

The Church at 30,000 Feet: Appreciating Pope Francis's Press Conferences

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Pope Francis has been lauded as “a voice crying out in the world.”¹ With the help of today’s digital media, that papal voice reaches a universal audience at a moment’s notice. While the pope speaks in and on a variety of platforms, one of the more attention-getting has been the in-flight press conference with international journalists. Despite his personal anxiety about giving interviews amid a “lion’s den” of reporters,² this pope routinely does so on every apostolic voyage outside of Italy.

To date, he has conducted thirty-three such press conferences. From them we can glean some features of this pope’s ecclesiology, his conception of what the Church is, how the Church thinks, and what the Church is to do. Hence, the medium of the papal press conference has become a distinct and powerful way for Francis’s voice to cry out in today’s world.

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¹ This essay is an expanded version of a paper presented on April 13, 2018, at the international conference “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.

² Carol Glatz, “Media Guide: Interview with Pope Reveals His Communication Philosophy,” *CatholicPhilly.com*, September 8, 2017, <http://catholicphilly.com/2017/09/news/world-news/media-guide-interview-with-pope-reveals-his-communication-philosophy/>. “Asked whether knowing whatever he says will go global caused him any distress, the pope said while he does not feel anxious, ‘there’s a lot of pressure. When I get on the plane with the journalists I feel as if I am descending into the lion’s den. And I begin by praying, then I try to be very clear,’ but there have been some ‘missteps,’ he said, without specifying what.”

In formal terms, media events are not a typical source for theological thinking; as one prominent *Vaticanista* points out, “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.”³ Nevertheless, the in-flight press conferences do show Francis’s mind at work and, thus, serve as a locus in which to probe his understanding of the Church in its effort to evangelize the world.

The Papal Press Conferences

The pope actually confers with the Vatican Accredited Media Personnel (or VAMPs) twice on each trip. On the outbound leg, the meeting is usually just a courtesy call, in which the pope welcomes them aboard and encourages them in anticipation of what will be tiresome work. He then ambles about the cabin, greeting the journalists personally. The question-and-answer sessions take place during the return leg of the international flight and, if time allows, on transfer flights between countries on the same trip. Prior to the interaction, the accredited journalists organize themselves into language groups and decide upon a few questions to be asked.

The reporters chosen to pose the questions are usually ones who have not done so before. Beginning with journalists local to the lands just visited, the director of the Vatican Press Office (formerly, Father Federico Lombardi and Greg Burke, respectively; now, Alessandro Gisotti, *ad interim*) introduces each journalist to the pope and invites the questions (which the pope prefers not to see in advance). The questions and the responses are usually offered in Italian, but occasionally they are given in Spanish. The entire event lasts an hour or so, depending on the flight time, the number of questions, and, of course, when the meal is served! The text of the press conference is later published on the Vatican’s website and is thus registered as part of the archive of the apostolic voyage.

For the journalists, these press conferences mean extra work. As John Allen Jr. once said in conversation, the flight back used to give the press corps a chance to rest after a harried trip. But now, with what he calls the spectacular in-flight entertainment provided by Francis, their work has become even more demanding. This is especially true because the breaking news that often comes from the pope’s comments can be

³ John L. Allen Jr., “A Potpourri of Nuggets from a Week on the Vatican Beat,” *Crux*, September 17, 2017, <https://cruxnow.com/news-analysis/2017/09/17/potpourri-nuggets-week-vatican-beat/>.

immediately communicated via digital technology. Still, Allen considers these encounters “a precious gift to the media.”⁴

As for the pope’s own thoughts about these events, he reveals his trepidations in the preface to a new book of his “conversations on the Church and on the world of tomorrow.”⁵ There he admits to a fear of journalists. “I used to think they could have put me in a bind,” he writes. Worried that what he might say would be badly interpreted, he used to refuse all interviews. But then he came to be convinced that good could come from them. Regarding those that take place on the airplane, he writes, “I know that I must be prudent, and I hope I am. I always pray to the Holy Spirit before beginning to listen to the questions and responding. And so, just as I must not lose prudence, so neither must I lose faith. I know that this can render me vulnerable, but it’s a risk that I must run.” That risk has been rewarded on each flight in the good copy that journalists can work with and in the insightful teaching Francis offers to all who read the media reports.

Theological Analysis

The papal press conferences take place at a rather high altitude, literally and figuratively. The topics discussed there cover a wide range of globally significant issues. Some questions do touch upon specifically theological matters, but even these have a broader cultural regard.

Given the freedom of the journalists to pose questions of any interest to them, it would prove difficult to construct a theological compendium from the pope’s responses. But the voice speaking those responses does so in a way that brings the pope’s airborne theology down to earth and gives witness to his particular view of the Church as it engages the contemporary world. Examining that voice, we find three characteristic features of Francis’s ecclesiology, namely, his concern for pastoral

⁴ John L. Allen Jr., “Fun Facts and More about Life Aboard the Papal Plane,” *Cruz*, September 18, 2015, <https://cruznw.com/papal-visit/2015/09/18/fun-facts-and-more-about-life-aboard-the-papal-plane/>. See also Caroline Wyatt, “God’s Gift to Journalists: Questioning the Pope,” BBC (blog), October 2, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/cd349f3e-c145-4322-83ad-07550905fa78>. “In all, then, Pope Francis is, you might say, God’s gift to journalists: a leader always happy during press conferences to explain, expand on a theme, to talk at length about the issues facing the Church and, more often than not, to give ‘good copy.’”

⁵ Francesco con Antonio Spadaro, *Adesso fate le vostre domande. Conversazioni sulla Chiesa e sul mondo di domani* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; Milano: Rizzoli, 2017), 5–9.

“accompaniment,” his approach to prophetic “dialogue,” and his practice of pedagogical “discernment.” Together, these features communicate the papal mission to “encounter” the world, in a way particularly well-suited to an age dominated by mass media.

Pastoral Accompaniment

The international journeys that Francis undertakes are, first and foremost, about being with the people of the countries he visits. This may sound obvious, but it bears stating explicitly. On his first trip, to Brazil, the pope noted that “meeting people does me good, because the Lord works in each one of us, he works in our hearts, and the Lord’s riches are so great that we can always receive many wonderful things from others.”⁶ On a more recent flight, he expanded his view.

And what does the Pope think about his journey? To me the journey is good for me when I manage to meet the people of the country, the People of God. When I am able to speak or encounter them or greet them: encounters with the people. We spoke about encounters with politicians. ... Yes, it’s true, it must be done; with priests, with bishops ... but with the people, them, the people. The people are really the heart of a country. The people. And when I find them, when I am able to meet them, then I am happy.⁷

The happiness that comes from sharing the joy of the Gospel perdures despite the rigors of international travel and the scheduling demands of each trip. The pope humbly confessed the following after a ten-day visit to Cuba and the United States. “This is a bit personal, but I have to be honest. When the plane leaves after a visit, I think of the faces of all those people. I get the urge to pray for them and to say to the Lord: ‘I came here to do some good; perhaps I have done wrong, forgive me. But watch over all those people who saw me, who thought about the things I said, who heard me, even those who criticized me, all of them...’ This is what I feel.”⁸

⁶ “Press Conference of Pope Francis during the Return Flight,” Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro, Vatican website, July 28, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-conferenza-stampa.html.

⁷ “Press Conference of the Holy Father during the Return Flight from his Apostolic Trip to Myanmar and Bangladesh,” Vatican website, December 3, 2017, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/12/03/171203b.html>.

⁸ “In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from the United States of America to Rome,” Vatican website, September 27, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150927_usa-conferenza-stampa.html.

The pope's pastoral concern for the people of God becomes apparent whenever he is asked what strikes him most about the places he visits. He speaks, for instance, of the really big hearts of the Brazilian people,⁹ the diverse expressions of warmth in the United States,¹⁰ the courage of suffering Armenians,¹¹ the enthusiastic goodness of the youth in Poland,¹² the tenderness and nobility of the Colombian people,¹³ and the capacity of prisoners to change their lives.¹⁴

But this pastoral concern also extends directly to the journalists with whom he interacts. It is evident in his personal greetings to each of them on the outbound flights, and it frames his interactions with all of them on the homeward-bound flights. He usually begins the press conferences by expressing his wish to be "at their disposal," and he always concludes their conversations by thanking them for their work.

As a result of this accompaniment, the pope and the press corps have cultivated a relationship whose warmth also derives from this pope's personality. Likening their task to covering the British royal family, BBC correspondent Caroline Wyatt notes that "even the sceptics and the critics of the Roman Catholic Church might find this pope hard to resist in person. He is disarming, and has a personality that feels like a

⁹ "Press Conference," Rio de Janeiro.

¹⁰ "From the United States of America to Rome." Francis further explained this experience as "something beautiful but also different. In Washington the welcome was warm but a little more formal; in New York it was rather exuberant; in Philadelphia, it was very heartfelt."

¹¹ "In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Armenia to Rome," Vatican website, June 26, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/june/documents/papa-francesco_20160626_armenia-conferenza-stampa.html. Francis described the Armenian people as having "a life of stone" from having "suffered so much throughout its history, and faith alone, faith has kept this people on its feet."

¹² "In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Poland to Rome," Vatican website, July 31, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160731_polonia-conferenza-stampa.html.

¹³ "Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis on the Return Flight from Colombia to Rome," September 10, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/september/documents/papa-francesco_20170910_viaggioapostolico-colombia-voloritorno.html.

¹⁴ "Press Conference on the Return Flight from Lima to Rome," Vatican website, January 21, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180121_peru-voloritorno.html.

force of nature: irrepressible, jocular, open. He was dubbed in US [magazine] the ‘People’s Pope,’ and you can see why.”¹⁵

Early in Francis’s pontificate, journalists inquired about the pope’s personal habits, such as carrying his little black bag or asking people to pray for him; likewise, they wondered what he thought about being pope or remaining a Jesuit.¹⁶ At times, they engage him with the curiosity of tourists, as they seek to know his impressions or memories about each trip.¹⁷ They even express genuine concern for his well-being when something goes awry, as when he fell in Poland and in Colombia.

For his part, the pope’s pastoral concern shows forth in the personable ways in which he interacts with them. Sometimes it appears in a jovial manner, as when he warns them to watch out for the mosquitoes¹⁸ or apologizes for taking them into a heat wave.¹⁹ Often his responses include a bit of self-deprecating humor. The pope once responded to a question about challenges to the reform of the Curia by saying, “Well, the first obstacle is me!”²⁰ When asked about the secret to his energy and endurance on these trips, he suggested that the questioner really wanted to ask what drug he was using.²¹ And in response to a question about other travels, he stated that he would like to make a future trip to India, adding wryly, “If I’m still alive.”²² With a shared laughter, these and other quips set a cordial tone important to their reciprocal tasks.

The pope also freely shares insights about himself, such as his “neuroses” about taking a vacation²³ or the “good dose of unconsciousness” he

¹⁵ Wyatt, “God’s Gift to Journalists.”

¹⁶ All of these topics were discussed on the return flight from Rio de Janeiro.

¹⁷ This is especially so with the initial questions asked by journalists from the countries just visited.

¹⁸ “Greetings of the Holy Father to the Journalists during the Rome-Nairobi Flight,” Vatican website, November 25, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151125_kenya-saluto-giornalisti.html.

¹⁹ “Myanmar and Bangladesh.”

²⁰ “Interview of Pope Francis with Journalists during the Return Flight from the Holy Land,” Vatican website, May 26, 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140526_terra-santa-conferenza-stampa.html.

²¹ “In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Paraguay to Rome,” Vatican website, July 13, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150712_paraguay-conferenza-stampa.html.

²² “Myanmar and Bangladesh.”

²³ “In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Korea to Rome,” Vatican website, August 18, 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/august/documents/papa-francesco_20140818_corea-conferenza-stampa.html.

has regarding his own security.²⁴ These seem to pass as innocuous comments, but they function to let the reporters in on who their subject is. To that end, he also appears to enjoy telling biographical stories to help him make a point. For example, he once 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].”²⁵

In other words, as a pastor close to his flock, Francis has developed a sense of regard for, and trust in, the media. He speaks to reporters who happen to be corralled on a plane, but their mutual mirth witnesses to a level of familiarity that facilitates interaction. And the innocuous comments from the pope make him all the more “real” to them, thereby reducing some distance between them. As a result, this mutual concern serves as the foundation to their shared work of communication.

But this lightheartedness does not, by any means, turn these in-flight encounters into some sort of lovefest between the pontiff and the “hacks in black.”²⁶ In fact, the bulk of the discussions concern serious matters, and in them we hear another feature of the pope’s ecclesiology—in the voice of one who expresses faith through dialogue born of conviction.

Personal Dialogue

The media traveling with the pope are not there simply to banter. They have a job to do. They know it, and so does Francis. That job is to dig and prod, sometimes to seek and always to find what is newsworthy about these papal voyages. In this regard, journalists do not merely advance official themes spoken about in the papal discourses during the trip; they eagerly bring up subjects of concern to their own audiences. Not

²⁴ “Meeting of the Holy Father with the Journalists during the Flight towards Manila,” Vatican website, January 15, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150115_srilanka-filippine-incontro-giornalisti.html.

²⁵ “Press Conference of the Holy Father during the Return Flight from the Philippines,” Vatican website, January 19, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150119_srilanka-filippine-conferenza-stampa.html. See also “Flight towards Manila” for the story he told of his grandmother’s saying something good about Protestants.

²⁶ See Trisha Thomas, “Hacks in Black: On the Papal Plane with Pope Francis,” *Mozzarella Mama* (blog), September 2015, <http://www.mozzarellamamma.com/2015/hacks-in-black-on-the-papal-plane-with-pope-francis/>, which describes Thomas’s experience covering the papal trip to Cuba and the United States.

surprisingly, this includes hot-button topics, such as the purported gay lobby in the Vatican,²⁷ the politics of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump,²⁸ or the sexual abuse of minors by clergy.²⁹

No question is off-limits. Nor are the papal responses constrained by unwritten protocol.³⁰ Francis does not refuse an answer, nor does he hide behind a public relations machine. With this pope, as the saying goes, “what you see is what you get.”³¹ What the media get is a Church leader who dares to speak freely. As Francis likes to say, his responses reflect “what comes to mind.” This phrase may qualify what the pope says as being non-definitive, but the boldness with which he offers his own perspective is striking, as in this example: “Perhaps what I want to say is a lack of respect, but it comes to me. I believe that behind every suicide attack there is an imbalance, a human imbalance. I don’t know if mental, but human. Something wrong with that person. He does not have that balance on the meaning of his life, his life and that of others.”³² In other instances, he dares to ponder out loud—about terrorism,³³ the Roman Curia,³⁴ the environment³⁵—thinking and speaking off the cuff in ways that may surprise those who question him there or who later read what he says.

²⁷ “Press Conference,” Rio de Janeiro.

²⁸ “In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Mexico to Rome,” Vatican website, February 17, 2016, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/documents/papa-francesco_20160217_messico-conferenza-stampa.html.

²⁹ See, for example, “Return Flight from the Holy Land”; “From the United States of America to Rome”; “From Lima to Rome”; and “Press Conference on the Return Flight from Dublin to Rome,” Vatican website, August 26, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/august/documents/papa-francesco_20180826_irlanda-voloritorno.html.

³⁰ In “God’s Gift to Journalists,” Wyatt says, “While they’re the subject of immense discussion and debate ahead of the presser, I have not yet seen a serious question self-censored or over-ruled by the press officers on board the flight.”

³¹ Gustavo Entrala identifies this as one of two defining qualities of the pope’s leadership. Inés San Martín, “Meet the Man Who Helped Build the Pope’s Brand on Twitter,” *Crux*, September 21, 2017, <https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2017/09/21/meet-man-helped-build-popes-brand-twitter/>.

³² “Flight towards Manila.”

³³ “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.” “From Poland to Rome.”

³⁴ 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.” “Press Conference,” Rio de Janeiro.

³⁵ “From Colombia to Rome.”

Beyond the extemporaneous responses, the media also get a pope unafraid to challenge what they do. On the return flight from Istanbul, for example, he objected to a reporter's question about how the Church should speak about homosexuals by telling her, "I would like the main subject of your news reports to be about this visit. But I will answer, I will answer, be assured. But let this not be perhaps the most *éclatant*: people need to be informed about this visit."³⁶ On other flights, he pointed out missteps taken by the press, including mistaking opinion for news,³⁷ missing the real focus of the first Synod of Bishops on the Family,³⁸ and misleading readers about his wanting to study the question of deaconesses.³⁹ On one trip, he even named three "sins" to which the press is subject: "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 little to do with the present."⁴⁰

Beyond these objections, the pope also expresses his frustration with the media, especially in terms of their leading questions that misinterpret his words or actions. One sharp example of this came in response to a question about how he, as pastor and minister, would accompany persons who question their own gender and sexual identity. To this the pope retorted as follows:

³⁶ "In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Istanbul to Rome," Vatican website, November 30, 2014, http://m.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_turchia-conferenza-stampa.html.

³⁷ "From Mexico to Rome."

³⁸ On the return flight from Lesvos, the pope complained, "When I called the first Synod, most of the media were concerned with one question: Will the divorced and remarried be able to receive communion? Since I am not a saint, this was somewhat annoying to me, and even made me a bit sad. Because I think: those media that say all these things, don't they realize that that is not the important issue? Don't they realize that the family, all over the world, is in crisis?" "In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Lesvos to Rome," Vatican website, April 16, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/april/documents/papa-francesco_20160416_lesvos-volo-ritorno.html.

³⁹ "From Armenia to Rome." 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" (second set of brackets in the original).

⁴⁰ "In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from the Central African Republic to Rome," Vatican website, November 30, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151130_repubblica-centrafricana-conferenza-stampa.html.

Life is life, and things have to be taken as they come. Sin is sin. Tendencies or hormonal imbalances create many problems and we have to take care not to say: “It doesn’t make any difference, let’s live it up.” No, not at all. But for every case welcome it, accompany it, look into it, discern and integrate it. This is what Jesus would do today. Please, do not say: “The Pope blesses transsexuals!” Please! Because I can already see the newspaper headlines... No, no. Are there any doubts about what I said? ... It is a moral problem. It is a problem. It is a human problem.⁴¹

Sometimes, especially when fielding repeated questions on the same topic, he finds it necessary to insist that his positions are in full accord with the social teaching of the Church.⁴² At other times, with less detail but no less exacerbation, he uses a single word in Italian that brings the dialogue to a halt after enough has been said, as in these three examples:

A bishop who moves a priest, who has been proven to be a pedophile, to a new parish is reckless, and the best thing he can do is present his resignation. Is that clear? [*Chiaro?*]⁴³

We are all saints because we have the Holy Spirit in us, but we are all of us sinners. Myself first. Agreed? [*D'accordo?*]⁴⁴

When I speak of war, I speak of real war, not of a war of religion, no. ... All the religions, we want peace. Others want war. Do you understand? [*Capito?*]⁴⁵

⁴¹ “In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Azerbaijan to Rome,” Vatican website, October 2, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/october/documents/papa-francesco_20161002_georgia-azerbaijan-conferenza-stampa.html; cf. his response to that in “From Dublin to Rome,” in which he corrects a question (“No, no, that isn’t it”) and clarifies the notion of tribunals.

⁴² For example, in response to a question about why his critique of the communist system in Cuba was “more ‘soft’” than his critique of the liberal capitalist system in Latin America, the pope replied as follows:

In my speeches in Cuba, I always mentioned the Church’s social teaching. I spoke clearly, not gingerly or gently, about the things that need to be corrected. But also ... I didn’t say anything harsher than what I wrote in the encyclical, and also in *Evangelii gaudium*, on unfettered or liberal capitalism: it is all there. I don’t recall having said anything more than that. I don’t know, if you remember, help me to recall... I said what I had written, and that is more than enough! Then too, just as I said to your colleague: all this is part of the Church’s social doctrine.

“In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Santiago de Cuba to Washington, DC,” Vatican website, September 22, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150922_intervista-santiago-washington.html.

⁴³ “From Mexico to Rome.”

⁴⁴ “From Armenia to Rome.”

⁴⁵ “Greeting of the Holy Father to Journalists on the Flight to Krakow,” Vatican website, July 27, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160727_polonia-volo-andata.html.

But one should not mistake the pope's directness for sternness or animosity. As a leader expressing faith convictions for the world to know, the pope desires (and needs) to communicate with clarity more so than with diplomacy. Putting spin on his responses is clearly not his *modus operandi*.

Instead, this pope's mode of speaking manifests a humble yet bold confidence in expressing viewpoints on a variety of subjects. This he does from a belief that, with the journalists, he is engaging in open dialogue about important matters. In such a dialogue, the pope's honesty prevails; as he 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."⁴⁶ He also willingly apologizes for his own mistakes.⁴⁷

Despite the occasional misstep, Francis still speaks with the authority of a universal pastor. In conversation with the journalists, his convictions about the meaning of human life, social systems, and the ways of the world become evident. These are, to be sure, the pope's own opinions, but being "the bishop dressed in white,"⁴⁸ he knows that his views come with the power and the responsibility to lead the worldwide Church. Here we find another feature of Francis's ecclesiology—in the voice of one acting as a guide in the realm of the spirit.

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, the press conferences provide a unique opportunity for Francis to raise his voice (figuratively) as a herald and speak as a teacher in the exercise of a new sort of papal magisterium. We hear this pedagogical voice when the pope explains the terms he uses, makes necessary distinctions, adopts universal principles, and broadens the context of the topics under discussion.

Responding to questions about his choice of words, the pope ably defends speaking about "genocide" or "concentration camps."⁴⁹ More

⁴⁶ "From the Central African Republic to Rome."

⁴⁷ "From Lima to Rome."

⁴⁸ "In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Fatima to Rome," Vatican website, May 13, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/may/documents/papa-francesco_20170513_voloritorno-fatima.html.

⁴⁹ "From Armenia to Rome." See also "Return Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Egypt to Rome," Vatican website, April 29, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170429_egitto-volo.html.

interestingly, he elaborates on the meaning of terminology that he creates, adopts, or promotes. For example, on the flight from the Philippines, the pope explained “ideological colonization” as introducing “an idea to the people that has nothing to do with the people. With *groups* of people yes, but not with the people. And they colonize the people with an idea which changes, or means to change, a mentality or a structure.” On that same flight, he clarified the notion of “responsible parenthood” as the Church’s key to population control.⁵⁰

In addition to helping them understand the papal lexicon,⁵¹ Francis schools the journalists on necessary distinctions that they (and, by consequence, their readers) too easily overlook. To a question about US military forces bombing terrorists in Iraq, he distinguished between stopping an unjust aggressor and doing evil.⁵² On the question of Islamophobia, he suggested 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.”⁵³ On the thorny question of pardoning manifest sinners, he noted the difference between seeking and granting forgiveness by stating, “It is one thing to forgive—we are bound to forgive, because we have all been forgiven—but it is another thing to accept forgiveness. . . . We must be ready to forgive, but not all can receive it or are able or willing to receive it.”⁵⁴

Ever the Jesuit philosopher, Francis also emphasizes the use of universal principles that go beyond the particular situation about which the media inquire. For instance, when asked whether conscientious objection applies to government officials, he noted that “it is a human right. And if a

⁵⁰ “Return Flight from the Philippines.”

⁵¹ Cf. Joshua J. McElwee and Cindy Wooden, eds., *A Pope Francis Lexicon* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).

⁵² “From Korea to Rome.”

⁵³ “From Istanbul to Rome.” See also “From Poland to Rome,” in which Francis 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.”

⁵⁴ “From the United States of America to Rome.” See also “From Colombia to Rome,” in which Francis states, “There is a difference: God never tires of forgiving, and sinners find the courage to beg his forgiveness. The problem is that the corrupt person gets tired of begging forgiveness and even forgets how to. This is the grave problem; they are no longer sensitive to values, to the destruction and exploitation of people. They are not capable of begging forgiveness. It is as if they are already condemned. In this sense, it is very, very difficult to help a corrupt person. But God can do it. I pray for this.”

government official is [a] human person, he enjoys that right. It is a human right."⁵⁵ Or, when asked about ecumenical dialogue, the pope addresses specific issues like a common date for Easter,⁵⁶ but he also refers more generally to a spiritual ecumenism and an ecumenism of blood that can be widely shared with other churches and faiths.⁵⁷ Most recently he recalled the juridical principle that "one is presumed innocent until proven guilty" and elaborated on the distinction between informing and investigating with regard to media reporting about abuse.⁵⁸

Not content merely to set things straight in the reporters' thinking, Francis routinely stretches their consideration to include broader contexts than the situations about which they ask. He generally does not allow himself to be drawn into partisan political debates, as, for instance, on the Jerusalem question⁵⁹ or legislation about civil unions,⁶⁰ or government responses to immigration.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the pope does "do politics" as a religious leader by expressing the value proposition of political issues, as, for example, in his repeated comments on building bridges rather than walls.⁶² He explained the need for such comments thus: "In an indirect way we do get involved in politics when we preach values, true values, and one of the greatest of those values is fraternity, among ourselves. ... Being political, in the sense of winning over people ... that is the 'politics' in which we religious leaders must engage."⁶³

⁵⁵ "From the United States of America to Rome."

⁵⁶ "Return Flight from the Holy Land."

⁵⁷ See, for example, "From Istanbul to Rome."

⁵⁸ "From Dublin to Rome."

⁵⁹ The pope admits that he does not "feel competent to say, 'This or that should be done,' because it would be madness on my part." "Return Flight from the Holy Land."

⁶⁰ The pope flatly states, "I do not know what's happening in the Italian Parliament. The Pope does not interfere with Italian politics." "From Mexico to Rome."

⁶¹ On the possible deportation of "dreamers" from the US, the pope made clear that "really I don't want to express an opinion on that case because I have not read about it, and I don't like to speak about something I haven't first studied." "From Colombia to Rome."

⁶² See "From the United States of America to Rome," in which the pope responds, "You ask me about fences, walls. You know what happens to walls, all of them. Walls all fall down—today, tomorrow or in a hundred years—but they will fall. ... Walls are never solutions, but bridges always are." In "From Mexico to Rome," in response to a question about Donald Trump's calling the pope a political pawn, Francis uttered the infamous quip that "a person who thinks only of building walls, wherever it may be, and not of building bridges, is not Christian," after which he immediately added, "I only say: if a man says these things, he is not Christian. We have to see if [Trump] said these things, and thus I will give him the benefit of the doubt."

⁶³ "From the Central African Republic to Rome."

In the sociopolitical realm, the pope seeks, on the one hand, to expand the media's viewpoints. For example, to a question about legitimizing the use of condoms to prevent HIV infection, he responded that "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."⁶⁴ Similarly, when asked whether the Church should apologize to the gay community, the pope said, "I think that the Church should apologize ... not only to this person who is gay and has been offended, but also to the poor, to women and to children exploited in the workplace, and for having blessed so many weapons. The Church should apologize for all the times she has not acted."⁶⁵

On the other hand, the pope also challenges the journalists to reflect personally on the issues they face during 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 so much, to me, that you in your *media*, made reflections: how do you see these things today? How is the level of cruelty of humanity? And what do you think of torture? I think it will be good for all of us to reflect on this."⁶⁶

With various pedagogical tools, Francis grapples with reporters' questions, while also endeavoring to lead them to discern more clearly the multiple aspects of those questions. Moving beyond theological matters to instruct them on a wide variety of social, economic, and political subjects, the pope expresses points of view that can influence worldwide opinion, even if his stated positions come to life in verbal images and constructs that may not yet be fully formulated. But, as we shall now consider, the pope's approach, at once pastoral and personal and pedagogical, gives to his message a dynamism befitting the living, breathing mission of the Church to tell the Good News to all the world.

Communications Synthesis

With his uniquely magisterial voice, Pope Francis delivers his message to the media. But the press conferences provide more than just timely

⁶⁴ "From the Central African Republic to Rome."

⁶⁵ "From Armenia to Rome."

⁶⁶ "From Korea to Rome."

responses from a globally popular leader. These events act as an “encounter” between pope and people, both the journalists on the plane and their readers on the ground. For Francis, such an encounter is the Church in vivo. Consequently, the in-flight press conferences have become for him a powerful vehicle for conducting the papal mission of evangelization to the Church and the world.

With Francis, the Petrine ministry is intentionally missionary. As Father Antonio Spadaro describes it, “The movement of ‘going out’ is ... explicitly clear from the beginning of this pontificate: it is a going out in order to go there where human and spiritual meaning can be found.”⁶⁷ Although he does not especially enjoy traveling, Francis goes out to other lands as a “sign” of solicitude for people otherwise on the margins of the world’s attention and as an opportunity to herald the “message” of Gospel joy he wishes to give to them.⁶⁸ On the return trip from Azerbaijan, for instance, he 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.”⁶⁹

But no matter the size of the country he visits, Francis still speaks with a unique authority. His responses to the journalists’ questions express what he is thinking in a manner different from that of formal teaching. Reading these responses with the “hermeneutics of the whole” that the pope champions,⁷⁰ we find in his words rich insights born of a deep personal spirituality and vast pastoral experience. As Father Spadaro puts it, “The message of Pope Francis is capable of touching persons in an immediate, direct, and intuitive way.”⁷¹

As the pope himself sees them, the press conferences are missionary moments, but they are also person-to-person moments akin to the way he preaches. Likening the in-flight conversations to his daily homilies in St.

⁶⁷ Francis and Spadaro, introduction to *Adesso fate le vostre domande*, 20.

⁶⁸ The pope describes going to Albania as “a message, it is a sign: it is a sign which I wish to give.” “In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Albania to Rome,” Vatican website, September 21, 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/september/documents/papa-francesco_20140921_albania-conferenza-stampa.html.

⁶⁹ “From Azerbaijan to Rome.”

⁷⁰ “From Mexico to Rome.”

⁷¹ Francis and Spadaro, introduction to *Adesso fate le vostre domande*, 13.

Martha's Chapel, the pope states, "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."⁷²

The locus of these dialogues highlights the focus of Francis's teaching, in which the pastoral becomes prophetic. The lessons take place with the pope standing in the midst of an airline cabin rather than seated on a cathedral throne. In those close quarters, he answers any and all questions without prefabrication or prevarication. Father Spadaro explains well the significance of this approach.

The fact that Francis does not wish to know the questions ahead of time certainly puts the Pope at risk of lapses in speech (*sbavature*) because he has no remote or pre-packaged preparation. However, it has the merit of generating a language that wishes not only to clarify and explain, but to encounter whoever listens to him. ... If it seems to be a mimetic way of speaking, it is because it is abased, becoming that of life, not of speculation. The sense is clear: the evangelical message comes to be presented 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. This is the background motivation to what we see in the interviews and in the conversations of Francis.⁷³

In his humble approach, the pope's unfiltered speech can put him at risk, and that risk increases with the instantaneous global reach of today's digital communications. As we know, papal comments often create jarring headlines and generate vociferous criticism. But the pope acknowledges, even embraces, this risk. As he said to a journalist who asked whether he feared having his words manipulated, "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."⁷⁴

With courage and boldness, then, this pope dares to speak, to say what is on his mind, and even to express his thoughts with homespun examples or down-to-earth idioms that may require further explanation. At

⁷² Francis and Spadaro, preface to *Adesso fate le vostre domande*, 7.

⁷³ Francis and Spadaro, introduction to *Adesso fate le vostre domande*, 14.

⁷⁴ "From Paraguay to Rome."

the same time, however, he senses that today's prophetic messages require a continual process of communication, one that does not "slam the door" in the face of others. As he explained on a recent flight, in his method of communicating, "the most important thing is that the message gets across, and therefore to try to say things one step at a time and listen to the responses, until the message gets across. ... And this is very important, in communication: concern that the message gets across. So often, there is condemnation, even in the media—I don't want to offend—with some dose of aggressiveness, closes the dialogue; it closes the door and the message doesn't get across. And you, who are specialists at getting messages across, understand this quite well."⁷⁵

With that focus on the message more so than the messenger, 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. In dialogue with those interviewing him, as Father Spadaro claims, the pope's "chief interest" is "not to offer definitions and sentences but to draw near to the restlessness of the interlocutor."⁷⁶

Sometimes the VAMPs are, indeed, restless. Still, they remain always there to accompany the pope on his apostolic journeys. More significant is the realization that the pope is also there to accompany them. The press conferences allow Francis not only to teach them in response to questions they ask, but through them to show the world what the Church can be and how it should work.

On the one hand, the pope appreciates the crucial role the media have to play in the work of evangelization. He explicitly invites them to share in the apostolic mission of the trips they undertake together. On the way to Greece, he asked the media to communicate the spiritual reasons for the trip; namely, to be with "so many people who are suffering, who do not know where to go, who had to flee."⁷⁷ On the way to Egypt, he reminded them that "people follow us," and, therefore, their job will be to "help many people to understand the trip, to know what has been done, what we have spoken about, many things."⁷⁸ And on the way to Turkey, he

⁷⁵ "Myanmar and Bangladesh."

⁷⁶ Francis and Spadaro, introduction to *Adesso fate le vostre domande*, 15.

⁷⁷ "Words of His Holiness Pope Francis during the Flight from Rome to Lesbos," Vatican website, April 16, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/april/documents/papa-francesco_20160416_lesvos-volo-andata.html.

⁷⁸ "Greeting to Journalists on the Flight from Rome to Cairo," Vatican website, April 28, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170428_egitto-volo-andata.html.

specifically describes their work as “a support, a help and also a service to the world,” because they would be able to make known the religious and humanitarian nature of the trip.⁷⁹

On the other hand, the pope appreciates the particular role played by the media in advancing the mission of the Church. Recognizing that the media exercise the significant function of posing questions that people are asking, he willingly and honestly answers them. He even thanks the media “for the questions, too, for the things that I have learned from your questions,”⁸⁰ thereby putting into practice what he preaches about accompanying people along the way of understanding.

Along that way and in fulfillment of his papal mission, 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.”⁸¹

That conversation is ongoing. So, too, the pope’s ecclesiology appears 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.” In this respect, the in-flight conversations that have become a staple of Francis’s apostolic journeys reflect what Father Spadaro calls “a form of expression particularly suited to the dynamic forms of this pontificate. In the interview there is always the ‘background noise’ of life, in one way or another. And this makes a profound difference in the communication of a Pope.”⁸²

That communication has not always been received positively. Some wonder why he would risk giving interviews, and others cringe at his comments. Some are confused by his words, while others think the practice of engaging journalists in this way is unbecoming of a pope. Examining the many and varied criticisms of the pope’s interviews would

⁷⁹ “Greeting of the Holy Father to the Journalists during the Rome-Ankara Flight,” Vatican website, November 28, 2014, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141128_turchia-saluto-volo.html.

⁸⁰ “Myanmar and Bangladesh.”

⁸¹ Francis and Spadaro, preface to *Adesso fate le vostre domande*, 9.

⁸² Francis and Spadaro, introduction to *Adesso fate le vostre domande*, 17.

far exceed the scope of this paper. Instead, we simply conclude that the voice of Francis is particularly well-suited to communicating a vision of the Church in an age of new media, even if the pope himself dismisses the notion of being a global “star.”⁸³

For example, 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. In addition, 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 Francis a voice of popular appeal and theological interest.

In the end, the interactive encounters that are the papal press conferences bear witness to this pope’s thoroughly pastoral view of the Church, as he explains: “For me 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.”⁸⁴ That ministry is to be a herald crying out to the world, a world nowadays profoundly influenced by mass media. For Pope Francis, the story of faith—the Gospel story of joy and mercy—is one worth telling, even by way of the media, to all who will listen.

⁸³ In “From the United States of America to Rome,” Francis responded to a question about this designation.

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.

⁸⁴ Francis and Spadaro, preface to *Adesso fate le vostre domande*, 6.