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What Rick Santorum could learn from Pope Francis

Maureen Fiedler | Mar. 17, 2014 NCR Today

It's been more than a year now since the white smoke rose and Francis left the fancy cape behind, paid his own hotel bill and became the new pontiff of the poor, preaching simplicity of lifestyle.

Most commentators have very positive comments on his shift of emphasis and welcoming style. While I agree with that, I'm still waiting for a concrete move that pushes the church toward greater gender equality, i.e., new leadership roles for women.

But while I'm waiting, I've been reading other comments, and one of the most stunning came from none other than Rick Santorum, a Catholic and a former candidate for the Republican nomination for president in 2012.

Santorum was at the Conservative Political Action Conference's annual meeting, speaking about ways to improve the Republican Party, its message, its approach. And who is his model? None other than Pope Francis!

According to Santorum [1], Francis is "going out there and not talking about what the Christian faith is against. He's going out there and talking about what we're for. He hasn't changed a single policy. ... But what he'll do is he'll go out there and talk about the good news to a hurting world because he believes that is what the world needs," he said.

Santorum urged the Republican Party to take lessons from Pope Francis, his model of popularity. In that vein, Santorum wants Republicans to reach out to people who are suffering and to talk about the "positive policy agenda" of the Republican Party.

There's just one problem -- a major problem -- with Santorum's message. What does the Republican Party have to say to those who are needy and suffering?

"You should have health care, yes, but we are going all-out to repeal Obamacare, and we will do nothing to make Republican governors expand Medicaid funding."

"You make $7.25 an hour? Too bad, but we can't raise the minimum wage right now."

"We won't extend your unemployment benefits."

"You're on food stamps? Too bad. We're cutting funding in that department."

With all due respect to Rick Santorum, this does not sound like the message of Pope Francis.

And is the Republican Party now ready to follow Francis in his critique of the capitalist system? Are its leaders willing to suggest that members of Congress or corporate donors simplify their lifestyles? I'm not holding my breath.

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[1] http://www.christianpost.com/news/santorum-republicans-need-to-be-more-like-pope-francis-115826/