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**CHURCH**

## **The book interview with Pope Leo could have been avoided**

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24\_09\_2025

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As is well known, one of the most controversial aspects of Francis's pontificate has been the chapter on 'interviews': authorised or 'stolen' as they may have been, they have always been a source of misunderstandings, controversies, leaps forward, contradictions and a true Magisterium of confusion (the ones with Eugenio Scalfari were sensational). Above all, their proliferation has debased the role of the Pope, reducing him to just another opinion leader on the one hand, and on the other, preventing him from exercising the pontifical Magisterium through its proper instruments (encyclicals, exhortations, etc.).

**Pope Leo's style was immediately different**, much more careful with words to avoid ambiguity and scandal.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that a book-biography (*León XIV, Ciudadano del mundo, misionero del siglo XXI*, Penguin) was released last week. It was written by the American journalist Elise Ann Allen and contains a long 360-degree interview (the result

of two lengthy conversations during the Pope's summer break at Castel Gandolfo). Leo XIV is not only present in the final interview, but also throughout the book, providing further details and explanations to complement the author's biographical notes.

**The surprise lies in both the fact itself and the manner in which it occurred.**

Given the direction of the previous pontificate, one might have expected a halt to interviews, at least initially, in line with the style seen in recent months. When the Pope has to intervene on matters of faith and morals, or on issues that directly affect the life of the Church, he already possesses the necessary authority. On other topics, he need not express his opinion, precisely to avoid the "opinionated" effect that caused so many problems with his predecessor.

**Above all, such an initiative is unusual when the Pope has not yet "spoken" with actions:** the appointments to key dicasteries and decisions on pressing issues (LGBTQ+, China, the Synod, the Vetus Ordo Mass, sexual abuse and canon law) that have caused the polarisation within the Church that the Pope denounces in this book.

**Although Leo XIV has a clear and direct way of speaking,** the interview format, by its very nature, leads to concepts being expressed in a summary manner, which can produce different interpretations or misunderstandings. This can also be seen in this book, with contentious expressions on the subject of LGBTQ+, which we will have the opportunity to discuss further in the future. These are issues on which there is a need for great clarity.

**Another aspect concerns the person chosen to carry out this 'project',** namely a 'friendly' journalist — a detail reminiscent of a much-discussed *modus operandi* of Pope Francis. In this case, it is a friendship that, as Allen recounts, began during a battle against the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae (SCV), a Peruvian society whose founder and leaders were found guilty of psychological and sexual abuse. For the record, the battle ended with the dissolution of the Sodalitium, signed by Pope Francis on his deathbed.

**This detail may explain why this book was only released in Spanish** (an English edition will be released later) and presented in Peru. This is an unprecedented event: the first book interview with the Pope to be published in a single language and far from Rome. It is curious that no one has highlighted this peculiar choice or questioned it. An homage to the country where he was a missionary and bishop certainly does not fully explain this. Furthermore, the original language of the book and interview is English, meaning the initial publication is a translation. These are truly singular choices.

**Perhaps the origin of the friendship between Pope Leo and Allen is relevant here**

. A relevant point in the biography is the section dedicated to the sexual abuse scandal in the Peruvian Church, which, in the months preceding the Conclave, also involved Cardinal Prevest. As you may recall, *the Daily Compass reported on the entire affair*, and there were accusations against Cardinal Prevest because, as Bishop of Chiclayo, he had covered up two priests accused of sexual abuse.

**The book is also a kind of memoir in which the Pope**, through Elise Ann Allen's account, offers his perspective on the matter. This goes back to the denunciations of abuses within the SCV, in which Bishop Prevest was one of the first to collect evidence and lead an uncompromising battle against the association. He did this alongside two journalists, Pedro Salinas and Paola Ugaz, who published the book *Mitad Monjes, Mitad Soldados* (Half Monks, Half Soldiers) in 2015, which is dedicated to these abuses. What Allen fails to mention is that she and Solinas are both outsiders to the Sodalitium, of which she was a member until 2013. This must inevitably affect their judgements.

**The allegations against Prevest could therefore be revenge** from members of the SCV who have been hit by canonical sanctions (although there is no proof of this). In reality, the allegations of molestation against two priests in the Chiclayo diocese, which was headed by Prevest, are genuine. Allen herself has spoken to the alleged victim, Ana Maria Quispe, who came forward with the abuse story. Allen's thesis is that Bishop Prevest correctly recorded the allegations, sent the alleged victims to a listening centre for counselling, and sent all the documentation to Rome. Therefore, she believes that all the fuss about this story is the result of the exploitation of those who wanted to strike at the 'enemy', Prevest.

**Ultimately, Leo XIV expresses his sorrow for the victims** and regrets the slowness of justice, which exacerbates the pain: 'The time that has passed during this whole process,' he tells Allen, 'has made everything very painful. I honestly feel very sorry for that.' But, amid all this, it has come to light that there has been a great deal of manipulation of the case, causing even more pain to many people, especially the victims. I am very sorry for that. They have been victimised and re-victimised”.

**While not wishing to dwell on this affair**, one cannot help but notice that Ana Maria Quispe maintains in this book that her denunciation was not followed by a real investigation in the diocese. In other words, even though the case was reported in Rome, the alleged victims were not heard by anyone. This circumstance remains without any documented refutation.

**In any case, Leo XIV states that, as Pope, he immediately sought to resolve the issue** of the slowness of justice while ensuring the rights of all parties involved, both

victims and the accused. Time will tell if this commitment will bear fruit: **the Rupnik case**, which caused so much scandal and damage to the Church, is waiting to be resolved.