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WPFMTS: Spinning the Pope

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 23, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Last week, I announced my WPFMTS awards ? What Pope Francis Meant To Say ? to be given to those who try to parse the new pope?s words with the effect of gutting them of their obvious meaning. I wish to distinguish, however, between those who are engaged in spinning the pope?s words in this manner, and those who are genuinely wrestling with the new pope?s words and/or adjusting to what is truly, and obviously, a clear break with what we had come to expect from leaders of the Church, a break that was abundantly obvious in the now famous interview given to a group of Jesuit journals and released last Thursday.

The difference between spinning and wrestling is made obvious in this article by Matt Abbott [1], a self-described ?right-wing Catholic.? Abbott has these two paragraphs that illustrate someone who is genuinely wrestling:

The problem with the interview, said Monica Migliorino Miller, Ph.D, associate professor of theology at Madonna University and director of Citizens for a Pro-Life Society, "is the lack of clarity."

She said in an email that Pope Francis "wants to emphasize the pastoral nature of the Church and her missionary outreach" ? and she agrees with this ? but "as someone down in the trenches of the battle for life, I think the pope does need to take into consideration how those who truly hate the Church will exploit his lack of doctrinal precision. And that, sadly, is just what we are seeing."

Professor Miller is not parsing, she is not spinning. She is voicing a straight forward concern about the effects of the pope?s comments. Where she errs is in suggesting that the pope?s words evidence a ?lack of doctrinal precision.? The pope is not doctrinally imprecise. He is encouraging us to view the role of doctrine, especially moral doctrine, in the life of the Church differently from the way many have viewed it. More on this in a bit. But, I have no problem with Professor Miller expressing her unease that the pope?s upsetting of the apple cart has upset her and her apples. Indeed, the pope?s candor invites such a frank reply.

Conversely, Abbott reports on an email he received from Father John Trigilio Jr., president of the Confraternity of Catholic Clergy, who wrote:

Pope Francis did not discount the efforts of the pro-life, pro-family and pro-marriage movements and organizations. What he was saying was that the universal Church has a three-fold mission or mandate: to teach the truth (magisterium); to sanctify the people of God (sacred liturgy); to shepherd the sheep in love (hierarchy). All three come from the one and same Jesus Christ, who founded Holy Mother Church. As Christ was Priest, Prophet and King, so His bride continues His work of sanctifying, teaching and governing....

Pope Francis did not give carte blanche to commit fornication, adultery, homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, and so on. He is reaching out to the fornicators and adulterers, as did Our Divine Lord, to urge them to abandon their sins and follow the path of virtue. He reminds clergy ? bishops, especially ? that ordination is neither a career nor a job; it is a vocation and a mission.

Teaching and defending the truth is one of our mandates, but we are also ordained to offer sacrifice, to

console, to counsel, to advise, to solace, to bless, to sanctify, to absolve and to lead. If these are done with mercy and compassion, they can be done without compromising the truth and without cheapening grace.

This is spin, perhaps even worse than that. I do not know Fr. Trigilio, but I can tell from this quote that he is trying to put the pope?s new wine into old, tired, wine skins. In the first paragraph, there is no sense of the pope?s call for the clergy to accompany the people of God, not just to govern them. In the second graph, there is the failure to note that if you reach out to people who fornicate by calling them fornicators, you probably will not convince them that you are genuinely willing to accompany them on their spiritual journey. Much has been made of the pope?s comment about not interfering with the spiritual lives of gay people, with the emphasis on the word gay, but I think the pope?s comment was most startling in what it suggested about ministry ? it should accompany, not interfere, with the spiritual lives of others, gay or otherwise. This is very profound. Lastly, in the third graph, Fr. Trigilio gives the game away when he speaks of ?cheapening grace.? This always strikes me as Calvinistic. In our culture, the worry is not that grace is considered cheap. It is that too many churchmen suggest grace is remote, requires a strict adherence to this law and that rubric. There is something Jansenistic and Pelagian in this ?cheapening grace? concern. What there is not is the simple statement at the end of ?Diary of a Country Priest,? when the dying priest is told that the confessor has not yet arrived, and he replies, ?Does it matter? Grace is everywhere?.? In listening to Pope Francis these past few months, I have been reminded of that last scene in ?Diary of a Country Priest,? in which the priest dies at the home of a druggist who lives out of wedlock with a woman. How that scenario must have scandalized some, but not our new pope.

My disagreements with George Weigel are many and well documented. But, he seems to me to be adjusting, not spinning, as evidenced in his article on the pope?s interview [2]. Of course, Weigel does not tend to mention the poor when writing about Pope Francis, which is a bit like writing about the Red Sox without mentioning Fenway Park. Still, Weigel gets points for trying.

I wish to recall my conservative friends who are having trouble with Pope Francis to this article I wrote [3] about how I wrestled with Pope Benedict. I confess I was gravely worried when Joseph Ratzinger came out onto the loggia as our new pope in 2005. But, thanks to the encouragement of good friends, I tried to keep an open mind, I read and re-read his writings, I noticed that as pope he seemed freed from the role of doctrinal enforcer that had been his job so many years, and seemed in his modest way to be enjoying the role of pastor. Who had ever seen a photo of Cardinal Ratzinger with children? There was a density to his sermons that made them a bit inaccessible to many. His love for beauty was always expressed in a love for the baroque, which turned of many not raised in Bavaria. But, I came not only an admiration for Pope Benedict, but a true affection. I was a better Christian and a better Catholic for having made the attempt to wrestle with his writings. I came to see him as a gift to the Church. I hope my friends who are having trouble loving Papa Francesco will adopt the same attitude. It served me well.

Let me close my talking about the one common phrase found among the spinners ? the pope is not changing the doctrine of the Church. This is true but hardly exhaustive. What he is doing, and what Benedict tried to do too, was to invite the Church to examine the relationship of doctrine to the life of the Church. Pope Benedict was deeply concerned that we not reduce our religion to ethics, that we encounter Christ and draw lessons for our moral life from that encounter. Our fundamental statement of what it means to be a Christian, the Creed, has not a word about ethics. Pope Francis is building on this notion of Benedict?s but also inviting us to a privileged path to the encounter with Christ: To live with and for the poor. If Benedict?s heart warmed to the beauty of the baroque, Francis sees beauty in the poor. The two insights might be said to be joined in the baroque aria in Handel?s Messiah, ?How beautiful are the feet of Him.? For Francis, doctrine is not being changed, but we are invited to see it as a goal to which we all strive, not to use it as a way to differentiate between those who are ?Catholic Lite? and those who are ?orthodox.? As Cardinal O?Malley said in his speech at the Knights of Columbus convention, the truth is not a wet rag that we throw in other people?s faces. But, it has been used in such a way. I fear that Fr. Trigilio, quoted above, still wishes to use it that way.

Our plain spoken pope does not really need much in the way of interpretation. His words tend to speak for themselves. Those who seek to spin him should be dismissed as analysts and challenged when their spin turns into untruths. Those who may be having a tough time, including some bishops, those who are wrestling, they should be an object of our prayers and compassion, not our hubris. This new pope has not only hit a ?reset? button, he has reminded us all that we continually need to hit the reset button in the spiritual life and, provocatively, powerfully, challenged us all, especially in the need to deepen our commitment to the poor. He invites us to encounter Christ among the poor and then, and only then, based on that encounter, to engage the moral teachings of our faith, understanding they are rooted in love, not self-justification, that the truth is not a wet rag but a warming cloak, and that the Church is more than her doctrines, important though they be.

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