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## Pope Francis leads Catholics in understanding different aspects of faith

by Pat Perriello

NCR Today

Writing for Religion News Service, David Gibson raises the question of the orthodoxy of Pope Francis.

He suggests many conservatives are "panicky." Yet he makes clear that while plain-spoken, Francis is enunciating long-standing Catholic doctrine -- Christ redeemed the whole world -- and Francis' statements are in line with statements from popes Leo XIII through John Paul II. As Francis said in his now-infamous homily, God can save everyone through the blood of Jesus, even atheists.

I think there are a couple of issues here. First, there is the issue of the new Mass translation, which says Jesus died for many, not all. I'm pretty sure Pope Benedict was not saying Jesus did not die for all. It was merely his love of the Latin Mass that led him to the dubious decision to insist on a literal translation from the Latin throughout the new Mass translation. I have even seen explanations that point out that the original Greek actually means to include all. In any case, there is no disagreement between Francis and Benedict on the doctrinal issue.

More importantly, it is fascinating to see how restating solid doctrine in a different way can upset a lot of people. I believe the problem centers on the emphasis or stress placed on certain doctrines. We become so accustomed to hearing a particular doctrine stated a certain way or some doctrines emphasized more than other doctrines that we confuse orthodoxy with saying things in a customary fashion.

Actually, Christianity is a religion filled with many contradictions. For example, we can speak of God as both immanent and transcendent. Both are true, but which doctrine you stress will make a huge difference in how you practice your faith and even conduct your liturgy.

We remove our shoes and stand trembling in front of the burning bush, yet we walk and talk intimately with our God, holding his hand as we experience the trials of life. Jesus is lord and master, yet he is also friend and brother.

In the case of salvation, we can focus on what we see as the absolute truths of our Catholic faith or we can choose to recognize God's power to redeem the entire world and to judge each of us apart from established church structures. Both represent orthodox positions but can lead to very different approaches to those outside the church.

We tend to move from one side to the other on such doctrines and emphasize one often at the expense of the other until the pendulum swings once again. There was a period in the Middle Ages when God as transcendent being was dominant. We used a language at Mass that had become foreign and could not be understood to emphasize our distance from the sacred. The altar faced the wall. The people were allowed to gaze briefly on the host at Mass. Seldom did the faithful receive Communion, and they were deeply conscious of their own unworthiness. When Communion was received, one knelt before a Communion rail and received on the tongue lest the body of Christ be touched.

Beginning with the papacy of Pius XII, the pendulum started to swing. Frequent Communion was encouraged and made easier for the faithful. We remembered that Christ was our brother and we were all children of God. We celebrated and participated in the Mass with the priest and not merely as onlookers.

The danger is that we become fixed on having only one way of understanding a doctrine. We need to guard against confusing one set of explanations of an issue with defined doctrine. Insisting that the church represents absolute truth and there can be no change fails to embrace the depth and breadth of Catholic/Christian theology. Our understanding and expression of who and what God is can be culturally conditioned. Which aspects of the deposit of faith we choose to emphasize may well depend on the conditions of society at a particular moment in time.

For me, I find a personal, intimate relationship to God central to my Catholic faith. I was taught to love Jesus and not to fear him. I want a liturgy that emphasizes that relationship as well as the relationship we share with one another.

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Those who see God as primarily transcendent and want a liturgy that emphasizes their separation from God should be able to have that kind of liturgy. Recognizing different aspects of our understanding of God should provide wider choices and opportunities for everyone to express their faith.

In the same way, reaching out with understanding to our separated brothers and sisters will prevent us from being the self-referential church Pope Francis has warned against. We will have the opportunity to learn from the truths of every other member of our community, which will serve to enhance our own faith.

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