NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Editorial: Becoming a 'messy' church under Pope Francis

NCR Editorial Staff | Aug. 13, 2013
Editorial

One line from Pope Francis' impromptu news conference with reporters aboard the papal plane as it flew from Brazil to Rome last month quickly became a setup for comedians around the world.

Responding to a question about gay priests, Francis said, now famously, "If they accept the Lord and have goodwill, who am I to judge them?"

Comedians, unable to resist this setup from the ultimate straight man, responded: "Who are you to judge? You're the pope. Judging is in your job description."

It was funny to see these secular jesters trying to grapple with this papal teaching moment. But like all good comedy and satire, this little joke was based on at least a kernel of truth. Out of force of habit, we have come to expect judgment and correction -- if not outright condemnation -- from official Vatican releases and papal announcements. Francis has turned this notion on its head.

Until Francis, we had come to expect moral teachings -- especially those dealing with sexuality -- to be addressed in an abstract, antiseptic way, divorced from human application with all its messiness. (Francis, in fact, instructed the thousands of pilgrims attending the vigil before the final World Youth Day Mass on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro that we want to see messiness in the church. Making reference to the heavy rains that bedeviled the pilgrims, Francis said, "I expect a messy World Youth Day. But I want things messy and stirred up in the congregations. I want you to take to the streets. I want the church to take to the streets.")

Francis' "who am I to judge" statement reflects the fundamental experience felt by most Catholics: We don't see gays and lesbians, we see brothers, sisters, family members, co-workers and we want for them everything we want for ourselves. That may not be a perfect response to tough questions, but it is where we all start. Francis seems to recognize that.

As funny as the comedians trying to understand this papal teaching moment were the responses of the princes of the Catholic clerical class trying to explain it away. There were many, but we can pull out two as exemplary.

All of them quickly and definitively announced that Francis was not changing church doctrine.

Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron told the *Detroit Free Press* that he heard Francis reiterate Catholic doctrine, which opposes homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Vigneron said the pope made it clear that gays must try to "repent and put their lives in order."

"There's no change" on the Catholic church's view on homosexuality, Vigneron said. "He may have had his own Pope Francis way of putting it, different from maybe the way Pope Benedict would put it, but they're saying the same things."

In an official statement dated July 29, San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone thanked Francis "for reiterating the Church's love and welcome to all people, especially those who experience same-sex attraction." (Remember -- see *NCR*, Jan. 18-31 -- Cordileone doesn't use the words *gay* or *lesbian* because, he says, those words are politically loaded and not in the church vocabulary for moral theology.)

"While the Church does not judge individuals, the church does judge actions," said Cordileone, who was a major supporter of Proposition 8, California's gay marriage ban, holding rallies and raising more than $1.5 million to put the measure on the ballot in 2008. "With regard to sexual acts, the Church has always faithfully taught, and always will, the teaching she has received from her Lord, namely, that they find their proper order and purpose within the marital union of husband and wife, and outside of the bond of marriage they are sinful. Both natural and revealed law teach us this truth."

The rush of our leaders to insist Francis had said nothing different is as unseemly in its own context as the comedians' comments, funny as they might have been, were irrelevant in the end to church teaching.

What is missed in each is the broad region between those extremes where, it seems, Francis is inviting us to move and become comfortable. It would be absurd for anyone to suggest, on the basis of five words, that Francis is changing church teaching on the run. It is equally absurd to suggest that nothing has changed. Those five words are an expression of graciousness and generosity, not to mention deep humanity, that has not been part of papal practice in recent memory.

It is hardly a secret that competing agendas are at work in the church, including those of liturgical traditionalists, Catholic progressives and Vatican "old guard." Big questions remain on how the church handles everything from an abusive and out-of-touch clerical culture to women who feel utterly and definitively shut out. What Francis intends to do about that, and how long it will take him to assemble the kinds of leaders he needs to refocus the way the church is led, is unknown. But it is clear, at this point, that he has relocated the papacy in real time and space and in the way leadership is practiced. In so doing, he has at least begun to deprive the Vatican's palace culture of a locus and of its most prized asset: exclusive access to the highest leader.

If the direction of this papacy is not as clearly drawn as the lines on a blueprint or a corporate five-year plan, Francis has still provided significant indications of where we're headed. One example lies in his words to the Latin American bishops. Francis has said that a primary ministry of the papacy is ministry to his brother bishops and he has sternly criticized clerical ambition and arrogance. History may show that these two speeches in Brazil were the most important of his early papacy.

At one point, he warns against dealing with the church's problems with "a purely disciplinary solution" and against a "restoration of outdated manners and forms which, even on the cultural level, are no longer meaningful." He warns against "exaggerated tendencies toward doctrinal or disciplinary 'safety.' "

How often do our church leaders who adopt the "culture warrior" stance seem to be railing against, rather than engaging, modern culture? And where has that gotten us?

Francis continues: "Responding to the existential issues of people today, especially the young, listening to the language they speak, can lead to a fruitful change, which must take place with the help of the Gospel, the magisterium, and the church's social doctrine. ... If we remain within the parameters of our 'traditional culture' ... we will end up nullifying the power of the Holy Spirit."

Later, he would describe how a bishop should lead: "The bishop has to be among his people in three ways," he said. "In front of them, pointing the way; among them, keeping them together and preventing them from being scattered; and behind them, ensuring that no one is left behind, but also, and primarily, so that the flock itself

can sniff out new paths."

Source URL (retrieved on *02/06/2016 - 03:18*): http://ncronline.org/news/spirituality/editorial-becoming-messy-church-under-pope-francis