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On the pope's 'mystical moment': something did happen

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When journalists look back at the important pieces of work we've produced, we typically ask two sorts of questions:

- Did I get the story right? That is, did I mislead readers or viewers about what happened, what its significance was, and so on?
- Did I get the details right? Were names spelled correctly, dates properly recorded, the sequence of events presented correctly, and so on?

Naturally, the two things are related, because a big picture is made up of details. On the other hand, it's possible to let a couple of points get away without fundamentally distorting reality.

As things stand, when Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari looks back at his blockbuster Oct. 1 interview with Pope Francis, he may feel some irritation on the second score, but he probably won't lose much sleep on the first.

Scalfari, who's 89, appears to have jumbled some of the fine points regarding a so-called "mystical moment" experienced by the new pope shortly after his election, but the bottom line is that something did happen, and it may have implications for understanding the spontaneity and boldness Francis has displayed ever since.

To recap, although the Vatican confirmed the basic "trustworthiness" of the Scalfari interview on Oct. 2, questions didn't go away about a section where Scalfari has the pope describing what happened when he was elected the evening of March 13.

Scalfari quotes Francis as saying he initially considered refusing the papacy, and before he accepted, he left the Sistine Chapel for a moment of prayer in a small room off the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Basilica. There, according to the text, he had a quasi-mystical experience that dispelled his anxiety. Afterward, Scalfari has the pope saying, he returned to the chapel, signed his act of acceptance and went off to present himself to the world.

Experts were immediately dubious, first for a technical reason -- there is no small room off the balcony, which is located in the middle of a long hallway.

Second, cardinals who had been inside the conclave already had described several aspects of what happened after the pope's election, but none ever mentioned any delay by Francis in accepting the office. (For the record, describing the scene after a pope is elected is no violation of the cardinals' oath of secrecy because as a technical matter, the conclave is over.)

On Thursday, veteran Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli published his doubts about the Scalfari interview, including not just the scene described above but also other matters of word choice.

On Saturday, *NCR* carried a story quoting Cardinal Timothy Dolan [1] of New York, one of the cardinals who

elected Francis, denying there was any delay between Francis' election and his acceptance. (Dolan spoke in response to an *NCR* inquiry.)

Later that day, Fr. Thomas Rosica of Salt and Light TV in Canada, who assists the Vatican Press Office with English-speaking media, issued a statement confirming Dolan's version of events.

According to Rosica, Scalfari neither tape-recorded his interview nor took notes at the time, so it was an after-the-fact reconstruction. On the matter of his acceptance, Rosica said, Scalfari had it wrong.

"The newly elected pope never left the Sistine Chapel for a period of reflection before finally accepting the papacy," Rosica said.

The key question, however, is: Does this correction fundamentally alter the point of the story -- that shortly after his election, Francis experienced some sort of brush with the divine that gave him a sense of peace?

The answer would appear to be no, and we have confirmation from at least two other sources.

First, I published a column Friday [2] in which I quoted a cardinal on background (not an American) who recently had a private session with Francis. This cardinal said he's been struck by the more freewheeling and spontaneous style Francis has demonstrated as pope in comparison to the fairly restrained and shy manner he exhibited in public in Argentina, and he told me he had said to the pope point-blank, "You're not the same guy."

According to the cardinal, the pope's reply was more or less the following: "When I was elected, a great sense of inner peace and freedom came over me, and it's never left me."

We got additional details from an interview Rosica recently conducted with Msgr. Dario Viganò, director of the Vatican Television Center, for Salt and Light:

Viganò was inside the Vatican in the moments immediately after Francis' election and before the new pope stepped out to greet the world. He says when Francis left the Sistine Chapel to walk toward the balcony, he had his eyes down, he wasn't smiling, he didn't say anything to the cardinals, and was as if he were carrying "an enormous burden."

Then, however, Francis stepped into the Pauline Chapel, where a throne had been set up for him to use for prayer. Instead, Francis asked the two cardinals walking with him, Jean-Louis Tauran (who made the "Habemus papam" announcement) and Agostino Vallini (the vicar of Rome) to sit with him in the chapel's back pew.

The pope had a few moments of silent prayer and, according to Viganò, describing what he saw, "he stands up, turns around, and at that moment he's a different person."

"It's as if God had said to him personally, 'Don't worry, I'm here with you,' " Viganò said.

Those moments were filmed, Viganò said, though they haven't yet been broadcast.

In other words, both the pope's comments to the cardinal I quoted and Viganò's description of the moments just before Francis stepped out onto the balcony dovetail with the gist of Scalfari's scene: Something happened to

the new pope that night, whether we call it a mystical experience or not, that gave him a feeling of calm, and it's stayed with him afterward.

None of this, of course, is to excuse *La Repubblica*'s sloppiness in not making clear to readers that what was being presented as the literal words of the pope was actually a reconstruction, not a transcript.

Barring further clarification from the Vatican, it's now impossible to cite any particular lines or formulae from that interview and attribute them directly to the pope, since we don't know quite where Scalfari ends and Francis begins.

It would also be a mistake, however, to simply disregard the interview, including the critical matter of what happened to Francis immediately after his election.

Scalfari apparently got some of the details wrong, but the essence about right.

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