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Pope Francis is guilty of being a Christian

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Oct. 24, 2013 Bulletins from the Human Side

I never did quite believe that the "age of revelation" ended with the death of the last surviving apostle. We experience revelations every day, sometimes when it is both so great and yet so utterly human that we feel caught up in the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the great and engulfing mystery of everyday faith.

That occurred on 9/11 when, for the first time on a large scale, we learned what people do when they know they are going to die. They do not wail or rend their garments, nor do they recite the creed or sign hurriedly on to any specific teaching they were to hold onto under pain of mortal sin that stamps your visa for eternal punishment.

Nor do those suddenly facing death experience "celestial flights" or other out-of-body phenomena that are sold as indulgences in the great evangelical marketplace, as they once were in St. Peter's Square. Those confronted by imminent death find their minds cleared, as the temple once was by Jesus, of such religious trivia.

9/11 revealed that those about to die do not seem afraid or plead for forgiveness for their sins, if they think about them at all. They all have one thing in mind -- those they love -- and they all do the same thing: They call them up -- spouses, family or friends -- to tell them they love them. This is so obviously the first thing in their lives that they do not think at all about the last things -- death, judgment, heaven or hell -- ballyhooed by generations of preachers as subjects we will be quizzed on in the SATs we must pass before the Last Judgment.

9/11 allowed us to witness the ordinary face of goodness in the love that those about to die brought with them to work that day. It is fitting that we refer to a large segment of the church year as Ordinary Time because it describes the look of the true faith that, as we read of the Kingdom, is spread about us.

Pope Francis seems to understand all this: He speaks of Christian faith not as a bound volume of dogma but as a "love story"; he rides the bus after the conclave at which he was elected and pays his hotel bill, as the saying so well expresses it, "like any ordinary person."

That Pope Francis understands that the mystery of faith has an ordinary face perplexes some Catholics and, according to reports, moves others to complain about him. Francis irritates them by speaking to the world rather than just to the church as his predecessors did, and those who miss Benedict XVI "desperately," as one of them put it, feel challenged by Francis to view the world in the direct way that he does.

In a Washington *Post* article, "Conservative Catholics Question Pope Francis's Approach [1]," writers Michelle Boorstein and Elizabeth Tenety explore some of the papal discontents of traditionalist Catholics. Their concern began when the new pope "told non-Catholic and atheist journalists he would bless them silently out of respect." They were also upset when "he eschewed Vatican practice and included women in a foot-washing ceremony."

They have also been alarmed by his urging Catholics not to be obsessed with just a few issues, saying they should see these teachings, including those on certain sexual matters, "in context"; that is, in relationship to the Gospel basics. You could hear their resonations in Francis' telling journalists on the flight home from Rio de Janeiro for World Youth Day that it was not his role to judge gays "if they accept the Lord and have good will."

"Behind the growing skepticism," the article continues, "is the fear in some quarters that Francis's all-embracing style and spontaneous speech ... are undoing decades of church efforts to speak clearly on Catholic teachings."

Family counselor and radio adviser Gregory Popcak is from Ohio, but he might as well come from New Orleans because of the betrayed lover feeling with which he sings the traditionalist blues. He told the Washington *Post* [2] he was sent into deep prayer "after several clients used Francis's public words to push back on Popcak when he explained church teachings on sex and love." Did he teach, as do traditionalists who envision the path to salvation as a tightrope walk across the Grand Canyon on a windy day, that failure to renounce the sexual feelings that enter uninvited into people's imaginations are always a mortal sin when in reality, they are homely evidence of our being ordinary, garden-variety humans?

At first, Popcak reacted to Francis by feeling "frustrated, then ashamed," the *Post* says, but in a separate online essay, he identified himself in the story of the prodigal son as the "good kid who stayed behind, did everything his father told him to do" while "people who left the Church, who hated the Church ... were suddenly realizing that God loved them, that the Church welcomed them, and all I could do is feel bitter about it."

Let's see if we have this straight. Despite Jesus' telling his followers to welcome the lost sheep whose return would bring more joy in heaven than the 99 that did not go astray, Popcak and those for whom he speaks are irritated by a shepherd whose voice is heard and heeded by Catholics who, sometimes feeling fleeced rather than found by other pastors, slipped out of the sheepfold. Francis displeases the Popcak conservative by being the good shepherd whose message of acceptance and welcome would go unheard if he spoke only to those inside the church and not to the world at large.

In short, traditionalists who prefer leaders who season their public utterances with a dash of masochism are dismayed to find that Pope Francis is a Christian who sees a suffering world spread out beyond St. Peter's Square and who understands the church not as an exclusive gated community of self-satisfied believers but as a field hospital that does not ask for a believer's ID card but takes in and cares for all those wounded by life.

Tradtionalists claim that by such statements, Francis is undermining all the hard work his predecessors did to underline "Catholic identity" in a relativistic, secular world. But perhaps he is the first pope to which that outside world has given its attention for many decades. Perhaps that is why the European Parliament has invited Francis to address its members. The world, more suffering than sinning, turns toward Pope Francis as in a conversation people turn to the person who is making sense of things. Obedience, which that many traditionalists prefer so blind that you need a guide dog to follow it, comes from the Latin *ob audire* that means "to listen to." In the Scriptures, we read that the lost sheep recognize and respond to the voice of their shepherd. Something like that is occurring in the great world that hears Francis who disarms its nations, so to speak, because they find they do not have to raise their defenses against him. They want to hear what he has to say precisely because he is, as the traditionalists charge, guilty on all counts of being a Christian.

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