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From Benedict to Francis, the perils of papal interviews

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Pope Francis

Rome ? Many things may have changed in the transition from Benedict XVI to Francis, but recent experience suggests that at least one point has remained almost entirely the same: the difficulty of releasing a blockbuster papal interview in a way that doesn?t make somebody unhappy.

Three years ago, a mini-brouhaha erupted over Benedict?s book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald, in which the pontiff said that in some cases the use of condoms, especially in the context of AIDS, may be ?a first step in the direction of a moralization.?

The news broke after *L?Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, published lengthy extracts from the interview in its Saturday evening edition on Nov. 20, 2010. Critics complained that by presenting the pope?s words without context or commentary, *L?Osservatore* stoked confusion as to whether the church was changing its teaching on contraception.

A month later, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith felt compelled to issue a lengthy clarification attempting to calm the waters.

(Critics also charged that *L?Osservatore* had violated an agreed-upon embargo date set for Nov. 23.)

At the time, American Catholic writer Phil Lawler accused *L?Osservatore* of a ?truly disastrous gaffe,? while noted canon lawyer Edward Peters called it a ?fiasco.? Veteran Vatican writer Andrea Tornielli charged that *L?Osservatore* had practiced ?contraception? on a papal consistory held Nov. 21, since release of the interview completely overshadowed what was supposed to be Benedict?s big event.

Inside the Vatican, the take-away from the episode boiled down to ?never again.? Three years later, some are openly wondering whatever happened to that vow.

The new source of ferment is the blockbuster 12,000-word conversation Francis granted to Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro on behalf of *Civiltà Cattolica* and 15 other Jesuit publications, including *America* in the United States, which immediately grabbed global attention for the way in which the pontiff reached out to women, gays, and other groups, as well as distancing the church from the culture wars.

Once again, insiders caught off-guard find themselves reeling, with some Vatican-watchers talking about the risks of ?government by surprise.?

In an especially juicy irony, the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for Social Communications ? arguably, its primary think tank for communications strategy ? was conducting its plenary assembly last Thursday, the day the interview appeared, and virtually no one taking part had any idea it was coming.

The meeting included three cardinals who will shortly take part in the Oct. 1-3 summit of council of eight

cardinals tapped by Francis to advise him on governance ? Cardinals Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, Oswald Gracias of India and Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the middle of a working session, participants in the plenary assembly suddenly found themselves distracted by vibrations and alerts on their iPhones and BlackBerrys as news of the interview broke.

Spadaro was present for part of the plenary assembly, and on background sources told NCR that while many participants complimented him for the interview, there was also some blowback related to perceptions of having been blindsided.

Most senior Vatican officials, including some of its top communications personnel, also did not have advance notice. That?s especially striking given that *Civiltà Cattolica* enjoys semi-official status and is typically read by the Vatican?s Secretariat of State prior to publication.

In this case, however, editors reportedly decided that since they had direct papal approval of the text, there was no need to pass the interview through the normal channels.

Speaking on background, some bishops who happened to be in Rome last week expressed irritation that a handful of secular media outlets apparently had advance copies of the interview, but not them.

One prelate told NCR that he began getting phone calls from reporters seeking comment on Thursday, before he even knew that an interview existed, and felt ambushed.

In another commonality with last time, it?s basically the same constituency in Catholicism that feels most put out by what the pope had to say, meaning the church?s most committed pro-life voices.

Three years ago, Catholics involved in advocacy of natural family planning and in the promotion of abstinence rather than contraception as the proper response to AIDS worried that the pope was undercutting their efforts.

This time around, some bishops have said on background that they?re hearing from pro-life activists worried that Francis is declaring surrender in the fight against abortion and gay marriage.

Though there are no indications that the doctrinal congregation has any plans this time to clarify the pope?s remarks, it?s striking that the day after the interview appeared Francis delivered an address to a group of Catholic gynecologists in which he strongly affirmed the right to life as a ?primary value and primordial right of every human person.?

In that address, the pope also called on Catholics to defend a ?culture of life? that begins ?from the first instant of conception.?

Though the timing was largely coincidence, some commentators concluded that the pope was rounding out his message in the speech to the gynecologists, or at least making explicit some things not said out loud in his Jesuit interview.

To be sure, it?s difficult to envision a way of coordinating the release of such material in which everyone who might theoretically lay claim to having a right to know in advance could be satisfied, and in which every possible misunderstanding or line of spin could be short-circuited.

Had *Civiltà Cattolica* sent out a copy of the text to papal ambassadors for distribution to more than 5,000 bishops ahead of publication, for instance, it defies credulity to believe it wouldn?t have leaked somewhere along the line, perhaps creating even more confusion. (Imagine the chaos if media outlets had selectively reported a few lines from the interview before the full text was available, and before anyone who had read it

could put it in context.)

Moreover, just as it wasn?t entirely fair to blame *L?Osservatore* three years ago, *Civiltà Cattolica* and the other Jesuit publications don?t bear responsibility alone this time. If the pope wanted his words broadcast in some other fashion, he could have said so.

Indeed, bishops, Vatican officials and church communicators who feel blindsided by *Civiltà Cattolica* could easily have made the same charge against Francis himself back in July, when his dramatic news conference aboard the papal plane on the way from Brazil to Rome also fell on them like a bolt from blue.

Though discussion about how best to roll these things out will continue, one thing seems clear: Whatever the blowback, and however many noses may be out of joint, it?s doubtful that *Civiltà Cattolica* has ever had a better week in its 163-year history in terms of stirring global interest.

*(Follow John Allen on Twitter:**@JohnLAllenJr**)*

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