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Some Catholic leaders need to follow Pope Francis' lead

John Gehring | Mar. 1, 2014 NCR Today

Pope Francis is winning hearts and minds around the world for his emphasis on mercy, personal simplicity and vision [1] for a church that is ?bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets.? He rejects culture-war Christianity and aloof moralizing from the safety of the sanctuary. He warns that a fixation on ?small-minded rules [2]? can stand in the way of ministering to those on the margins. A look at at a few recent headlines shows that some Catholic leaders never got the memo from Pope Francis or tossed it in the trash.

A patient who suffered a heart attack at a Washington hospital recently told [3] the *Washington Post* that a Catholic chaplain denied him last rites because he was gay.

Earlier this year, a Catholic middle school in Montana fired an unmarried teacher after she became pregnant. The superintendent of Catholic schools for the diocese defended [4] the decision with a cold legalism that would have made those letter-of-the-law Pharisees Jesus called to task proud.

Nothing sends a better ?pro-life" message than kicking a vulnerable pregnant woman into unemployment, right? The Catholic superintendent must have missed that part in Pope Francis?s groundbreaking interview with a Jesuit journal where he said [5]:

"If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing?Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal ?security,? those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists- ?they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies."

A Catholic priest in Missouri called a woman about to attend her mother's funeral and told her he would not give her Communion at the Mass because she was in a same-sex relationship. The parishioner had served as a lector, cantor and choir singer at the church for more than a decade. (A lesbian in the Archdiocese of Washington experienced the same treatment [6] in 2012.)

Pope Francis?

?The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak,? he said in his Apostolic Exhortation, the Joy of the Gospel. In fact, the pope's defining metaphor has been the need for the church to act like a "field hospital after battle," as Francis describes it in vivid terms. "It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds."

When the Boy Scouts of America announced [7] it would drop its ban prohibiting openly gay youth a priest in Northern Virginia swiftly kicked out his church's Boy Scout troop. "No more compromising with the devil," the priest thundered as he denounced "perverted relationships."

Paging the Holy Father.

?If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?? he told [8] reporters on the papal plane after World Youth Day in Brazil. In a lengthy interview [5] with the Jesuit priest and editor Antonio Spadaro, Pope Francis offers a lesson in humanity to clergy and other religious figures who reduce faith to ideology and rigid doctrine.

"A person once asked me in a provocative manner if I approved of homosexuality," the pope said. "I replied with another question. Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person? We must always consider the person."

And then there is Archbishop John Myers of Newark, a man who wants to retire in style. The archbishop?s nearly 5,000-square foot vacation home is apparently not cushy enough for his tastes. The Star-Ledger of Newark reports [9]that a major new addition will include an indoor pool, three fireplaces and an elevator. The half a million dollar tab will be picked up by the archdiocese.

I'm afraid we're going to have to call on that Argentine making trouble at the Vatican once again.

Pastors should be ?close to the people ? animated by inner poverty, the freedom of the Lord and also by outward simplicity and austerity of life," Pope Francis said in a speech [10] to papal nuncios, whose job includes nominating bishops. Bishops should not have, he insists, ?the psychology of princes.?

Un-Christian behavior on the part of Christians is as old as Christianity itself. Jesus had to remind the Pharisees again and again that their prideful defense of the letter of the law led them to defile the law's spirit of justice, love and compassion.

Pope Francis has brought an unexpected season of renewal and hope for the Catholic Church not because he is a liberal or a conservative. He is inspiring so many because he acts like a Christian should act. Not a bad starting point for Catholic clergy and anyone who tries to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

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[7] http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/12/31/22112742-boy-scouts-of-america-enters-new-era-as-group-opens-to-gay-youth-on-jan-1?lite

[8] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/europe/pope-francis-gay-priests.html?pagewanted=all
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