

Jesuit collaboration central to getting 'unprecedented' interview, magazine's editor says

Brian Roewe | Sep. 19, 2013

Once again Pope Francis focused the world's attention on his words Wednesday morning, this time thanks to a global coalition of his fellow Jesuits.

The extensive, 12,000-word interview appeared in *America* magazine, along with other Jesuit publications across the globe. It is the first one-on-one interview with Francis, the first Jesuit pope, since he was elected to the papacy in March.

Conducted in August by Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of the Italian Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the interview played out over the course of three sessions lasting two hours each.

"It is unprecedented certainly in the history of *America* magazine, and probably in the history of papal communications, so it's a very exciting day," said its editor Jesuit Fr. Matt Malone.

[In a special edition podcast](#) [1], Malone detailed the story behind the interview, saying the idea originated from a casual conversation after Francis' election with editor at large Fr. Jim Martin.

"We were talking about our general editorial approach to the new papacy ? and he said kind of offhand, 'Why don't we try to interview the pope?' And I said you know what, we *should* try to interview the pope," Malone said.

Not believing it would happen, he reached out to Vatican spokesman Fr. Federico Lombardi, who told him Francis doesn't give interviews, but would see if something could be arranged. At that time, Malone and the *America* staff learned fellow Jesuit publication *La Civiltà Cattolica* had also sought an interview. The two staffs determined a partnership could aid their efforts.

"They are also a Jesuit journal. They have a greater proximity to the pope, and they enjoy a special relationship with the communications department at the Vatican," Malone said.

Over time, other Jesuit journals worldwide joined the collaboration, and their editors compiled questions to send to *La Civiltà Cattolica* and Spadaro, appointed to relay them to the pope in his apartment at Casa Santa Marta in Rome.

After the interview concluded, *America's* role became translating it from Italian into English, a difficult and intimidating task, Malone said.

"This was the first time in *America's* history that we had ever been the primary vehicle through which the pope spoke to the American people, and we had never published the pope's words before as a first. So getting the translation right was a huge priority," he said on the podcast.

A collection of five, independent Italian experts ? native speakers and academics ? scoured through the 12,000 words to not only provide a literal translation, but also an accurate representation of what Francis meant to say.

Despite insistences that the pope didn't grant interviews, Malone thought the format fit Francis' personality.

"Though he may not be attracted to the [one-on-one] genre, it is actually quite well-suited to him," Malone said. "Because he says [in the interview] that he has a hard time talking to large crowds, and when he was at World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, and there were a million people on the beach, he found that intimidating and difficult to grasp.

"But he says to Antonio Spadaro, I am much more comfortable in situations where I'm speaking just to the person in front of me, and I'm concentrating on that person, and I'm engaging with their heart, and so in that sense, well, what kind of person could possibly be better suited to the interview format?"

That Francis' brothers in the Society of Jesus orchestrated the one-on-one likely played a large role in putting the pope at ease, Malone said.

"It's certainly true that Jesuits have by virtue of our living the Spiritual Exercises and the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, we have a certain shared language and outlook and experience," he said.

Reflecting on the interview itself, Malone noted that what Francis said is not new in terms of church teaching, but the freedom with which he spoke represents a stark contrast from papal decrees of the past.

"When you take together the interview on the plane and this interview that is appearing in *America* today, what we're witnessing I think is the birth of a new genre of papal communications, one that is less didactic, one that is less formal, one that is more fraternal instead of paternal," he said, referring to an impromptu press conference Francis gave in July to reporters on the plane as he was returning to Rome from Brazil.

That change in tone continues the shift begun after the Second Vatican Council from monarchical to pastoral in the papacy.

"We've had a series of steps from the late 1960s until today that brought us from the monarchical papacy to the pastoral papacy, and I think what we're seeing in Francis really is a full flowering of that. I mean he talks to us as our brother rather than as our father, and he talks to us as our pastor does, as a good priest would," he said.

"And I think that that's incredibly refreshing, and I think you know his sincerity has its own eloquence, and that's why people are attracted to him," Malone said, noting sincerity and authenticity are traits particularly prized in western cultures.

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