Opinion

Guest Voices



Pope Francis is interviewed by CBS' Norah O'Donnell on "60 Minutes." (RNS/CBS News/60 Minutes/Adam Verdugo)



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In an interview with CBS News that lasted more than an hour, Pope Francis came across as an intelligent, friendly and compassionate pastor still clearly capable of leading the Catholic Church.

The interview was broadcast in two parts, with some of the anchor Norah O'Donnell's interview airing May 19 on "60 Minutes," followed the next evening in an hourlong CBS special dedicated to the interview.

Most American media coverage of the pope has been from a distance: video of papal ceremonies, snippets of speeches, stories from reporters and analysis by commentators.

We have seen the 87-year-old pontiff struggling to walk and heard predictions that his papacy is ending.

In this interview, the first of its kind on American television, viewers could connect with the pope directly. He is, in the words of "60 Minutes," a man of "warmth, intelligence and conviction" — high praise from a program that has made its reputation by skewering the high and the mighty.

In introducing the pope, O'Donnell rightly noted that he "has dedicated his life and ministry to the poor, the peripheral and the forgotten."

Related: Pope Francis voices firm opposition to women deacons in CBS interview

Migrants, "who suffer a lot," according to Francis, have long been at the top of the pope's agenda. His own grandparents, he noted, suffered as immigrants from Italy to Argentina. "The solution," the pope said, "is migration, to open the doors to migration."

"Migration is something that makes a country grow," he added, a conclusion supported by American history and economics but not believed by the many Americans who back politicians promising to close the border.

When asked about attempts by Texas state officials to shut down Annunciation House, a Catholic charity giving humanitarian assistance to migrants, the pope did not mince words. "That is madness, sheer madness," he said. "To close the border and leave them there, that is madness. The migrant has to be received." He praised Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, "a man who does the impossible to help the migrants."

At the same time, Francis acknowledged, after the migrants are admitted, "you see how you're going to deal with them. Maybe you have to send them back. I don't know. But each case ought to be considered humanely.:

The pope, who spoke ahead of World Children's Day (May 25-26) in Rome with thousands of children, expressed his closeness to the young. "Children are the new. Every child brings a new message." He encourages parents to play with their children, listen to them and set limits that allow them to grow.

"We have to walk beside our teenage kids, we have to be there for them and guide them with intelligence, with love. We have to listen to them. Listening to them is very important."

He also spoke of the plight of children in Ukraine, who are so traumatized by war that "they have forgotten how to smile, and this is very painful."

Asked if he had a message for Vladimir Putin, he responded: "Please, warring countries, all of them, stop, stop the war. You must find a way of negotiating for peace. Strive for peace. A negotiated peace is always better than an endless war. War always serves to destroy."

Addressing leaders of conflicts around the world, the pope pleaded: "Please stop. Negotiate. A bad deal is always better than an ugly defeat. Negotiate! Negotiate! A white flag is for negotiating, not for surrendering. Wars are resolved through negotiation."

As for the war in Gaza, he spoke of the Catholic parish in the region where the people sometimes go hungry, but he also condemned antisemitism as an ideology.

"All ideology is bad, whether it is from the right, the center or the left," he said. "And antisemitism is an ideology, and it is bad. Any anti is always bad. These postures of persecution, of condemning outright, are no good at all. You can criticize one government or another, the government of Israel, the Palestinian government. You can criticize all you want, but not anti people, no anti, neither anti-Palestinian nor antisemitism."

The pope also worried about climate change. "Unfortunately, we have gotten to a point of no return. It is sad, but that is what it is."

He placed much of the blame on wealthy countries, "the ones that have more of an economy and an energy based on fossil fuels that are creating this situation. They are the countries that can make the most difference, given their industry and all."

Related: In CBS interview, Francis calls climate change 'a road to death,' chastises 'foolish' deniers

The pope criticized world leaders who hold conferences, sign agreements and then do nothing. "We have to be very clear, global warming is alarming," he said.

He acknowledged that "there are foolish people, and even if you show them the statistics, still the fool will not believe. They act this way either because they do not understand the situation or out of a vested interest."

"But climate change is real," he asserted, saying that protecting our planet is today's most pressing issue "because it is the future, it is life."

What seems to bother the pope most is that too many people ignore the plight of the suffering around the world.

"There are so many Pontius Pilates on the loose out there, who see what is happening — the wars, the injustice, the crimes — [and say,] 'That's OK. That's OK,' and wash their hands.

"It is indifference. That is what happens when the heart hardens and becomes indifferent. Please, we have to get our hearts to feel again. We cannot remain indifferent in the face of such human dramas. The globalization of indifference is a very ugly disease. Very ugly."

The pope repeated earlier assurances that he is not allowing the blessing of same-sex unions. "That cannot be done because that is not the sacrament," he said. "The Lord made it that way. But to bless each person, yes. The blessing is for everyone."

He acknowledged that "Some people were scandalized by this, but why? Everyone is to be blessed."

He also addressed surrogate motherhood, which he said "in the strictest sense of the term, it is not authorized." But he appeared especially disturbed when surrogacy becomes a business. While saying "there is a general rule in these cases," the pope said, "but you have to go into each case in particular to assess the situation as long as the moral principle is not skirted."

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Responding to a question about American bishops who oppose him, the pope bluntly affirmed, a "conservative is one who clings to something and does not want to see beyond that. It is a suicidal attitude because one thing is to take tradition into account, to consider situations from the past. But quite another is to be closed up inside a dogmatic box."

Francis argued: "You have to be open to everything. The church is like that. Everyone, everyone, everyone. 'That so and so is a sinner.' Me too. I am a sinner. Everyone."

That includes, he said, "someone with a diverse sexual gender. Everyone in! Everyone. Once inside, we will figure out how to sort it all out."

"The Gospel is for everyone," he repeated. "If the church places a customs officer at the door, that is no longer the church of Christ. Everyone."

Pope Francis greets Norah O'Donnell before an exclusive interview with the "CBS Evening Ne

Pope Francis greets Norah O'Donnell before an exclusive interview with the "CBS Evening News" anchor at the Vatican April 24 for an interview ahead of the Vatican's inaugural World Children's Day. An hourlong special based on the interview aired on CBS May 20. (OSV News/Courtesy of 60 minutes, CBS NEWS)

Francis praised women as "the ones who move changes forward. … They are braver than men. They know how best to protect life. … The church is a mother, and women in the church are the ones who help foster that motherliness."

Though he referred to women as apostles, he gave a definite "no" to women as priests or ordained deacons, saying women in the past functioned as deacons but were not ordained. Historians and theologians such as Phyllis Zagano would disagree.

In addressing the sex abuse crisis, the pope said that the church "must continue to do more." Abuse "cannot be tolerated. When there is a case of a religious man or woman who abuses, the full force of the law falls upon them. In this there has been great progress."

After talking about so many tragic issues, the pope was asked, "What gives you hope?"

"Everything," he said. "You see tragedies, but you also see so many beautiful things, you see heroic mothers, heroic men, men who have hopes and dreams. Women who look to the future. That gives me a lot of hope. People want to live. People forge ahead. And people are fundamentally good. We are all fundamentally good. Yes, there are some rogues and sinners, but the heart itself is good."

Throughout the interview, the pope was totally engaged. He smiled, he gestured, he laughed, his eyes sparkled. This is the pope who caught the imagination of the world when he was elected. This is the pope described by people who interact with him. CBS News has given the American people a unique opportunity to see the pope as he is, unfiltered.