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On the run interviews obscure Pope's role

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Is Leo XIV falling into the trap of on the run interviews? On 30 September, as he left Castel Gandolfo, the Pope was immediately surrounded by journalists (see the CNA video here). One journalist from EWTN News asked a question related to the case of the award that Cardinal Cupich, the Archbishop of Chicago, had proposed giving to Democratic Senator Dick Durbin in recognition of his commitment to immigrants and his

support for Catholic associations working in the area of welcome and integration. However, an equally strong commitment had consistently been demonstrated by Durbin in favour of legislative promotion of abortion.

We will return to the merits of the issue shortly, but first, let us discuss this Vatican practice of impromptu interviews. Are they really useful? If the question is trivial, the answer will be equally trivial and therefore useless. If the question raises a relevant issue, a few words in response will be equally useless because they will not address the issue adequately. Then there are trick questions designed to put one in difficulty. In this case, it is not certain that the Pope is well informed on the issue in question, and the answer will be imprecise and omit important details.

Does the Pope have no other means of imparting his teachings than a hasty interview? Not to speak his mind, but to impart his teachings? The Pope is not a commentator on current events; he is not a party secretary who emerges from an executive meeting to be bombarded by microphones and cameras; he is not a defence lawyer for subjects of television programmes. However, given the frequent impromptu interviews, he may end up looking like one. This is not a trivial matter because it concerns the nature of the papacy and the most effective way for it to express itself.

When questioned by the journalist in question, Pope Leo XIV was taken aback and had to pause to think. He expressly said that he was not familiar with the case ("I am not terribly familiar with the particular case"). One could argue that this is unlikely, given the bitter confrontation within the Church in the United States, with many bishops vociferously criticising the award to Durbin. However, an uncertain answer goes well with a direct question. Pope Leo gave a disjointed response with imprudent juxtapositions, misleading comparisons and untenable underlying theses.

Firstly, he invited us to consider 'the senator's entire career' and to 'seek the truth together on ethical issues'. 'I think it is important to look at the overall work done that a senator has done during, if I am not mistaken, in 40 years of service in the United States Senate,' he said.

Now, a senator's 40-year record will contain interventions of varying ethical value. While it is certainly necessary to assess the entirety of parliamentary activity, it is not necessary to legitimise everything. On the contrary, it is not necessary to legitimise what cannot be with a public award. Support for immigrants and support for abortion are part of that picture: one cannot use the first criterion without taking into account the second, precisely because of the duty to consider the entire body of work. A similar case

took place in Italy when Pope Francis praised Emma Bonino as a 'great Italian', presenting her with a sort of award, he did so in recognition of her commitment to development, while overlooking her deadly commitment to abortion. This was inappropriate, as it would be for Durbin. Leone's appeal to consider the entire curriculum is precisely what grounds the rejection of the award, whereas his words suggest the opposite. 'Seeking the truth on ethical issues together' turns truth into interpretation.

The most problematic expressions, however, were: 'Someone who says, I am against abortion but is in favour of the death penalty is not really pro-life... Someone who says, I am against abortion but I am in agreement with the inhumane treatment of immigrants in the United States — I don't know if that's pro-life". Had he had more time to reflect and had he chosen to write rather than speak off the cuff, a different speech would certainly have emerged. Taken literally, these words cause bewilderment.

The comparison equating the fight against abortion with immigration policies and the death penalty seems to have little foundation. Causing the death of an innocent human being is an intrinsically bad action that should never be done under any circumstances or for any reason. In contrast, the commitment to governing migration and immigration policies justly can be implemented in many ways. It requires keeping many variables and interests at stake in mind and exercising the virtue of prudence. Finally, the death penalty has always been part of the Church's doctrinal tradition. However, the fact that Francis has changed this doctrine, arguing that it no longer corresponds to contemporary sentiment, does not mean that, for centuries, the Church upheld the lawfulness of murdering the innocent, as is the case with abortion. It is also worth considering how these words can be reconciled with Pope Leo's emphasis on the "consistency unto death" (e.g. here) that Catholic politicians should strive for.

It is best to draw a veil over this interview. Let us call it an accident along the way. However, it does make us dream of a papacy without interviews and a Vatican that thoroughly revises its communication strategies.