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Stop parsing the pope

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 8, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The effort of some of our Catholic friends on the right to question or object or contextualize to the point of gutting the obvious import or even to demean Pope Francis' happy penchant for speaking frankly continues. They rightly perceive that something different is happening in the Church under the leadership of our new Holy Father. It brings to mind the words of the prophet Isaiah (43:19): "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

The Rome correspondent for LifeSiteNews, Hilary White, perceives there is something new, and she is not happy at all about it [1]. She writes of the concern that Pope Francis' words have "reached so deeply into the minds of orthodox believers," but why is that a concern? Isn't that a good thing? No. Because these orthodox believers have relied upon Rome to provide "doctrinal precision." Of course, no one is in favor of doctrinal imprecision. But, really, what is the concern here?

Pope Francis, like Pope Benedict before him, has insisted that our moral teachings flow from our doctrinal teachings, not the other way round. Benedict said this repeatedly, but he said it in his dense manner, which is not a complaint -- I liked the density of a Ratzinger sermon. But it was easier to ignore. Pope Francis says it plainly: Mercy first, then the rules. Social justice and concern for the life issues -- indeed, the life issues understood as part of our commitment to social justice. Love, unconditional love, the premise and promise of evangelization, not a checklist of precise doctrinal conformity. Accompany people before you lecture them. These are the leitmotifs of this pope's interviews, and they are as doctrinally pristine as the words of the Lord when he stood down the Pharisees of his day.

It is the last paragraph of Ms. White's column that really breaks my heart. She writes:

> We also know that the same system that kept ambiguity or confusion from causing problems among the faithful, also restrained those members of the hierarchy who were inclined, for whatever reason, to back away from the Church's teachings. It will not have failed to cross the minds of a certain kind of prelate and priest that there now appears to be no one minding the store and that some things may now be said and done with less fear of corrective action.

"With less fear." The words jump off the page. Fear is precisely what trust in the Lord banishes, does it not? I am not the kind of person who thinks joining hands and singing "Kumbaya" will solve all the ills of the world, but I know enough about sin to know that fear is the kindling that sets sin aflame. I suspect Ms. White is one of those people who hear the parable of the talents and think it conveys a blessing upon shrewd investment strategies when in fact, it is a parable about the spiritually crippling effects of fear. But let us tip our biretta to her: She is right about the pope. He wants priests and prelates -- and laypeople -- to be less fearful. The difference is that he sees that as a good thing and she, obviously, dreads it.

George Weigel, in a recent column at National Review Online [2], begrudges my friend and colleague Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese his excitement at the new papacy. Fr. Reese said, "I haven't been this hopeful about the Church in decades. ... It's fun to be Catholic again." Weigel wonders what Reese has been looking at to justify his previous

unhappiness. He cites all the good things that have been going on in the church, the tens of thousands of people received into the church, the rise of vibrant campus ministry programs, Fr. Barron's "Catholicism" series, and other items. With Weigel, I share the conviction that Pope John Paul II's visits around the world, especially to poor countries that no one else paid any attention to, were sources of joy and inspiration. And, I share Weigel's conviction that Benedict was a great teacher of the faith.

But there can be no denying that many Catholics felt shunted aside and were made to feel that they were not good Catholics, that we were "cafeteria Catholics" by Mr. Weigel and his pals the last 35 years. It is also true that there was some ugliness these past few decades. For all his heroism, Pope John Paul II looked the other way when it came to Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado. The other day, I was speaking with a bishop, and I said that I know Fr. Maciel fooled many people, but I thought the Vatican's reluctance to examine his situation was a disaster for the church and especially for those good-hearted souls who were attracted to the Legionaries of Christ and did not know better.

The prelate replied, "Maciel fooled no one. There was so much sugar-coating around that man from the very beginning, you had to know there was something rotten. They chose not to look." It is also more than a little ironic that Weigel and other Catholic conservatives are now dusting off the very quotes I always liked from Benedict to demonstrate continuity between Benedict and Francis, but they never seemed to call attention to those quotes when they were uttered. Alas, these are the quotes that got highlighted with the red pen, not the gold one.

Germain Grisez's comments [2] go beyond disagreement to disrespect. When he writes that Pope Francis is "self-indulgent," I wonder who died and left Grisez to be the pope's psychologist. Suggesting that the pope has had too much to drink and that he is shirking his responsibilities is really beyond the pale. I fear Grisez is saying publicly what others are saying privately. And it is surprising, if not shocking, that no prelate has, so far as I know, called out Grisez for his remarks and defended the Holy Father. You can bet if a nun had said something similar about John Paul II, there would be calls for her excommunication!

I reiterate my call to Catholic conservatives to approach Francis as I approached Benedict: accept that he is challenging your faith and inviting you to deepen it. Let the unfamiliarity of his words and approach encourage you to go out into the deep, not to shun or spin or minimize. As mentioned last week [3], Notre Dame's Rick Garnett has said this, and he is to be applauded for saying it, but more than that, his example should be followed. Not every conservative is greeting this papacy as a sign of the end times.

My liberal friends also are being challenged by Pope Francis. They warm to his words and to his style, yet they too must be careful not to trim his comments or mischaracterize what he is saying. The pope rightly said that the Church should not only be obsessed with the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage and contraception, but some Catholic commentators have described these concerns as "narrow" when, in fact, our Catholic teaching against abortion is foundational, our Catholic witness to marriage is sacramental, and our Catholic concern about contraception is, I believe, prophetic, if nonetheless more problematic. And the decision to laicize Fr. Greg Reynolds in Australia indicates that Pope Francis wants to remind us that while the rules should not be the first thing people know about the Catholic Church, there are still rules, and clergy especially should be expected to follow them.

This is, as Father Reese said, an exciting time, a fun time to be a Catholic, and not just for those of us who range ourselves on the left. Pope Francis is inviting the entire Church, from the Curia to the pews, to get out of ourselves and get over ourselves and, trusting in the Lord, go out into the world with confidence and joy. He is not asking us to abandon our moral doctrines. He is asking us to live them in such a way that they shine and do not scold. He is inviting us to love the poor, to encounter Christ in the poor and not to be so overly concerned with our own moral purity that fear of the messiness of life deters us from being with the poor. He is calling us

to trust, to really trust, in God's mercy. This is not doctrinal imprecision. This is not a slur on his predecessors. This is the Gospel.

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