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Is Pope Francis Unclear?

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 15, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

In this morning?s Washington Post, [1]Michelle Boorstein and Elizabeth Tenety write about conservative disquiet with Pope Francis. They highlight some people who are genuinely wrestling with the challenge of Pope Francis? provocative words and style, and I am genuinely thrilled to see that some of my conservative co-religionists are reacquainting themselves with the story of the Prodigal and its implications for the life of the Church.

Unfortunately, my friend Robert Royal delivered himself of two quotes that I think are, well, unfortunate. In the article he states, ?[Francis] is a remarkable man, no one would deny that. But I?m not sure he cares about being accurate.? And, later in the piece, Royal is quoted as saying, ?We had one of the greatest living intellectuals [in Benedict], and now we?ve got a guy who doesn?t think clear expression is important.?

Clarity? I think Pope Francis is crystal clear. What he has been saying, repeatedly and clearly, is that the Church has been in danger of being defined by its rules and not by its love. He is saying, again with crystal clarity, that while everything the Father has belongs to the older son, the good son, the son who stayed faithful to his duties, the Gospel at its most profound is not about human goodness but about God?s superabundant mercy, which is showered upon the prodigal son. Pope Francis is inviting us to not only read the story of the Prodigal, but to live it and to form the Church in the image of the man who had two sons. ?A man had two sons.? Peguy wrote that these are the words that have brought grown men to tears through the centuries. Pope Francis has set it as the lodestar of his pontificate to bring our culture to tears. That, I would think, is crystal clear.

The fetish for moral clarity on certain moral issues has led to many unfortunate results. As Bishop Robert McElroy recently pointed out in his extraordinary essay published at America magazine, the fixation on ?intrinsic evil? and its role in determining the Church?s stance in the public square has led to a deflated concern to focus on grave, but not intrinsic evils, like poverty. I believe the USCCB?s unwillingness to endorse the Affordable Care Act out of a concern that some government subsidies might be used to purchase policies that cover abortion was an unfortunate result. I understand that negative proscriptions ? you can never take an innocent human life - have a clarity that positive proscriptions ? you must help the poor ? do not. But, moral clarity does not always yield political clarity, and the insistence on a certain pristine moral stance led the USCCB to oppose the ACA.

Some conservatives have long complained that they do not hear more sermons about abortion and same sex marriage. True, most preachers tend to focus on the Gospels that were just proclaimed and the Gospels have more to say about God?s superabundant love than they do about the institution of civil marriage. But, the Church has mounted prominent and expensive campaigns against same sex marriage. The Church launched a Fortnight for Freedom that lost its proper focus on the institutional integrity of our Catholic ministries and found itself making the argument that the conscience rights of for-profit employers trumped the conscience rights of

their employees, which is something I have never seen addressed clearly in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. And, we have seen the appointment of bishops who are known for their ?clarity? on the Church?s moral teachings but who also evidence not a whit of pastoral solicitude, whose public comments and public personas could not be more different from the comments and the personality of Pope Francis. Should it surprise anyone that people, many people, are responding to his simplicity and his self-evident willingness to embrace all?

For many years I have heard conservatives say that the problem for the Church is that our people do not understand the Church?s teachings. I have long thought it was more accurate to say that the people understood the teachings just fine, but they rejected them. Still, I will grant, indeed insist, that there has been a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding that went deeper than any particular issue and, instead, has to do with the context of the Church?s teachings. Back during the sex abuse crisis, in May, 2002, I wrote these words [2]:

Few would argue that the Church's moral teachings, standing on their own, are persuasive in today's culture. But they were never meant to stand on their own. What is distinctive about Catholicism is not the manner in which its members copulate, but how we pray and to whom. This core sense of wonder at the admittedly large claims of the Catholic faith--that God himself came down from Heaven, was born of a virgin, walked upon the Earth, died, and rose from the dead--and the wonder they must necessarily inspire to those who hold them, are what the Church must reclaim if its credibility is to be restored. Unless a bishop or theologian can trace his views on moral issues to the empty tomb of Easter morning, there is nothing distinctively Christian or Catholic about them.

This is what has been lacking in the Church?s proclamation of the Gospel and of the moral teachings the Church draws from the Gospel, the ability to connect the teachings with the empty tomb rather than with the Republican Party?s platform. The moral teachings of the Church became a kind of Pelagian checklist of what it meant to be a good Catholic.

I recall the sex abuse crisis for a reason beyond that applicable quote. Bishops and archbishops and cardinals who had publicly insisted on the clarity of the Church?s teachings regarding sexual matters suddenly were exposed as incapable of such moral clarity when it came to their own willingness to cover up and excuse the crime of sexually abusing children. Who can forget the words of Cardinal Egan that horrible spring of 2002: ?If in hindsight we also discover that mistakes may have been made as regards prompt removal of priests and assistance to victims, I am deeply sorry.? Whither the moral clarity? These words do not evidence a voice of someone capable of evangelization. It is the voice of a dodger and dissembler, of someone who has forgotten his vocation to proclaim Christ crucified and, instead, listened to his lawyers. It was appalling and the bishops have no one but themselves to blame for the great price the Church paid in its public credibility, and still pays, when those who denounce politicians for their votes are exposed to have been busy covering up for their priests who committed unspeakable crimes.

Let us return to the story of the Prodigal. Any liberal who tries and rubs his or her conservative friends? noses in Pope Francis? electrifying words is, in fact, undermining Pope Francis. I understand the urge. Like many of my left-of-center friends, I have been called a ?faux Catholic? or a ?lite Catholic? or worse because I thought that the Church?s teachings did not actually require me to go to confession because I voted for Obama in 2008. (I have since gone to political confession, not sacramental confession, for failing to see the limits of Mssr. Obama and I did not give him my vote the second time round!) We have all witnessed prominent prelates call for this person or that to be denied communion. Still, we must resist the urge. The story of the Prodigal does not record how the younger, wayward brother responded to his older brother?s pique. The focus of the entire story is not on either brother really. The parable is about the father, our Father, ?God the Father of Mercies,? as we hear in the words of absolution. As I listen to Pope Francis and, even more, as I watch him, I see a pope who is trying to remind us that our faith is not foundationally about anything we humans do. It is not about human ethics. Fundamentally and foundationally, our faith is all about what God has already done for us, about His mercy and

His superabundant love. That is why grown men have cried through the centuries when they hear the words ?A man had two sons.? It is why Pope Francis is capturing the attention of the world. He is reminding us what our faith is really about. Sometimes Pope Francis uses words to do so, and those words are crystal clear.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/conservative-catholics-question-pope-franciss-approach/2013/10/12/21d7f484-2cf4-11e3-8ade-a1f23cda135e_story.html?hpid=z3
[2] http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Catholic/2002/05/The-Betrayal-How-To-Save-The-Church.aspx