

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 17, 2013 at 6:55am

Sticking with Francis

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

In the little more than a month since the election of Pope Francis, many of my friends on the left have been exultant. I should add that many of my friends on the right have also been thrilled. How can this be? Can one man, through a few gestures, really begin to break down the divisions within the church?

My colleague and friend John Allen in an interview posted today at RealClearReligion said:

I think this was clearly, and self-consciously, the most anti-establishment conclave of the last 150 years. I think you'd probably have to go back to the election of Leo XIII in 1878 to find a conclave where the Cardinals understood themselves so clearly to be voting for a change. In this case it wasn't a rejection of the substance of Benedict XVI's papacy, but it was a rejection of the methods of management and governance.

In the event, my colleague is wrong: The conclave of 1914 was probably the most anti-establishment conclave in recent memory. Cardinal Della Chiesa had only recently been made a cardinal, after being passed over at least three times. He had been exiled to Bologna by Pius X's Secretary of State, Cardinal Merry del Val, and was viewed with suspicion by the Pian Sodality, which served as a kind of secret police, ferreting out potential modernists. When he won election, becoming Pope Benedict XV, Cardinal Merry del Val approached the throne to make his vow of obedience. The newly elected pope leaned forward and whispered: "The stone which the builders rejected." Cardinal Merry del Val replied, "It is marvelous to our eyes." The story may be apocryphal, but it gets to the heart of the change that took place.

But Allen got the gist of the matter today correct: The cardinals were not rejecting the substance of Benedict XVI's papacy, still less the doctrine, only the methods of governing and management. Those who have entertained wild expectations of change need to consider the implications of what they expect. If you think Pope Francis is going to overturn fairly settled positions, are you not also suggesting that he

has been something of a hypocrite all these years, toeing the line without believing it? Would you admire the new pope more if he made a huge change -- say, ordaining women -- but the change revealed such hypocrisy? I wouldn't.

More importantly, why do so many of my fellow friends on the left think no one could really believe what the church teaches on issues like contraception, or same-sex marriage, or the all-male priesthood? We can concede that the church's teachings always need to be developed, and that sometimes those developments happen in startling ways. But there does seem to be in the air of modernity no sense that perhaps we should bend our wills, our consciences, our thoughts, to the considered judgment of Rome, or of the ages, or really of anybody except ourselves.

Yesterday at lunch, someone cast a slur against Vatican I's teaching on papal infallibility. To be clear, had I been at the council, I would have joined St. Louis Archbishop Peter Richard Kenrick and others in opposing the definition. (I am not sure I would have had the courage of Bishop Edward Fitzgerald of Little Rock, Ark., who not only opposed the definition but declined to leave town for the final vote and cast one of only two votes in formal session against the definition.) But in the wake of the conciliar definition, where would one stand to oppose the doctrine? John Henry Newman had opposed the definition of papal infallibility, but once the council affirmed it, he allowed that the judgment of the church must supersede his own personal judgment.

The announcement Monday that Pope Francis had reaffirmed the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious forces those on the left to reconsider their expectations. Yes, yes, I know. The doctrinal assessment was handled badly. Yes, the assessment was hatched stateside by priests and prelates without the courage to do the task themselves. Yes, the relationship of power between the bishops and the sisters is a large one and, for the sisters, it is understandable that any investigation will be welcomed as an attack. But if you find yourself loving Pope Francis and you cannot dismiss him as many on the left dismissed Benedict XVI, and he is willing to see the process through, I think you have to ask yourself if it is time for you to reassess your own prejudices in this regard: Maybe there really are doctrinal difficulties at the LCWR. I gotta tell you, they lost me with that choice of a keynote speaker who wants to "move beyond Jesus." But the oversight proposed as a remedy by the Vatican was entrusted to Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, who is a very good man, and in this case it is perhaps more significant that he is a kind man. With or without a new pope, I suspect Sartain and the LCWR will find a way to move forward together.

Of course, it is shocking that the Vatican has had the time to investigate the LCWR's doctrinal difficulties but has not found the time to remove Bishop Robert Finn, who has been convicted in civil court and stands today where Cardinal Bernard Law stood 10 years ago, as the poster boy for the sex abuse scandal. Of course, Law's actions were not uncommon among the hierarchs. Ten years later, Finn's failure to call the police about Fr. Shawn Ratigan really is exceptional. Removing Cardinal Law was a necessary call in 2002. Removing Bishop Finn in 2013 is an easy call.

Yesterday, I called attention to the Holy Father's sermon about Vatican II in which he called the Council a "beautiful work of the Holy Spirit" and indicated he would stand up to anyone who wants to turn back the clock. I urged readers to read the Holy Father's sermon and not think how it may or may not be interpreted as a slap to the traditional Latin Mass crowd or some other group within the church, but instead ask yourself if you have been faithful to the council. If you speak of the hierarchic structure of the church in dismissive tones, as some of my friends on the left do, are you being faithful to the council? If you minimize the call to justice and peace, as some of my friends on the right do, are you being faithful to the council? For everyone on all sides: Do you recognize that the Spirit will move where it wants, or can you only, grudgingly, allow the Spirit to move you in ways you have already decided to go? Who is

following whom? There is an invitation to idolatry in discipleship whenever we make our own ideas and agenda the measure of others. It is a thing to resist. It is a sin.

I am guilty of this sin myself sometimes. I had a conversation with a good friend the day the conclave began. We were assessing different candidates and how this one or that would be accessible to us and our friends, how this one or that would focus on issues we care about, that sort of thing. Then my friend, who is possessed of graces I lack, said, "Of course, I will be happy if they select someone I do not know at all. Then we will have the excitement of getting to know someone new!" I am still excited to be getting to know Papa Francesco. So far, I like everything I have seen and heard. And when he does something I do not like, I hope I will have the grace to admit that perhaps he is right and it is I who need to reassess my opinion and not evaluate the new pope as to whether or not he is playing on "our team."

Advertisement

Source URL (retrieved on 08/23/2017 - 22:42): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/sticking-francis>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>