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Pope Francis vs. Ideology

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 18, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Pope Francis delivered a very important homily yesterday at daily Mass. Like many people, I find these daily Mass homilies very challenging and encouraging, truly pastoral, rooted in the Scripture but attuned to the world. Yesterday, he spoke about ideology and faith and how the two are incompatible. These are words that we in the U.S. especially need to hear.

Here are the relevant passages from the Vatican Radio synopsis [1] of the sermon:

Pope Francis referred back to this passage from Thursday?s Gospel in his homily, moving from Jesus? warning. He warned: ?When we are on the street and find ourselves in front of a closed Church,? he said, ?we feel that something is strange.? Sometimes, he said, ?they give us reasons? as to why they are closed: They give ?excuses, justifications, but the fact remains that the Church is closed and the people who pass by cannot enter.? And, even worse, the Lord cannot be close to the people. Today, the Pope said, Jesus speaks to us about the ?image of the [lock]?; it is ?the image of those Christians who have the key in their hand, but take it away, without opening the door.? Worse still, ?they keep the door closed? and ?don?t allow anyone to enter.? In so doing, they themselves do not enter. The ?lack of Christian witness does this,? he said, and ?when this Christian is a priest, a bishop or a Pope it is worse.? But, the Pope asks, how does it happen that a ?Christian falls into this attitude? of keeping the key to the Church in his pocket, with the door closed?

?The faith passes, so to speak, through a distiller and becomes ideology. And ideology does not beckon [people]. In ideologies there is not Jesus: in his tenderness, his love, his meekness. And ideologies are rigid, always. Of every sign: rigid. And when a Christian becomes a disciple of the ideology, he has lost the faith: he is no longer a disciple of Jesus, he is a disciple of this attitude of thought? For this reason Jesus said to them: ?You have taken away the key of knowledge.? The knowledge of Jesus is transformed into an ideological and also moralistic knowledge, because these close the door with many requirements.?
The Pope continued, Jesus told us: ?You burden the shoulders of people [with] many things; only one is necessary.? This, therefore, is the ?spiritual, mental? thought process of one who wants to keep the key in his pocket and the door closed:
?The faith becomes ideology and ideology frightens, ideology chases away the people, distances, distances the people and distances of the Church of the people. But it is a serious illness, this of ideological Christians. It is an illness, but it is not new, eh? Already the Apostle John, in his first Letter, spoke of this. Christians who lose the faith and prefer the ideologies. His attitude is: be rigid, moralistic, ethical, but without kindness. This can be the question, no? But why is it that a Christian can become like this? Just one thing: this Christian does not pray. And if there is no prayer, you always close the door.?

Of course, no one ever thinks that they themselves are ideological. My ideology is a worldview. It is the other?s

guy view of the world that is an ideology! And, the Pope is not encouraging us Catholics to be sloppy thinkers, to fail to engage the world intellectually in hopes of forming coherent views on issues. He counterpoised ideology with prayer in this sermon, and what is prayer except an encounter with the Lord. I think what Pope Francis is calling us Catholics to is very profound, an understanding of our faith as an encounter with the Lord and with one another, especially with the poor, from which we draw lessons about human life depending on our time, our culture and our own personalities. But, always, the lessons we draw must grasp that it is the encounter that must shape them, not the other way round, that if our lives are the blank piece of paper, it is the Holy Spirit that serves as the pen with which we draw if we remain close to the Lord.

This powerful sermon came to us the same day two friends, one on the right and one on the left, sent me articles that would benefit from the Pope?s approach. Let me start with the one from the right.

Louis Verrecchio, writing at Catholic News Agency, posted a column [2]about serving the poor. He asks some strange questions: ?First, consider, did Jesus give money and food to the poor?? I confess I have never asked myself this question. Verrecchio notes the feeding of the 5,000, but continues,

Furthermore, the Gospels do not speak of Jesus giving material aid like money or housing to the lepers, the blind, or the lame, those people who in Jesus? day were the most materially needy. So what did He do? Ultimately, He removed from their lives that which prevented them from participating in the broader society in a manner that is truly reflective of human dignity.

This is true, but you can smell the argument behind it by noting what Verrecchio overlooks: Jesus became poor. And, before he ?removed from their lives that which prevented them from participating in the broader society,? he encountered them. He was *with* them *before* He *served* them.

That whiff soon turns into a nasty, pervasive odor: Verrecchio writes: ?That is why our efforts to serve the poor, if they are to be an accurate reflection of Catholic social doctrine, must include creating, as best we can, a society that offers real opportunities for the poor to become more self-sufficient, apart from which we risk moving them from the bondage of poverty to a slavery to charity.? I see the word ?self-sufficiency? and wonder what Gospel this man has been reading. (And I think Calvin!) The Gospels are a call to radical dependence on the Lord. Yes, we are called to be responsible. Yes, we want to free the poor from the bondage of poverty, but I do not believe the phrase ?slavery to charity? has any echo with the Gospel, does it?

Verrecchio then fully steps into the kind of thing the pope was speaking about. He writes:

From this alone it is clear that service to the poor must ultimately address the spiritual needs of those so impoverished.

Now, this is not to minimize the necessity of meeting the material needs of those who lack basic human necessities; it is simply to put such things in perspective.

It is also to say that we must reject any temptation to embrace a false dichotomy between teaching the doctrine of the faith as a means of delivering the spiritual food necessary for eternal life, and meeting the material needs of our fellow man relative to the temporal life.

That is why the Church, in addition to all of her efforts to meet the physical needs of the sick and the suffering, also labors to propagate the true faith, ?teaching everything whatsoever that Jesus commanded.?

Yes, I am all for opposing false dichotomies. Yes, I believe that Christianity is the true faith and that we are called to evangelize ? I am still a little nervous at the verb ?propogate.? But, doesn?t this sound a bit like ? feed the poor then give them a lecture? And nowhere, not anywhere, in this article does it occur to Mr. Verrecchio

that when we encounter the poor, it may be the poor that teach us about the true faith, not the other way round.

The other article that I think betrays the danger the pope was speaking of came from a friend on the left. Cara McDonough wrote at HuffPost [3]about what she thinks is the USCCB?s thin agenda at its fall meeting. She has a point. The agenda for the annual plenary next month does not scream ?Pope Francis? but instead seems, well, ?self-referential.? McDonough is right to note that it is difficult to imagine the bishops delivering a document on pornography that will have much of an impact on anyone. And, the lack of any mention of, say, income inequality, which Pope Francis speaks about quite a lot, is a glaring omission, not least because it comes in the wake of the USCCB?s inability to pass a statement on poverty last year. As I noted at the time, when bishops can?t draft and agree upon a statement on poverty, we have a big problem.

But, there is one section in McDonough?s column that disturbed me greatly and, I think, betrays the capacity for the Left to put ideology ahead of faith. She writes:

Rest assured, I recognize that I'm one of the troublemakers when it comes to proper Catholic doctrine. I didn't go to mass last week or the one before, and I, as mentioned, don't agree with many Church stances on core social issues. I think Planned Parenthood is an amazing organization. I'm a huge fan of contraceptives.

Still, I cling to my Catholic faith with a dogged perseverance that, frankly, I'm beginning to question. Do I remain Catholic because it's easier than the alternative? Because I'm just apathetic enough that permanently abandoning the religion seems too much work?

I'd like to think not.

What I'd like to think, instead, is that I still identify as a Catholic because I believe organized religion can do good in ways amplified by the fact that its very existence centers around a literal and figurative room of faithful, optimistic believers.

Sure, there's Hell and brimstone in both biblical and modern day sermons, but I don't think I'm mistaken in assuming that most Catholics, like me, remain Church members not out of fear or guilt, but because we believe that we can create positive change in the world.

It breaks my heart to hear someone say they missed Mass, especially when it is said so flippantly. And, Planned Parenthood is an organization that does some amazing things to be sure, but also some truly horrific things. And, the reference to ?organized religion? as a third party is telling. But, what really troubles is that last line ? ?because we believe that we can create positive change in the world.? I have written often, and always tell our RCIA class ? the only reason to be a Christian is because you believe the tomb was empty. There were plenty of other itinerant Jewish rabbis whom the Romans killed in the first century, the only reason to believe the ethical teachings of this one is because you believe that God vindicated Him in a unique way. Besides, as Pope Francis reminds us, an NGO is committed to creating positive change and the Church is not an NGO.

What flows from that awareness of being rooted in faith is not, firstly, a protean desire to ?create positive change,? which is also the kind of thing conservatives say. Ted Cruz also thinks he is trying to ?create positive change.? No, the call of the Bible is first to receive the merciful love of Christ and then to let that love bring about change, conscious that not all the change will be positive. Jesus was crucified. But, all the change wrought by faith will be salvific.

Let us return to Pope Francis and, in an important way, to Pope Benedict. In the first book of his trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth ? currently on loan to a friend so I do not have the exact quote ? Benedict wrote words to this effect: *What did Jesus bring? He clearly did not bring an agenda and if he did it was not very successful. He did not inaugurate world peace or an end to poverty. What Jesus brought was Himself. He brought God.* I think Pope

Francis, in his different way, echoes these words of Benedict. When Pope Francis stops the popemobile to embrace a child, when he starts his trip in Assisi with a visit of several hours to a home for the severely disabled, and appears to spend more time with each of them than he does with the monsignori lining his path, and in his sermons, there we see a man who is steeped in this encounter with Him who brought Himself and, just so, is electrifying in his witness to the Truth of the Gospels in a way Mr. Verrecchio seems not to grasp the Truth, and with a freshness, a newness, that escapes the programmatic concern to ?create positive change? articulated by Ms. McDonough.

Against the ideological temptations of our day, Pope Francis seems to have a simple inoculation. Christ first. Christ found first among the poor. A Church, like Christ, that is with the poor and then serves them, learning from them how to be a Church. A Church, like Christ, that becomes poor. That is the truth Pope Francis seeks, a truth that is worth ?propagating? and one that will truly affect ?positive change.?

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