



Msgr. Laurence Spiteri, a judge on the Roman Rota, a Vatican court, holds a public conversation with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito Jr. at a Jubilee of Justice event in the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome Sept. 20, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

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In a frescoed hall of a building housing the Catholic Church's highest courts, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito Jr. spoke about faith, mercy, tradition and hope.

The justice, a Catholic, was in Rome for the Sept. 20 celebration of the Jubilee of Justice, which brought together thousands of judges, lawyers, prosecuting attorneys, law professors and canon lawyers from some 100 nations.

The celebration featured an audience with Pope Leo XIV, who holds a doctorate in canon law and spoke about justice as involving respect for the law and for the dignity of the person as well as promoting reconciliation and forgiveness.

In the evening, in the Vatican's Palazzo della Cancelleria, Alito sat down for a public conversation with Msgr. Laurence Spiteri, a priest of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and a judge on the Roman Rota, a Vatican court.

The two were introduced by Brian Burch, the newly arrived U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, who praised Alito as a justice who has consistently defended religious freedom.

The justice quoted Pope Francis who would often talk about how there are more martyrs today than in the first centuries of Christianity.

"Unfortunately, religious liberty is embattled today," he said. And while there are threats to people's religious freedom in the United States, "the situation in America and Western Europe pales in comparison with what is going on in the rest of the world" with terrorist attacks on Christians, like in parts of Nigeria, or in nations "where Christianity is hardly permitted."

Asked about Leo's statement earlier in the day that mercy is an integral part of justice, Alito said he agreed, and that mercy should be built into laws as they are drafted and adopted, as they are enforced and, particularly, when sentences are handed down.

Alito was asked about the current composition of the Supreme Court and the frequently floated idea of changing the number of justices from its current nine members.

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While the framers of the Constitution did not specify the number of members, he said, it is clear they meant it to be a multimember body.

With nine justices, he said, "you are guaranteeing diverse backgrounds" in terms of experience, education and faiths, which leads to the necessary rigorous debate.

"If people of good faith talk to each other civilly and rationally," he said, the results are better than if just one person is making the decision.

Alito, who was appointed to the court in 2005 by President George W. Bush, said the current court members sometimes "disagree quite sharply, but I can say that it has never been personal," and no member has questioned the good faith of another. "Our role is to learn from each other."

A member of the audience asked Alito about the role of precedence or previous court rulings in the court's decision making. The questioner noted that for the church, laws are interpreted according to Scripture and tradition.

"The authority of the church comes from God through the Apostles," he said, "while the authority of the Supreme Court has a secular source, it comes through our Constitution."

The "important similarity," he said, is "the value of the body of decisions that have been developed over time with input from different sources."

Generally, Alito said, relying on precedence provides stability for a society and equality under the law.

"Past decisions represent the wisdom of the people who made them and are deserving of respect," he said, "but precedence is not absolutely binding" because it is important for a society to have the ability to go back and correct mistakes.

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