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Casual pope puts Vatican on alert with quips

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Pope Francis blesses a child during the weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2013. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis has grabbed headlines with his off-the-cuff homilies, crowd-pleasing one-liners and lengthy interviews during which he has pontificated on everything from the church's "obsession" with rules to how he won't judge gays. But his chattiness has gotten him into some trouble, and the Vatican has gone into damage-control mode to clarify, correct or put his comments into context. Here's a look at some of Francis' more eyebrow-raising comments, and the efforts by the Vatican's spin doctors to address them.

DID FRANCIS REALLY CONSIDER TURNING DOWN THE JOB?

In an interview with the Rome daily La Repubblica, editor Eugenio Scalfari quoted the pope as saying he was "seized by a great anxiety" moments after his election and asked the cardinals in the Sistine Chapel to give him a few minutes time to think things over.

"To make it go away and relax, I closed my eyes and made every thought disappear, even the thought of refusing to accept the position, as the liturgical procedure allows," he was quoted as saying. "At a certain point I was filled with a great light. It lasted a moment, but to me it seemed very long. Then the light faded, I got up suddenly and walked into the room where the cardinals were waiting." The pope was quoted as saying he signed the acceptance form and went out on the balcony to be introduced to the world as Pope Francis.

But the Rev. Thomas Rosica, who helps with Vatican media relations, later said the interview didn't reflect Francis' real words. He said Scalfari neither recorded the conversation nor took notes, reconstructing the conversation from memory and printing it as a verbatim interview. The Vatican doesn't dispute the overall thrust of the interview, which Scalfari said he submitted to Francis for review and which the Vatican newspaper reprinted verbatim. But Rosica said the purported "mystical" experience recounted by Repubblica after the election didn't happen, though Francis himself has said previously and in public that "I didn't want to be pope."

CAN ATHEISTS BE SAVED?

One of the novelties introduced by Francis has been his daily 7 a.m. Mass in the Vatican hotel, to which groups and individuals are invited. Francis delivers homilies each day, the contents of which are summarized by Vatican Radio. On May 22, he caused no shortage of confusion when he suggested that even atheists could find salvation.

According to church teaching, the Catholic Church holds the "fullness of the means of salvation" — a message that has long been taken to mean that only Catholics can find salvation. But in his homily, Francis said: "The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Father, the atheists?' Even the atheists. Everyone!"

Rosica issued a lengthy "explanatory note" a few days later after being inundated with questions about whether Francis was changing church doctrine on salvation. He noted that church teaching also holds that "those who through no fault of their own" don't know about Jesus but seek God and try to do his will can also attain eternal salvation.

"Always keep in mind the audience and context of Pope Francis' homilies," Rosica cautioned. "His words are not spoken in the context of a theological faculty or academy nor in interreligious dialogue or debate. He speaks in the context of Mass."

SHOULD THE VATICAN BANK BE SAVED?

On April 24, Francis invited members of the Vatican bank to join him for Mass in the hotel. The Institute for Religious Works, as the bank is known, has been plagued by scandals — most recently over the arrest of a Vatican Monsignor on charges he tried to smuggle some 20 million euro (\$26 million) into Italy from Switzerland without declaring it at customs.

Given the scandals, the arrival of a reform-minded, non-nonsense pope has prompted a flurry of speculation that Francis might shut the bank down. So imagine the headlines that followed his April 24 homily, when he lamented how the church can sometimes become too bureaucratic, too much like an aid group, and that bureaucracies are necessary up to a point.

"The church isn't an NGO, it's a story of love," Francis told the bank's staff in the pews. "But there are the IOR folks here, excuse me, OK? Everything is necessary, offices are necessary, OK, but they're only necessary up to a certain point: as a help to this story of love. But when the organization loses this primary place, when the love is gone, the poor church becomes an NGO. And this isn't the way to go."

Archbishop Angelo Becciu, under secretary of the Vatican secretariat of state, told the Vatican newspaper a few days later that Francis was by no means hinting that he might shut down the Vatican bank.

THE VICAR OF CHRIST SAID WHAT?

Sometimes, Francis' one-liners don't warrant Vatican clarification, but they're worth repeating simply because they came from the lips of the Successor of Peter, Vicar of Christ, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church:

— Francis urged the church to "strip" itself of its worldly attachment to wealth during his Oct. 4 trip to Assisi and focus instead on the basics of Christ's teachings. "You might say, 'Can't we have a more human Christianity, without the cross, without Jesus, without stripping ourselves?'" he asked rhetorically. "In this way we'd become pastry-shop Christians, like a pretty cake and nice sweet things. Pretty, but not true Christians."

—Francis was asked June 7 why he chose to live in the Vatican hotel rather than the fancier Apostolic Palace where his predecessors lived. "If I was living alone, isolated, it wouldn't be good for me," he told students of Jesuit schools. "A professor asked me the same question, 'Why don't you go and live there (in the papal apartments)?' And I replied: 'Listen to me professor, it is for psychiatric reasons.'"

—The pope has urged nuns and sisters to be like joyful mothers to the church, caring for its flock, and not act like they're "old maids." "It makes me sad when I find sisters who aren't joyful," he lamented during his Oct. 4 visit to a cloistered convent in Assisi. "They might smile, but with just a smile they could be flight attendants!"

Given Francis' wry sense of humor and willingness to regularly ditch speeches prepared for him, the Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said he wants the faithful to know the difference between a pontifical joke and an encyclical, a clever quip in a homily and infallible teaching.

"There are different genres of expression, some are magisterial and official, others are more pastoral," Lombardi told The Associated Press. "They have a different doctrinal value."

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