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"Open the Doors"

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Distinctly Catholic

The Holy Father delivered a remarkable sermon last Saturday at his morning Mass at the Casa Santa Marta. We do not get full texts of these sermons, many of which have been stunning, but Vatican Radio gives the highlights. Here is a link to last Saturday's Vatican Radio report.

The sermon has several remarkable sections. Let us start with this:

"Think about a single mother who goes to church, in the parish and to the secretary she says: 'I want my child baptized'. And then this Christian, this Christian says: 'No, you cannot because you're not married!'. But look, this girl who had the courage to carry her pregnancy and not to return her son to the sender, what is it? A closed door! This is not zeal! It is far from the Lord! It does not open doors! And so when we are on this street, have this attitude, we do not do good to people, the people, the People of God, but Jesus instituted the seven sacraments with this attitude and we are establishing the eighth: the sacrament of pastoral customs!"

"Jesus is indignant when he sees these things" - said the Pope - because those who suffer are "his faithful people, the people that he loves so much"

"We think today of Jesus, who always wants us all to be closer to Him, we think of the Holy People of God, a simple people, who want to get closer to Jesus and we think of so many Christians of goodwill who are wrong and that instead of opening a door they close the door of goodwill ... So we ask the Lord that all those who come to the Church find the doors open, find the doors open, open to meet this love of Jesus. We ask this grace. "

We hear in these words and echo of Blessed Pope John XXIII, in his speech opening the Second Vatican Council, warning against the 'prophets of doom.' But, we hear, as well, a direct challenge to those who are constantly trying to close the doors to the Church. Those who think that only certain types of people should be permitted to come to communion. Those who think only certain types of little boys should be scouts. Those who denounce others as practicing a form of 'Catholic Lite.'

To be sure, the Holy Father has also spoken about spiritual lukewarmness, about those who trust in the Lord, but not entirely. But, his words always sound like encouragement, not admonition. He never sounds like a neo-Jansenist.

I must ask the question: What does Cardinal Burke or Archbishop Chaput make of this sermon by the Holy Father? The joke in St. Louis was that there would be no Catholics left by the time Burke's tenure as archbishop ended because they would all be excommunicated. Now, from his perch in Rome, he tells local bishops how they should, and should not, permit the sacraments to be administered, and his interpretation always sounds like a door being slammed to someone.

Archbishop Chaput famously decided that a child of gay parents should not be allowed to attend Catholic schools. The parents were not trying to make a statement. They did not once use their child's enrollment as a means of advocating any supposed 'gay agenda.' They wanted a good education for their child. But, Chaput shut the door. On a child. You can hear some chanceries all weekend, busy deciding whether or not to continue to allow scout troops at their parishes because the Boy Scouts decided to let gay kids join. Kids. Children. 'Suffer unto me the little children,' was the text the Holy Father was preaching on.

I do not mean to single out Archbishop Chaput. I do not know the man and people who do tell me that he deeply loves the Lord. I do not doubt it. But, oftentimes he gives the impression 'and he is far from alone as there are many bishops and priests who give the same impression ' that while they may love the Lord, he doesn't care very much for people, at least people who do not agree with him that we are engaged in a culture war. The Holy Father, by contrast, repeatedly gives evidence of the simple fact that he likes people and understands that a pastor must be gentle, that his primary job is to love, not to instruct or, better to say, that loving is the proper form of instruction for a bishop.

At another point, the Holy Father illustrated the limits of theology:

"If you want to know who Mary is go to the theologian and he will tell you exactly who Mary is. But if you want to know how to love Mary go to the People of God who teach it better. " The people of God -

continued the Pope - "are always asking for something closer to Jesus, they are sometimes a bit 'insistent in this. But it is the insistence of those who believe.?"

"I remember once, coming out of the city of Salta, on the patronal feast, there was a humble lady who asked for a priest's blessing. The priest said, 'All right, but you were at the Mass' and explained the whole theology of blessing in the church. You did well: 'Ah, thank you father, yes father,' said the woman. When the priest had gone, the woman turned to another priest: 'Give me your blessing!'. All these words did not register with her, because she had another necessity: the need to be touched by the Lord. That is the faith that we always look for, this is the faith that brings the Holy Spirit. We must facilitate it, make it grow, help it grow. "

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How many times in the seminary in the mid-80s did I listen to the smart crowd speak derisively of those whose pieties were simple or too traditional for modern tastes. Even now, when liberal theologians invoke the "people of God" to support overturning all manner of traditional Catholic beliefs, I wonder if they have spent much time with the people of God, at least with those who don't read the Times, or didn't go to college, or aren't sure who Hans Kung is.

Papa Francesco is challenging all of us, across the board, to re-think our attitudes and our ideologies, are certainties and our prejudices. It is so refreshing. Today, a priest friend said that at the lunch table at the chancery, the priests all talk about these morning sermons from the pope. I am glad of it. It seems like the Holy Father is becoming the world's parish priest, and I hope the actual parish priests (and their bishops) will follow his example. He is welcoming. He is challenging. He is straight forward. But, most of all, he is loving. "Only love is credible," as Balthasar used to say. Indeed.

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