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Pope Francis plays an adroit game

Robert Blair Kaiser | Mar. 12, 2014
Analysis

From his first appearance on the balcony of St. Peter's on March 13, 2013, we could see Pope Francis was trying to demythologize the imperial papacy. Instead of blessing the people below, he asked them to bless (and pray for) him. He did not refer to himself as "the pope" but as "the bishop of Rome," a far less pretentious and ecclesiologically correct title. He wore a simple metal cross on his breast, not a gold one. In short, it appeared he was stepping off the papal throne, presenting himself as he finally admitted in last week's interview with *Corriere della Sera*: "The pope is a man who laughs, cries, sleeps calmly and has friends like everyone -- a normal person."

In that interview, he not only said he was normal; he demonstrated how normal a pope he was by giving undue praise to his predecessor Pope Paul VI for having "the courage" to promulgate the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. It is all too normal for one pope to praise a predecessor and equally normal for him to indulge in a bit of hyperbole, as Francis did when he lauded Pope Paul for reaffirming the not-so-ancient teaching of Pope Pius XI that "every marital act must to be open to the generation of life" and rejecting the opposite conclusion of his own birth control commission, that nature herself had seen to it that for 25 days in any given month, the feminine half of the marital dyad was not at all "open to the generation of life" in the narrow sense of the expression "making a baby." Nature herself made her free, on the other hand, to give "carnal expression" to her love for her husband, thereby bringing the two of them ever closer with each passing day and night. That is why they called it "making love" and why the fathers of the Second Vatican Council gave their lovemaking such an enthusiastic endorsement in *Gaudium et Spes*.

Pope Paul knew all this, of course, when he issued *Humanae Vitae* in July 1968. But his choosing to ignore the recommendations of his own commission was hardly an act of courage. (The commission told the pope that Catholic couples needed to make their own decisions about responsible parenthood. If they had good reasons -- including economic reasons -- not to have more children, they had a duty to use the most efficacious means not to have more children.)

Rather, it was an act of fear -- fear that if he changed the so-called teaching of Pius XI, he would lose his moral authority. It turned out, however, after his commission leaked their final report to the press, Paul VI lost his moral authority anyway. This was because a majority of the world's Catholics now realized that if contraception was a sin, the pope could not give them permission to use it, and, if it wasn't a sin, they didn't need it. Furthermore, they realized he had published *Humanae Vitae* for the wrong reason. It was not because the pope disagreed with his commission's conclusions about the necessary connection between good lovemaking and a good marriage but because he was worried about losing his power over the people in the matter of their own salvation. For a time, he actually put some stock in the logic of one of his aides, who told him, "If we change the Church's teaching on birth control, what will we do with all the souls we condemned to hell for practicing it?" He put even more stock in another aide's entirely proper question: "What will happen to your infallibility?" (Answer: It will vanish -- in moral matters, infallibility was never there as it was in matters of faith.)

Now the world's Catholics knew the pope had not been straight with them. As a consequence, even the most faithful of the faithful began to practice responsible parenthood in good conscience. By not "receiving the teaching" of *Humanae Vitae*, they made it a nonteaching. In effect, the people vetoed the pope. And at least half of the world's bishops agreed with their people. Some bishops' conferences even wrote pastoral letters that said in such matters as this, couples should follow the dictates of their own consciences. Paul VI knew when he was licked. In his 10 remaining years as pope, he did not write another encyclical.

We do not expect Pope Francis to know all this history, much less to have read all of the position papers of the birth control commission or sought out transcriptions of all the debates. We do not expect a "normal" man to know everything, especially when he is so engaged in other weighty affairs, like reforming the Roman Curia and decentralizing authority in the church, which is a far more doable task than getting celibate, male prelates to reverse the church's 1,000-year-old presumption that sex was the Creator's only mistake.

We suspect that Francis, a good Jesuit, has not thought very deeply about love and intimacy in a modern marriage. In fact, vowed to chastity, he probably could not. It is more than likely that in his 17-year training, he was programmed to fear sex (and probably women, too, as part of the equation women = sex = pleasure = sin). In the 17th century, St. Francis de Sales reminded his people, "Marriage is a great sacrament, but it is the holiness of the fruit it produces which permits a just compensation for recovering from the fault one incurs *by reason of the delight taken*." (To de Sales, sex was OK to ensure the preservation of the human race, but it was a sin to enjoy it too much.)

Jesuit Fr. John C. Ford, one of the four commission advocates for no change (out of a total of 79 members), may have agreed with St. Francis de Sales. Ford revealed his inability to understand married love when he told the commission there was no necessary relationship between sex and love.

"Conjugal love," he wrote in one of his commission papers, "is above all spiritual (if the love is genuine) and it requires no specific carnal gesture, much less its repetition in some determined frequency." A father and a daughter can love each other, he said, "without the necessity of carnal gestures." His conclusion, though unexpressed, was clear: "So why can't husband and wife?"

To many of the commission members who were married, it was the final proof that Ford did not understand what the council fathers were driving at when they said married love is "uniquely expressed and perfected through the marital act." That the bishops at Vatican II even went that far was a miracle because for much of church history, most of the "teachings" on sex were made for the people by celibate clerics who knew as little about married love as Father Ford. Give Paul VI credit for at least this, for appointing to his commission more laymen and laywomen than clerics. And give Pope Francis credit for seeking the opinion of all the people of God about birth control to help prepare for the synod on the family.

We happen to believe Pope Francis did not intend in his interview with *Corriere della Sera* to simply bury the fact unearthed by the synod's questionnaire that a preponderant majority of the world's Catholics have not received what still passes for the church's official teaching on birth control. In fact, Pope Francis told *Corriere* he expected the October synod to take up what many are beginning to recognize as still an open question.

We suspect this has been his canny strategy all along. At the beginning of his papacy, when he started to climb down from the papal throne, he never intimated he was infallible, never acted like he was God, or even a god who had a right to tell people what was moral or immoral on his say-so alone. And he kept saying he had authority not to dominate the people but to serve them.

At the conclusion of his upcoming October synod, who could fault Francis for saying to the bishops at the synod, "In an open letter to the faithful on Feb. 25, I asked to hear from 'all the people.' Why would I do that if

we did not expect to listen to them now -- on a subject they know more about than we do?"

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