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Papal press conference continues to make news

Thomas Reese | May. 29, 2014 Faith and Justice
Francis in the Holy Land

He did it again. Pope Francis held a free-wheeling press conference on the airplane on the way back to Rome from the Holy Land. Even though Vatican officials warned that the pope was tired and asked reporters to keep the questions short, the pope stood and took questions for 40 minutes after a grueling three-day visit to Jordan, Palestine, and Israel.

Under previous popes, these press conferences were usually scripted with questions submitted in writing in advance followed by prepared responses from the pope. Coming back from Brazil, Pope Francis set a more open style, which he repeated on his return from the Holy Land.

The pope gave the press lots to write about.

Many reporters led with his comments in response to a question on celibacy. "The Catholic Church has married priests --- Greek Catholics, Coptic Catholics, those of oriental rites," he told reporters. "Celibacy is not a question of dogma, but rather a rule of life that I greatly appreciate, as I believe it is a gift for the Church. But, since it is not a dogma of the faith, the door is always open."

In fact, he said nothing new here that he had not already said in his book *Of Heaven and Earth*, as I reported shortly after his election [1].

Last month, after a meeting with the pope, Bishop Erwin Kräutler of Xingu in the Brazilian rainforest said that the pope is open to the idea of ordaining married men. [2] "The pope explained that he could not take everything in hand personally from Rome," the bishop told the Austrian daily *Salzburger Nachrichten* on April 5. "We local bishops, who are best acquainted with the needs of our faithful, should be *corajudos*, that is 'courageous' in Spanish, and make concrete suggestions."

Earlier popes would have acknowledged that celibacy is not a dogma of faith, but Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI also made clear that any discussion of optional celibacy was off the table. Francis is not going to lead the charge for optional celibacy, but neither is he going to attempt to stop any discussion of it. Instead, he has signaled that if bishops of a nation or region request permission to ordain married men, he would be open to it. So if you want married priests, talk to your local bishop.

The other big story to come out of the press conference was his announcement that he is soon going to meet with some survivors of sexual abuse by priests, something the NCR Editorial Staff [3] and others have called for.

From a PR perspective, he should have simply met with victims and announced it afterwards. Announcing it ahead of time will lead to numerous media stories [4] on the purpose, makeup, and expectations of the meeting. But Francis' natural openness has trumped PR considerations.

The pope also used some of the strongest language on abuse to have come out of the Vatican. A "priest must

lead this child, this boy, this girl, to sanctity, and this boy or girl trusts in him," he said. But "instead of leading them to sanctity he abuses them. This is very serious. It is like, by way of comparison, holding a black Mass. You are supposed to lead them to sanctity and instead you lead them to a problem that will last their entire lives."

The pope also reported that "At the moment there are three bishops under investigation: one has already been found guilty and we are now considering the penalty to be imposed. There are no privileges."

It is unclear whether the bishops under investigation were abusers or involved in cover-ups. Some people have speculated that the pope was talking about Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City, Mo., who was found guilty in civil court for not reporting a priest who had child pornography on his computer.

My guess is that the pope was talking about bishops who were abusers. If the Vatican were investigating bishops who were involved in cover-ups, there would be a lot more than three.

While the pope's comments on celibacy and sexual abuse made the biggest splash in the media, his responses on Vatican finances and reform caught the attention of Vatican insiders.

For example, he acknowledged that Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the former Vatican secretary of state, is under investigation for mishandling 15 million Euros held by the Institute of Religious Works or Vatican bank. "It's something being studied, it's not clear," the pope said. "Maybe it's the truth, but at this moment it's not definitive." Just a week earlier, the Vatican press office had denied that Bertone was under investigation [5].

Francis indicated that the financial reform of the Vatican was going full speed ahead. But "it is inevitable that there will be scandals, because we are human and we are sinners," he acknowledged. "The key is trying to avoid that there are more of them!" And the reform process needs to be ongoing. "The Church?s fathers said the Church must be '*semper reformanda*.' We are sinners, we are weak."

But preventive measures have been implemented. For example, 1,600 illegitimate accounts have been closed in the Vatican bank, which is now limiting accounts to "bishops, dioceses, Vatican staff, their widows and embassies" accredited to the Holy See, he said.

When asked about obstacles to reforming the Curia, he refused to pass the buck. ?The first obstacle is me!" he said. The Council of Cardinals appointed by him "has consulted many people and with the Curia and is still studying certain issues, such as bringing together various dicasteries to streamline organization."

He says that financial reform had to come first. This July, "we will be holding a four-day work session and then at the end of September, another four days, but work is underway." He does not seem willing to do reform simply by fiat. "The obstacles are those one encounters in any process of this type," he explained. "Planning the approach, the work of persuasion is very important. There are some people who do not see this clearly, but any reform involves these things. But I am content, in truth."

He also responded to questions about the upcoming synod on the family. He complained that some have focused simply on the question of admitting to Communion divorced and remarried Catholics. The synod is about more than that.

"Today, as we all know, the family is in crisis, and it is a global crisis," he said. "Young people no longer want to get married, or prefer simply to live together; marriage is in crisis, and therefore the family is too. The problem of family pastoral care is very broad."

He also reported that he will make two trips to Asia, to Korea this August and to Sri Lanka and the Philippines

in January. The pope noted the lack of freedom of religion in some Asian countries. "There are places where it is forbidden to wear a crucifix or to possess a Bible; where it is forbidden to teach the catechism to children," he said. "I think there are more martyrs now than the early Church had seen."

North Korea has been designated as a "country of particular concern" [6] (the worst category) by the U.S. State Department because of its lack of religious freedom. With regards to Sri Lanka, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) [7], of which I am a member, reports [8]that "In the last year there have been numerous attacks against religious minority communities, including Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, by extremist Buddhist monks and laity affiliated with Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups such a Bodu Bala Sena (BSS) and Sinhala Ravaya."

When asked about recent European elections, he admitted, "I don?t know much about this kind of thing," but then went on to complain about the high level of unemployment in Europe.

"We have a global economic system that is centered on money, not a human person," he said. "In order to keep going, this system discards things.... It is an inhumane economic system. Like I said in the *Evangelii Gaudium,* [9] this economic system kills."

The pope was also asked a few questions about his just completed visit to the Holy Land. He reported that he had tried to set up a prayer service for peace in the Holy Land, "but there were many logistical problems, because each one has to consider the territory." As a result, he invited the presidents of Israel and Palestine to the Vatican.

He refused to take sides on the role of Jerusalem as a political capital of either country. "Concrete measures for peace must be negotiated," he said. "But I don?t feel it is my place to say that this or that must be done. It would be foolish on my part. I think we need to go into this in a spirit of fraternity and mutual trust, following the path of negotiation."

In discussing his meeting with Patriarch Bartholomew I, he noted that they talked about unity being created "as we walk together." It will not come about simply through theological discussions. "Unity cannot be created in congress on theology," he said. The Patriarch confirmed confirmed that Athenagoras said to Paul VI: ?We go ahead together, calmly, and put all the theologians together on an island where they can discuss among themselves, and we walk ahead in life!?

But he felt that "There are many things we can do to help each other." He saw no reason Catholics and Orthodox could not share churches and agree on a common date for Easter, a disagreement he considered "ridiculous."

They also "spoke a lot on the problems of ecology, and the need to work together on this issue," he said.

Finally, in response to a question about the possibility of his resigning like Benedict, he said, "I will do what the Lord tells me to do: pray, and seek God?s will." His own belief is that "Benedict XVI is not a unique case?." Now "?this door is open, and I think that a bishop of Rome, a Pope who feels that his strength is declining ? because we live much longer now ? must ask himself the same questions that Pope Benedict faced."

Reporters have to pay a lot of money to get a seat on the papal plane for these trips, but if he keeps doing press conferences like this, it will be worth every penny.

[Quotes from the press conference come from Vatican Insider [10] and Basilian Father Thomas Rosica of the Vatican Press Office.]

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