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Book indicates pope is a moderate realist

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 19, 2013 All Things Catholic
Pope Francis

Available today on bookshelves everywhere, of both the physical and virtual sort, is Image Books? English translation of *On Heaven and Earth*, a dialogue between Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Pope Francis, published while he was still Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires.

In a word, it?s well worth the read.

The book first appeared in Spanish in 2010 [1], and it?s invaluable as a guide to the thinking of the pope across a wide range of issues -- from Capitalism and globalization to interreligious dialogue and feminism, even matters of leadership style.

?The bad leader is the one who is self-assured and stubborn,? the pope writes at one point. ?One of the characteristics of a bad leader is to be excessively normative because of his self-assurance.?

Those lusting for a bumper crop of new papal norms, in other words, may be in for a few lean years.

Though he doesn?t exactly come off as a laugh riot, Francis even serves up a couple of quips. Discussing a certain strain of feminism that he believes promotes a masculine model of gender conflict, he refers to it tongue-in-cheek as ?chauvinism with skirts.?

One caution is in order: It?s not always possible to draw a straight line between views expressed prior to election to the papacy, and what someone will do once they?re actually in the job.

Famously, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger expressed opposition to Turkey?s candidacy to join the European Union in a 2004 interview with *Le Figaro*, but as pope he upheld the Vatican?s standard line, which is neutrality as long as certain human rights guarantees are met (especially religious freedom).

That said, for those wondering where Francis will come down on any number of issues -- priestly celibacy, end-of-life care, refusal of communion to Catholic politicians who break with church teaching, and so on -- *On Heaven and Earth* is the best early guide out there.

A moderate realist

Overall, the impression of Pope Francis that emerges is of a moderate realist. He comes off as committed to classic Christian orthodoxy (clearly defending the idea of the Devil as a personal force of evil, for instance), always expressed in balanced fashion, and with a special emphasis on the poor and those at the margins of society.

?Religious truth does not change, but it does develop and grow,? Francis writes. ?It is like with the human being. We are the same as a baby and in old age, but in the middle there is a whole journey.?

(By the way, the example Francis gives of development in doctrine is the death penalty, which he says Christianity once accepted ?but today the moral conscience has become much more refined and the catechism says that it is better it does not happen.?)

At another stage, Francis warns of the dangers of ?rigid religiosity? and ?fundamentalism.?

?This type of rigid religiosity is disguised with doctrines that claim to give justifications, but in reality deprive people of their freedom and do not allow them to grow as persons,? he says. ?A large number end up living a double life.?

Francis acknowledges that he?s felt the sting of that rigidity himself, especially in criticism of his pastoral style over the years.

He describes once attending an ecumenical service in Argentina that brought 7,000 Evangelicals and Catholics together, where the Evangelical pastor asked if it would be okay for everyone to pray for him.

Francis says he knelt down to receive the blessing (among other things, anticipating his now-famous gesture the evening of his election to the papacy,) and the next week a traditionalist magazine carried the shot under the headline, ?Buenos Aires *sede vacante*: Archbishop commits the sin of apostasy.?

Francis said he remained unmoved, asserting that one can pray even with an agnostic: ?What?s the problem??

At another point, Francis expresses a healthy skepticism about claims of healings, revelations and visions, saying that God is not like Federal Express, sending messages all the time. The real tests of supernatural phenomena, he says are ?simplicity, humility and the absence of a spectacle? -- otherwise, he said, we may be dealing with a ?business? rather than the presence of the divine.

Finally, Francis briefly lists the veil on his private life, saying that when he was a seminarian he became ?enchanted? with a woman he met at his uncle?s wedding. It made him ?kick around the idea? of getting married, he said, but in the end he chose the religious path.

For those clerics who wrestle with similar doubts, the pope has a simple message: Better to be a good Christian, he says, than a bad priest.

Catholic/Jewish relations

Since this is a book with a rabbi, it?s reasonable to expect that the pope ought to have something to say about Judaism.

?The church officially recognizes that the People of Israel continue to be the Chosen People,? Francis says of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). ?Nowhere does it say: ?You lost the game, now it is our turn.? It is a recognition of the people of Israel.?

The pope also clearly rejects the traditional charge of deicide.

?The Jewish people can no longer be accused of having killed God, as they were for a long time,? he says. ?When one reads the account of the Passion it is clear. It would be like if all the Argentinean people were blamed for a specific governmental administration.?

In terms of news flashes, Francis also appears to support the complete opening of the Vatican Archives from the period of the Second World War, in order to address debates over the role of Pius XII and the Holocaust.

?They should open them and clarify everything,? the future pope said three years ago. ?Then it can be seen if they could have done something, to what extent it could have been done, and if we were wrong in something we will be able to say: ?We were wrong in this.? We do not have to be afraid of that. The objective has to be the truth. When one starts to hide the truth, one eliminates the Bible.?

Life issues

On the hot-button issues of sexual morality and the defense of life and the family, *On Heaven and Earth* basically positions the new pope as a centrist.

Regarding end-of-life care, Francis underlines the traditional Catholic distinction between ?ordinary? and ?extraordinary? means to defend life, saying that the latter are never obligatory.

?The strength of medicine, in terminal cases, is not so much about making someone live another three days or two months,? he says, ?but rather in making sure the body suffers as little as possible. You are not obligated to conserve life with extraordinary methods. That can go against the dignity of the person.?

Though he does not directly address the question of patients in a persistent vegetative state, his position may be seen as in contrast with the more restrictive line from the Vatican under John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

?The patient must be given everything necessary and ordinary to be able to live while there is hope for life,? he says. ?Extraordinary measures, for example, the insertion of a breathing tube to give someone a few more days of life, are not obligatory.?

Francis clearly opposes euthanasia, and expresses special concern for the treatment of the elderly.

?When I visit nursing homes, I ask the elderly about their children and they answer that they are not going to see them because they have to work; they try to cover for them,? he said. ?There are many who abandon those that fed them, who educated them, who wiped their bottoms. It hurts me; it makes me weep inside.?

The pope calls neglect of the elderly a form of ?covert euthanasia.?

With regard to homosexuality, Francis defends the idea of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, but condemns ?spiritual and pastoral harassment? of individuals and couples, and suggests that ?a union of a private nature? among same-sex partners is another matter.

The future pope also insists that abortion is not a religious issue but rather a ?scientific? one, since ?the genetic code of the person is present at the moment of conception? and hence killing that individual is ?not ethical.?

Francis does not address the question of whether bishops should administer communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians, but he hints at how he might handle it in the context of talking about Catholic business leaders who refuse to pay employees a just wage.

?In certain situations, I do not give communion myself; I stay back and I let the ministers give it because I do not want those people to come to me for the photo op,? he says.

Social justice

Francis begins by highlighting the problem of global warming as an example of humanity becoming ?overly zealous? and losing respect for nature. He calls it the result of a ?constructivist? ethic, in which humanity forgets that it has received creation as a gift from God.

In a chapter on economics, Francis says the church condemns both Communism and ?wild Capitalism ? with equal vigor.? He asserts that Capitalism harbors a ?spiritual perversion? that seeks to ?tame transcendence,? seeking to co-opt religion for its own ends.

The pope warns that without a robust defense of the poor at its heart, Christianity risks becoming a ?lukewarm, weak and mediocre church.?

Francis also clearly endorses the concept of ?social debt,? meaning the idea that business people have a responsibility to serve the societies in which they operate. He says that social debt must be considered part of every transaction.

In terms of the broad process of globalization, Francis rejects what he calls a ?billiard ball? model, in which uniformity swamps the distinctiveness of local cultures. Instead, he says, globalization should be more akin to a polyhedron ?in which everyone is integrated but each player maintains his particularities, which, at the same time, enrich the others.?

Clerical life

Two passages from *On Heaven and Earth* have already made the rounds in advance of a definitive English translation: the new pope?s comments on the sexual abuse scandals in the church, and his views on priestly celibacy.

On the sex abuse front, Francis endorses a ?zero tolerance? policy and describes the earlier practice in the United States of shuffling problem priests from parish to parish as ?stupid.?

?You can never turn a blind eye,? he says.

The pope says that when another bishop called him for advice about how to handle a case, he replied: ?I told him to take away the priest?s faculties, not to permit him to exercise his priestly ministry again, and to initiate a canonical trial in the tribunal that corresponds to that diocese.?

On celibacy, Francis upholds the existing rule in the Western church but also hints at openness to reconsidering things down the line.

?It is an issue of discipline, not of faith,? he says. ?It can be changed.?

?For the time being, I am in favor of maintaining celibacy, with the pros and the cons it has, because it has been ten centuries of good experiences more often than failure,? the pope says.

More broadly, Francis identifies what he considers the original sin of clerical life: The temptation to ?worldliness.?

?One Catholic theologian, Henri de Lubac, says that the worst that can happen to those that are anointed and called to service is that they live with the criteria of the world instead of the criteria that the Lord commands from the tablets of the law and the Gospel,? Francis says.

?The worst that can happen in the priestly life is to be worldly, to be a ?light? bishop or a ?light? priest.?

The pope evinces little preoccupation for externals: ?The problem is not whether you wear a cassock, but rather if you roll up its sleeves when you have to work for the good of others,? he says, quoting another priest he respects.

Finally, Francis rejects clericalism, which he calls a ?distortion of religion.?

?When a priest leads a diocese or a parish, he has to listen to his community, to make mature decisions and lead the community accordingly,? he says. ?In contrast, when the priest imposes himself, when in some way he says, ?I am the boss here,? he falls into clericalism.?

The church and politics

One interesting tidbit from *On Heaven and Earth* is that Francis reveals he hasn?t actually voted in elections in Argentina since the early 1960s, partly as an expression of how important he thinks it is for the clergy to remain impartial.

?I am father of all, and I cannot be wrapped in a political flag,? he says.

(By the way, voting is compulsory under Argentine law and refusal makes one subject to fines. That obligation ceases at 70, however, so Francis is probably safe from prosecution.)

Francis clearly doesn?t believe in an apolitical church. At one point he rejects what he calls ?quietism,? and at another he decries the ?liberal? model of religion as an exclusively personal affair without public consequences. He applauds John Paul?s insistence that ?faith creates culture.?

At the same time, Francis rejects partisan alliances. He also twice says that the loss of the Papal States, and thus the papacy?s temporal authority, was a good thing for the Vatican. He called the Papal States ?a deformation of Christianity? that ?did not correspond to what Jesus wanted and what God wants.?

Francis says the only time he ever directly criticized a government official in 18 years was when the mayor of Buenos Aires failed to appeal a court ruling authorizing a same-sex wedding. Even then, the pope insisted, he was making a point about social values, and ?at no time did I speak about homosexuals nor did I make any derogatory reference toward them.?

Governance

The new pope drops a couple of interesting hints in *On Heaven and Earth* about his approach to governance.

At one point, he says that while he can be naïve on some matters, in other ways he has a good ?alert-o-meter,? meaning a sense of when people are trying to play him.

Specifically, he tells the story of a couple of Argentine government officials who once came to him wanting to donate money for the poor in the slums -- only they wanted him to sign a note saying he?d received twice what they actually gave, so they could pocket the rest. He saw through the scheme, and politely suggested they transfer their donation directly to the church?s bank account.

Francis also talks about Vatican finances, defending the institution from exaggerated perceptions about its wealth.

?The Vatican?s finances are public, and it always runs a deficit,? he says. ?What comes in as donations or for visits to museums goes out to leper hospitals, to schools, and to African, Asian and Latin American communities.?

At the same time, he signals support for greater transparency, applauding John Paul II?s decision in 1982 to authorize payments for the Vatican?s liability in the collapse of Italian banking giant Banco Ambrosiano. He calls the temptation for religious leaders to be corrupted by money ?absolutely condemnable.?

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