

Christopher Lamb

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line by Christopher Lamb, vatican correspondent for The Tablet who has the inside track on Pope Francis' struggle to reform the Catholic church. A former writer for The Daily Telegraph. Christopher joined The Tablet in 2009. A theology graduate, he moved to Rome where he is now permanently accredited vatican correspondent. He regularly travels with Pope Francis on papal visits and also covers stories in Italy, producing weekly Facebook live updates. A regular contributor to the BBC, Christopher's book '*The Outsider: Pope Francis and his Battle to Reform the Church*' is a definitive account of the current papacy. Chris, thank you for joining me.

Thank you very much for having me, Paul. Great honour to be here.

The honour is ours. I think you're a fascinating guy and you've got a fascinating job. There's plenty to get through. Let's start at the beginning, if we can. It was a conversation with Bob Geldoff was it not, about finding your vocation that set you on your career?

That's right. Well, before I got into the religious affairs coverage world, I was working at The Telegraph. Started my career as a diarist, before The Telegraph was actually at The Mail on Sunday, working at the diary there. So it was a great training and a great few years working on the diaries, trying to get the big stories and go to lots of parties, et cetera. But there was one moment where I remember I was asked to call Sir Bob Geldoff, I think it was about an extension that he was planning on his house. And some of the neighbours had complained and I managed to get through to Sir Bob on the phone to ask him about this problem he was facing. And I put the question to him and he paused and he said, "Christopher, go and find your true journalistic vocation." And I think that kind of sparked something in me and made me think, well, actually I need to follow what I'm really passionate about, and that is religious affairs. As you mentioned, I was a theology graduate, I was very interested in the church and I moved to The Tablet in 2009 and things went from there.

I mean, you see those signs, don't you, the humorous signs in people's workplaces that say 'you don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps,' do you have to be Catholic to work at the tablet? Is your own faith an important influence on your work?

Yes, faith is very important to me and my work. I don't think you have to be Catholic to work for The Tablet, The Tablet's employed lots of journalists who are not Catholic. I always say that I'm a journalist first and a Catholic second. That's not to say that my faith isn't very important to what I do. And a motivating factor, of course, journalism is seeking to tell the truth and that's a central part of, or vital part of Christianity. My point is that I'm driven by journalism and by good journalism, and I'm not trying to be a particular, I'm not trying to do propaganda for the church as it were, I'm trying to do good journalism. And I think that serves the church and that serves what the mission of the church is as well. But I do like to say that I'm, first of all, a journalist, I'm not doing this to try and promote some element or some part of the church, I'm doing this because I'm passionate about being a journalist.

The arrival of Pope Francis must have been a godsend for journalists like yourself, because he's a reforming, yet enigmatic figure and obviously much more popular and personable than his predecessor. I remember when he took the job, I don't know what the proper word is, but the first thing I read about him is that he's a former nightclub bouncer.

That's right. Well, Pope Francis has certainly been a boom time for journalists such as me, because as you say, he is really a media superstar. What's interesting about Francis is the relationship with journalists and when you travel with him on the papal plane, he comes to the back of the plane and greets each reporter travelling with him in person and shares a joke or talks to them. And he's very at ease with journalists and his papacy has seen a kind of sea change in the relationship between the Vatican and the media that was under Benedict 16th and John Paul 2nd to a certain extent, there was sometimes tension between the papacy and the media that was nervousness, put it that way when you travel with Benedict the 16th, any question that a journalist asked had to be vetted beforehand, whereas Pope Francis has open press conferences, which are unfiltered and that's the first time that that's ever happened. He also recently awarded two journalists, one from Reuters and another from a Mexican television channel with two awards, basically making them a Knight and a Dame, the order of Pius, who was ironically the Pope who condemned free speech and free press. And so what I think that shows is that Pope Francis values journalism, he sees it as promoting the common good, it's something that is very important and he's not afraid for journalists to uncover difficult things that have gone on in the church, scandals, the sex abuse crisis. He's actually thanked journalists for exposing that. I think that also comes back to his own background in Argentina, he lived under the dictatorship that was there in the 1970s and 1980s. And he saw how information was weaponised. And he saw the importance of a free press and the dangers of power, manipulating the media. So under Francis is certainly been as I said, a real boom time for people like me covering the Catholic church and the

Vatican because Francis is a reformer, but also because of his relationship with the media.

I've actually met Pope John Paul II. I bet he didn't expect me to say that, but I grew up in York and very famously, there was a papal visit to York. I must have been about six or seven years old. And I was one of the token local kids that got to meet the Pope. And I was aware it was a big deal, but it was interesting because I wanted to ask you, he seemed like a very nice personable guy, but quite distant and quite aloof, but very warm, obviously didn't know Benedict, but he was slightly more aloof many people would say, but you've travelled with the current Pope on many occasions. How have you got to know him as an individual?

I can't say I know him extremely well as an individual, but from what I have seen and what I do know, Francis is very charismatic. He's also someone with a lot of emotional intelligence. He can sort of suss out a room and he's able to sort of read people in a way that sometimes you don't see that often at high levels of the church. Often there's a certain career trajectory for Cardinals or senior figures. And it's often you do a certain amount of studies and you work in the offices of the church at a high level or in the Vatican and then you rise up that way. But Francis, as I described in my book, is an outsider, he had never studied in Rome or lived in Rome before being elected as Pope. So he's someone who's spent a lot of his time amongst people and therefore whenever I met him, I've always been struck by someone who's very human, very able to connect with people at a different level. And he has a good sense of humour. I'll just share with you a little anecdote if I can, when I was on the plane once there was a story bubbling around about the order of Malta, which is an ancient Catholic order. And the head of that order, an Englishman who sadly died, Matthew Festing, he was having at that time a bit of a public battle with Pope Francis and in the end, the English head of the order of Malta or the Knights of Malta, resigned. And on the plane, I said to Pope Francis, I'm an English vatican journalist, but please don't worry. I am not a Knight of Malta. And Francis roared with laughter and then turned around to me and said, "sei cattivo!" Which means 'you are naughty' or 'you are wicked.' And so he has a way of I think being very natural with people and he's got a good sense of humour and I think that's the overall impression that I have of him. He's also a steely character, who is quite political and knows what he's doing within the Vatican and is very determined to reform things in the church.

I mean, when you think of the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders, I don't think even the President of the United States couldn't understand the depth of the scale of the Catholic communion. Do you get a sense that can sometimes wear heavily on his shoulders?

I think he actually enjoys being Pope. He never expected to be elected and he arrived for the conclave election in 2013 with a return ticket to Buenos Aires in Argentina. And so I think there is a part of him that I think feels he's been called to this job or to this ministry. I think certainly he is aware of the responsibilities, they must weigh heavily on him. But I always get the impression that he actually enjoys

being Pope. And he works very hard. He gets up, I think, around 4:30 in the morning and spends time in prayer. And then he meets a lot of people. He's doing lots of different things. He works long hours. But I am always struck by the fact that he actually seems to relish the role and he's been doing it now for eight and a half years. When he first was elected Pope, he said, "oh well, I may only be hoped for three or four years." He certainly revised that plan now. I think also, and this is a point about his leadership style, he doesn't seek to micromanage every part of the church. He very much is trying to offer spiritual leadership and to set the direction of travel for the church. It's a bit like turning an oil tank round when you're trying to reform the church, he pushes down all the levers and then it takes some time for the vessel to start moving. And I think that's in a way how he sees his role, which is to set the direction of travel to try and lead as a spiritual figure to ask the challenging and tough questions of people to inspire and to set the agenda. But that is how he sees his role rather than trying to have to manage every element of the church. Although of course he does have a huge amount to make decisions over and he has to appoint every Bishop, et cetera, but I think he sees his role as leadership at the macro level. And he wants to in a sense, give Catholics on the ground freedom to do their role and to do their ministry.

I mean, one imagines the Vatican, could be every bit as full of scheming and cunning as you would uncover as a lobby correspondent at Westminster, apart from the fact that obviously the prime minister can't ever give an end date when he or she is serving, because then they're doomed, the Pope has papal infallibility and is there for life. What is it like behind the scenes?

It is quite political and someone once remarked to me that it's more political than say Westminster or say The White House, because it's often dressed up with spiritual or religious language. So say in Westminster or another place, someone will say, 'I'll support you in exchange for this job and we'll do a deal, et cetera,' whereas often in the Vatican its 'if called this role or if chosen, yes, I would accept and I will do it, but I'm not seeking anything, I'm not seeking any role, I'm not seeking to do this.' So often you have to sort of go through certain layers to understand what's going on. So it is very political. It's a human institution as much as a divinely inspired one. So I think there's that element to covering the Vatican. I think often people don't see on the inside, within the Vatican, there are some people who are extremely committed who are working across various different cultures, they're multilingual, they're trying to lead and shape a church globally. And so you don't always see what's going on on the inside, with some very, some very committed people. Francis has tried to shift the culture within the Vatican as well. I think he's tried to make it less about being a place where you go and have a career, but more of a place you go to serve for a certain number of years, and then go back to the church where you've come from. But certainly it is political. And that's I think what makes it a very interesting place, because you have world leaders coming through, just today Emmanuel Macron was meeting the Pope. So there is this sense that the church doesn't exist in a vacuum. The church is engaging with the world and engaging with the most powerful people, world leaders, culture, science, arts, et cetera. So that I think makes the beat very interesting. It's that cross section between, I think Robert Harris put it in his book

'Conclave,' it's the power of God and the ambition of men. So it always makes it an interesting story to cover.

I'm a lapsed Catholic. I was raised Catholic as a child. I went to Catholic school, but then had a reverse conversion and became an evangelical fundamentalist atheist. But I'm certainly not against the Pope or the church. I can see that he's trying to take things in the right direction. My last sort of education was a fictional one. I watched the re-edit of Godfather part three, of course, which was full of Vatican scheming and actually brings me to your book, 'The Outsider,' because it conjures imagery of forces seeking to block Francis into the Renaissance period. How does that work in terms of papal infallibility? Obviously, as an outsider now, I assume anything Francis says most automatically is gospel, if you can forgive the pun, how does that work?

Well, it's fascinating because in the past, certainly in living memory Popes, yes, they might have faced a bit of opposition, but their word was taken as what had to be followed. And actually there were certainly a number of Catholics, from the more conservative side who identified themselves as following the Pope and following everything that Pope John Paul II and Benedict etc was saying, but Francis, the tables have turned, it's the more conservative Catholics who are questioning the Pope. So it's kind of very unusual. Now there were more progressive Catholics who were critical of John Paul II and Benedict. But with Francis, you do have this extraordinary opposition to what he's trying to do in terms of reform. I think the opposition is small in number, but has a powerful voice and platform. The position is certainly present in Rome, in the Vatican, but it's also very strong in the United States. And so I think what's happened during the Francis pontificate is that let's say a certain group of Catholics have not been happy with his emphasis on say the migrants refugee crisis, trying to tackle climate change, the environment, talking about the poor church or the poor and his reforming impulses is quite critical of Catholics. He's saying if you're a Christian, if you're a Catholic and you go to church on Sunday, you can't then go into your office on Monday and treat your staff or your team badly. You can't pay people in an unfair way or not give them a fair wage, et cetera. So your faith can't just be something that you do on Sunday. You make yourself look virtuous, but then don't actually put it into practice. He's challenged a lot of people, he's challenged all Catholics, everyone in the church to try and be more authentic in the faith and to try and live that faith more credibly to the world. So that challenge he's laid down has upset a number of people. And you could say that in a way, that's what Jesus did when he was on earth. He challenged the religious leaders, the scribes, the religious authorities of the day in quite a profound way. So that's where some of the opposition has come from, with Francis. It also comes from, as I said, parts of the United States, conservative forces, certainly conservative political forces. There's been a kind of coalition between Fox News, Steve Bannon, other wealthy Catholics who don't like this Pope's political focus, the focus on the poor, the focus on migrants. So there's been this kind of internal church opposition and opposition from those Catholics who in the previous pontificates were quite powerful, they could get in to see the Pope. And I write in the book that John Paul II used to have a morning mass where you could get in to see the Pope through the mass. If you knew the right person, you could get to the mass basically. And then

afterwards, you could meet the Pope. So you can sort of navigate the access. Francis on the other hand has an early morning mass, and it's for the people who are in the parishes in Rome. As I write you're more likely to get into the mass if you're one of the Vatican gardeners than you are if you are a wealthy donor. So that's also upsetting people. So it's because Francis has challenged the church and he's tried to in a sense turn the tables. And in many ways he's also, I would call a sort of pastoral populous Pope. He likes to communicate directly to people. So he writes letters to people who write to him. He picks up the phone and calls a single mother who said that the priest wouldn't baptise her child. And he said, 'well, come to me and I'll baptise him.' So he has that style as well. That's also upsetting people. So he's shaking things up. And he's a disruptor as well. He's a compassionate disruptor of the church. And I think that's all also been where some of the opposition has come from.

In direct contrast to his predecessor, he seems to place mercy above the upholding rigid doctrine. I mean, he's spoken about openness and warmth toward divorced and remarried Catholics, gay Catholics, defense of migrants, as you mentioned, critiques of capitalism, calls to protect the environment. He is a disruptor, isn't he?

Yes. I think he is. And people say, oh, well, Francis is a liberal, et cetera. I wouldn't call him a liberal or a progressive in inverted commas. I mean, he's still been very strong say on things like abortion, there's been very little movement on say blessings for same sex couples. Although he has certainly shifted the tone of the church's outreach to LGBT Catholics, perhaps that's another conversation. But what I'm saying is he's not a classical what you call a liberal, but what he has done is he's taken the church's teaching on social matters, let's say migrants, on critiquing capitalism, he's really pushed that to the fall. I think that's what really motivates him. So he has certainly been issued a challenge to some of the nationalist populism that we've seen on the rise in Europe, he and Matteo Salvini, the leader of Northern League, a far right party in Italy. He certainly sees Pope Francis as someone who he is opposed to. So he's certainly clashed with politicians on the right, but I think he's tried to show more clearly or enunciate more clearly the social message of the gospel, social message of the church. And that's a strong tradition in Catholicism and Christianity, which is to serve the marginalised and to love one's neighbours, essential to what it means to be a Christian. He's tried to show that in a sense on the biggest platform that he has as Pope. I think that's the way to understand him rather than through political categories.

How is he dealing with tackling critics of the church's historic problems in terms of sexual abuse of minors, the spread of aids across Africa, for example.

So when it comes to clerical sexual abuse, initially Pope Francis was a bit slow to get a grip on this crisis. And I think that was partly because in his diocese where he came from in Buenos Aires, the scandal hadn't really been a huge problem compared to say what had happened in Boston and other parts of the church, Boston United

States, obviously the subject of the spotlight film. So he was a bit slow to get on top of this and deal with this problem. And he made a big mistake when it came to sexual abuse scandal in Chili, and he apologised for that and then reversed a number of decisions. So since then he has tried and has taken a number of steps to bring in new laws, to bring in procedures. He brought together for the first time bishops from across the world to have a summit to discuss sexual abuse crisis. And that was very important because we know that abuse is going to be uncovered in parts of Africa and Asia. And what Francis was trying to do is say you have to deal with this now, you have to get on top of tackling this problem, and let's be honest the clerical sexual abuse crisis is the worst crisis facing the Catholic church for 500 years since the reformation, without a doubt, and is not just that the crime of abuse has taken place within the church. It is that it was not properly handled, that it covered up that it was mismanaged. And so the big shift under Francis is that the voices of abuse survivors are beginning to be heard inside the Vatican and are leading the church's response. So for example, the Pope has chosen Juan Carlos Cruz who was an abuse survivor in Chili to sit on an important safeguarding commission in the Vatican and Francis has become very close to Juan Carlos Cruz. He speaks to him regularly. He listens to what he's got to say. Having initially mishandled the abuse scandals in Chili, Francis apologised, and then responded by listening to the voices of survivors and Juan Carlos Cruz being one of them. So what I think Francis is trying to show to the rest of the church is that the response to the abuse crisis has to be about listening to victims and also having alongside that, the structures and procedures to ensure that abuse is reported and handled and dealt with. But as I say, this is a huge crisis that requires a deep reform of the church. And that's the other thing that Francis is trying to do, he is trying to change what he sees at the root of the problems when it comes to abuse, which is this idea of clericalism, which is the elevation of a priest or a leader in the church, giving them far too much unaccountable power and authority. And from that led to abuses of power. And he sees clericalism, he's described clericalism as a cancer in the church, and he is trying to root his clericalism out of the church, because this is where he sees the abuse crisis coming from, it's the abuse of power. And so these are the ways that Francis has been trying to tackle abuse and it hasn't been easy and there's still a long way to go, but it's a start.

He inherits quite a large in-tray of problems though, doesn't he? I mean, could you tell our listeners about the Amazon Synod, there was a lot of issues to be discussed there, not least the ordination of women, clerical celibacy, ordination of married priests, abortion, a huge array of quite difficult topics.

So yes, Francis has inherited a lot of difficult topics to respond to, contentious issues. And of course, one of the concerns that any Pope has is the 'S word' schism and the Pope really in what he's trying to do is trying to keep the church together. So unity is absolutely central to his approach and to ensure that the church doesn't kind of break apart. And the way he's responding to these controversial topics is to have what he calls a Synodal Reform Process, a global Synod, which is what he launched last month. And these Synods are ways for discussions to be had on very difficult topics, on different ways that the church can evangelise the world today or to ensure that its mission is credible. And this process is about people talking to each other, listening to each other. They may have different views on things, but they are in the same room

and they're trying to talk together to find a way forward. And that's how he sees the church moving forward. In terms of dealing with the issues that you raised. You mentioned the Amazon Synod in 2019. Now that was all about how the church can improve its witness in the Amazon region, it can respond to the environmental crisis there, can support the indigenous people who were so often facing persecution, but from that Synod, there was a call for the ordination of women deacons, the ordination of married men as priests, the bishops of that region wanted those things to be allowed. But the cardinals of the curia, the Roman curia, the Vatican effectively said no, so there was no agreement. So there was a deadlock. And what Francis did was he didn't say no, but he didn't say yes either. And he's basically asked for the conversations to continue. And so I think the Pope's approach is to try and open the processes of reform, rather than try and answer everyone's request for this change or that change, et cetera. He's not saying let's ordain women tomorrow, because if you do that then there's the potential for schism and split. But at the same time, he's not saying we're not gonna have the discussion. We are gonna try and open this process of reform, which hopefully will renew the church and will try to deal with the huge debates and disagreements that are happening within the Catholic church. And as I've said this synodal process is absolutely vital because it's about bringing people together who have different views who may really disagree with each other. And it's actually, I think quite a powerful statement to our current political culture, which is so polarised where people are shut away in their own echo chambers and don't talk to each other. What Francis is saying is that actually disagreements don't need to be destructive. We can have the tensions of people having different views. And from that, that can actually be quite creative. Now, at some point you do have to make decisions about things. So let's say married priests, there are people who think this should happen. And I think how Francis is is that he wants to get a consensus of the church. He wants to get agreement and then move things forward as a collective, rather than just one group going one way and one group going another way. So it's a really delicate balancing act. It's not easy. But I think what Francis is trying to do is to bring about reform by opening up the processes, by starting the conversations and being open about where that might lead the church.

The Tablet has been the pre-eminent force in Catholicism for more than a century. How does it retain that role in the digital era?

I think it's a real challenge because The Tablet has been printing as a weekly since 1840 and it's got an incredibly loyal print subscribers and it produces each week an amazing read and print is very important to what The Tablet does. At the same time it's vital to reach new audiences online and through new digital channels. And so one of the things that I've tried to do is experiments. So I did Facebook live at the back of the papal plane, I've done that a number of times in fact, and it's amazing the interest that you get, people asking what's on the menu for the inflight dinner or who's that sitting behind you, or can we see the papal crest on the headrests and kind of thing. So you've gotta try and find ways to engage new audiences and actually recognise that there are lots of people out there who might be interested in what the Pope is doing or what's happening, what's happening in the church in the particular country, but they don't really have any way of finding out. And so I think The Tablet can serve that. And also I think at a time, particularly in the west and in Northern Europe where

let's face it, church practice is on the decline, where religious literacy is on the rise. The Tablet has a role, I think to deepen understanding, to engage with the culture. And there is a challenge because there are some Tablet readers who are incredibly knowledgeable and engaged with everything the church is doing, but there are others who may be far less knowledgeable. So you someones have to shift what you are doing and the content that you're producing to to think, let's say you're writing for the print publication, you know, they're gonna have people reading that who've got a lot of background knowledge, but then you're doing something online, like a Facebook live, or you are, doing a Twitter thread or some other, or just regular online story. You need to think about it, this audience doesn't know as much, so you've gotta try and write in a different way, produce content a different way. So it is a challenge and is a bit of a balancing act at times you could feel pulled in different directions, but what's interesting in my word, Catholic Twitter, is a huge thing now. I mean, the debates that rage and news is broken on Twitter and there's a huge kind of global audience that has sprung up on Twitter for news about the Catholic church and the Pope. And that's really fascinating because it was never assumed that this kind of community might have existed. So certainly social media and social media channels are really vital in what I do as a journalist, as a Catholic journalist.

Your focus is not just on the Catholic church, you visited the Muslim world and witness, the results of religiously motivated violence.

Yeah. That's right. I've covered a number of stories, when the Pope went to Abu Dhabi, the Pope was in Bangladesh, and we went to Egypt. Our focus hasn't not just been on what is going on in the Catholic church. It's also interreligious dialogue and the way that religions can work together to religiously inspired violence. And we saw recently a gathering of religious leaders in the Vatican sign declaration ahead of COP26. So what I find in my role is that you often report on the interface between the church and other religions and how other religious leaders might be meeting the Pope about what they're doing. And I think it's important that I maintain that focus on other religions and other other denominations because I think that although in the UK, there's a big decrease in religious practice, I mean 84% of people around the world belong to a religion or say that religious faith is important to them. So it is a huge factor in understanding the world today. I don't think you can understand, say, the conflict in the middle east without having a good understanding of the religious roots of that conflict. So I do try to cover particularly the church Islam dialogue and covering the Pope's trip to Egypt, for example, just after the bombings of churches was really an eyeopener as the Pope went to Al Hazar university to make a joint appeal with the Grand Imam of Al Hazar for religions to work together. And then in 2019 in Abu Dhabi, signed a declaration for religions to try and tackle violence, to collaborate more closely. So it's very much in my role, I see myself as covering the major faiths as much as possible.

What does a typical week look like for you? How would you go about doing your job? I was doing some research and you're on the record to say that you rightly believe that informed and balanced reporting on religion has never been

more important in understanding our world today. How do you go about doing that?

So I try to cover this beat in a way that I think any journalist would. So we have the official channels of information from the Vatican each day at midday, you get a bullet in from the Vatican with news of what's happening, what the Pope is doing. So you try and find out what's going on through the official channels. And then of course you have your own contacts, which I've tried to build up over the years. When I'm in Rome, we'll go down to the Vatican press office which is just off St Peters Square and meet different colleagues. And to get different perspectives from different language groups because there's really an international group of journalists who cover the Vatican. And then I'll try and meet the context, try and meet people. Obviously a lot was done off the record. You have to develop trust with the influential people, in the Vatican and in the church. So try to meet people for lunch or try and see them in their offices. Sometimes inside the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican. So it's like having an art history tour when you walk past the frescos and incredible artwork which is inside the Vatican. And then just try and keep up with people, use contact, contact, contacts, that's what I've always done as a journalist and continue to do. And I think there's also a very important element in that and journalism and what I do of decoding and contextualising. So there may be an important speech by the Pope. He may say something which generates headlines on Twitter, et cetera. And I see it as my job to put what he says in context, to explain why this is important, to compare it to what maybe other Popes have said or what he said in the past. And there's the decoding element so there may be something that's put out by the Vatican. No one knows quite what it means? What's the significance of this? And I see it as my job is to try and decode, why is this important? What impact is it gonna have on ordinary people's lives in churches?

So, the so-called explainer?

Exactly, analysis. Exactly.

If you look at this sort of Westminster analogy, it's like a revolving door isn't it? I mean, even when Allegra Stratton was a journalist covering the prime minister. Now she works for the prime minister. You're a journalist first and foremost, but you are a Catholic, you'll see the church make what you might think as PR missteps along the way, as a Catholic think I wouldn't have done it like that, even though you're there to hold them to account. So I suppose to put it to you directly, could you ever imagine a career change? Could you become the spin doctor to the Pope?

Well, I don't think that would play to my strengths, Paul, I like to be on the outside trying to tell the story and explain what's going on. I mean, there have been Vatican journalists who have gone into work for the Vatican Andrea Tornielli, a colleague who now runs Vatican news, the media channel. He was a Vatican journalist for La Stamper and went to work for the Vatican. So it does happen now. I prefer to be on the outside telling the story, although in some ways, given that for many people, the

Vatican is a difficult place to read and understand and navigate, sometimes my role is to explain what's going on. So yeah, I think it's important for what I do, is to tell the story, if the Pope called me up and asked me to come work for him, I would certainly have the conversation. I think my skills are best as a journalist.

Now we've had a very prominent journalist, Boris Johnson take the top job as prime minister. I suppose my question is, will there ever be a British Pope? And could that be you?

Well, technically it could happen. Popes are chosen from the Cardinals. So I don't think that's possible.

Only by convention though.

I'm happy to be a humble reporter. I think journalists should, particularly at a time when the lack of understanding of faith or religion generally is on the increase. I think the role of good religious affairs journalism is absolutely more vital than ever. But I think what you're are what you are hinting at, you're hinting at something quite important. And you are onto something here that actually Vatican journalists do hold quite a lot of influence because when people want to know what's going on inside such an important institution, they want to know what the Pope is doing, who is the leader of 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide, and is seen as such an influential moral leader on the world stage my role and other Vatican journalist role, you do have a lot of influence. You do have a degree of power. And so it's beholden on us to make sure we get it right. And I think if you look at Westminster for example someone like Laura Kuensberg who sends out a tweet about what's happening in, in number ten down street, and that within seconds, it's all over the place and it's hugely, hugely influential and important. And I suppose the line between journalists being kind of just the anonymous reporters and now being of influences and players as it were, that line is really blurred. And so in what I do and in covering the Vatican, there's certainly a lot of influence that Vatican journalists have in shaping the narrative around the Pope and in explaining what's going on because there is such huge interest in what the Pope is doing. And sometimes there is a lot of misinformation about what's going on. And the Pope himself has been a victim of fake news and other disinformation. So I don't think I would ever be a candidate for the papacy. But I do recognize that that the role I have does have influence

If I was a mischievous tabloid reporter. Now, I could splash on the headline. Chris doesn't deny that he might one day be... but we don't need to submit it in those words, the denial was not there. What advice would you give to your predecessor? Who's gonna succeed in the job, IThe flip side to the same question is what advice would you give to someone starting out in religious journalism that would ultimately like to take your job? What are the qualities of the journalist in your role that would help someone Succeed there?

Well, I think first of all you gotta be passionate. You gotta be interested in the beat, in the, in the subject matter, I think understanding theology and understanding the deeper contours and trends within the church and within religion is really important. That's the first thing. And the second thing is you've gotta love to tell the stories and you've got to want to meet people and to try and uncover what's going on and, and really be excited by, by the practice of journalism, by breaking stories and by seeking to shape and influence the narrative. So, I would say both a passion for religion, religious faith, or whatever aspect of that you're covering. You are covering and have a great desire to be the best journalist that you can be and to break stories.

Chris, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you, Paul. I really enjoyed it. It was great to talk to you.