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My moment with the pope

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 22, 2013 NCR Today
World Youth Day 2013

It wasn't exactly hard-hitting journalism today aboard the papal plane en route to Rio de Janeiro, though one has to give Francis credit for candor.

"I don't give interviews," he said plainly to the press corps.

"Why, I don't know, but I can't," he added. "It's a little difficult for me, but I'm grateful for your company."

Francis did deliver a five-minute overview of how he understands the spirit of a World Youth Day, which had an interesting twist. Rather than just being a youth festival, Francis said, he wants the accent to be on young people as part of the larger "social fabric," including the elderly.

Both the elderly and the young, he said, frequently end up as victims of a "throw-away society," citing high youth unemployment levels and a sense in which the "life wisdom" of the elderly is often undervalued.

In the meantime, Francis didn't conduct a press conference but he didn't avoid the press either, spending almost an hour greeting each journalist one by one. We all had a few seconds with the pope, with Lombardi standing nearby holding a microphone.

I wasn't running a tape recorder during my turn, but here's more or less how it went:

Me: "Holy Father, I'm John Allen with the National Catholic Reporter in the United States. You probably don't remember, but we met in 2001 when you took over for Cardinal [Edward] Egan of New York at the synod of bishops.

Francis: "Yes, yes, I remember ?"

Me: "I wanted to tell you that not long after the conclave, in April, I had the chance to visit your sister in Buenos Aires. She's a remarkable woman!"

Francis: "She likes to talk a little bit, too! She was probably a great source for you ?"

Me: "I had a great time with her. Also, I wanted to tell you that American Catholics are rooting for you ?"

Francis: "Thanks much."

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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