

<sup>30</sup> On the return flight from the Central African Republic (11/30/15), in response to Jürgen Baez.

<sup>31</sup> On the return flight from Korea (8/18/14), in response to Yoshimori Fukushima.

<sup>32</sup> Greeting on the flight to Cairo (4/28/17)

<sup>33</sup> On the return flight from Bangladesh (2/2/17), by way of conclusion.

<sup>34</sup> Preface to *Adesso Fate le Vostre Domande*, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Introduction to *Adesso Fate le Vostre Domande*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> On the return flight from Philadelphia (9/27/15), he responded to a question about this designation from Matilde Imberti by saying, "Do you know what title the Popes used to use, and should still use? 'Servant of the servants of God'. That is a little different than being a celebrity, a 'star'. Stars are beautiful to gaze at. I like to gaze at them in the summer, when the sky is clear. But the Pope must be, has to be, the servant of the servants of God. In the media this sort of thing happens. But there is another side to the story. How many stars have we seen shine, then go out and fall. It is something fleeting. Whereas being the servant of servants of God, that is something beautiful. It doesn't pass away. That is what I think."