

Political Moralism as an Illness in the Church?

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Abstract

In his homily on October 17, 2013, Pope Francis set a new tone for opposition to the ideological position generally referred to as the “religious right” in US politics in particular, referring to moralizing ideologies as indicating that someone is “no longer a disciple of Jesus” and part of a “serious illness” in the Church. His statements signaled a major shift in Vatican posturing on political matters; arguably the greatest since the Second Vatican Council. Without signaling any major changes to the Catholic Church’s traditional teachings on sexuality, Pope Francis made it clear that “pelvic politics” will no longer be accepted as a higher political priority than “social justice issues” within the church. This in turn represents a serious threat to the political careers of those who have spent the last few decades championing Pope John Paul II’s opposition to abortion, homosexuality, extra-marital sexuality and any economic policies bearing a resemblance to Marxism. Yet it brings to the fore an aspect of John Paul II’s earlier legacy which is sometimes forgotten, and which is difficult to harmonize with his post-Cold War conservatism. This is giving rise to an interesting new conflict dynamic within the politics of the Catholic Church.

Keywords: Pope Francis, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, Second Vatican Council, Religious Right, Robert George, abortion, social justice, politics, moralism

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Introduction

It's hard to find anyone outside of the United States' Religious Right who has anything bad to say about Pope Francis I. At a time when the Catholic Church was mired in its most serious image problems since the Medicis and Borgias, in comes a guy who is selected as being a bit of an outsider — non-European by birth, from a monastic order that's never had a pope before — but a “safe” outsider — ethnically Italian and on record as being something of a conservative moralist — who shakes things up in a way that no one saw coming!

Eschewing pomp and privilege, stomping down on financial and sexual corruption within the clergy, yet at the same time reaching out to gays, Muslims, Jews, divorcees, disabled people, the poor and children of all ages; Francis comes across as the first pope since the beginning of the modern era to take Matthew chapter 25 — “...in as much as you have done it unto the least of these my brothers...” — seriously as a theological premise. A bit over a year into his papacy now, the world's intelligentsia, pop culture and press are even more enthralled with this man than they were with John Paul II when he arrived on the scene back in the 1970s.

But... and this is a fairly big but... in shaking things up on purpose the new pope has made some powerful enemies as well, and not only among former money launderers and allies of child molesters. For some his being labelled as a Marxist by Rush Limbaugh and company is nothing but a further merit, but for others, particularly those within the United States' religious right, his moves away from the legacy of the latter half of John Paul II's heritage, pretty much across the board, is a bit too much to swallow. Most challenged by this radical shift are those who have based their Catholic political principles on the program laid out in the 2009 “Manhattan Declaration,”¹ including more than a few of the United States' leading Catholic bishops.

Historical background

To put this in historical perspective we need to go back from looking at the legacy of the second-longest serving pope in Catholic history, John Paul II, to that of the longest serving pope in Catholic history, Pius IX. Pius reigned over the church at the height of what has been called “the age of revolution”² in the 19th century. His reign saw the rise of Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Alexander Dumas and Victor Hugo. Only a decade prior to his reign the Catholic Church had finally given up on maintaining the dogma of a geocentric universe, and posthumously forgave Galileo for preaching the “Copernican heresy”. During Pius's reign the Austrian monk Gregor Mendel made his major discoveries in genetics — proving incidentally that Thomas Aquinas's reliance on an Aristotelian understanding of sexual reproduction as a basis for many of the doctrines in *Summa Theologica* was factually wrong — but they managed to keep Mendel relatively quiet about this matter at the time. Most importantly, however, it

¹ Published online and promoted in numerous periodicals on November 20, 2009. Primary authors: Robert George, Timothy George and Charles Colson. The full text of this declaration is available at: http://manhattandecoration.org/man_dec_resources/Manhattan_Declaration_full_text.pdf (Downloaded August 25, 2014).

² Cf. the title of Alec R. Vidler's (1961) classic: *The Church in the Age of Revolution (Pelican history of the Church; vol.5)*. London: Pelican Books

was on Pius's watch that, without the military support of the kings of France, the Vatican States collapsed.

We could say that in psychological terms Pius did not deal with this well. Watching his empire collapse around him in so many different ways, he took to "pontificating" on a vast range of subjects to try to prove to everyone how important he still was. The most famous of his decrees was that of "the perpetual virginity of Mary." He could get away with making such decrees because under his direction the First Vatican Council made "papal infallibility" (when making ex cathedra statements of doctrine) an official doctrine of the church. In other words, when making official doctrinal statements, it became a matter of faith to believe that the pope could do no wrong. This is still a bit of a hot potato among Catholic theologians to this day. Preferably forgotten by the contemporary Catholic theologians would be Pius's most infamous non-ex-cathedra doctrinal statement: his 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, where he declared such ideas as freedom of religion, separation of church and state, ecumenism, public education and civil marriage to be damnable heresies.³

It wasn't easy for the church to come to grips with all of the problems Pius's dogmatism entailed. They couldn't really come out and reject his reactionary statements right away, in spite of how greatly they damaged the church's relevance to the intellectual life of the 19th century. The best his successor, Leo XIII, could do was to publish an encyclical entitled *Rerum Novarum*, "Of New Things", in which he set out to prove that Marxism was misguided and that the Catholic Church was still on the side of the poor. This document, with its major shift to the left politically, actually succeeded in restoring much of the church's political credibility. Among other things it called for a sense of solidarity between Catholic industrialists and their Catholic laborers, insisting on a principle that any full-time job must pay a sufficient wage to meet the basic needs of a single-income family with a possibility of having money left for savings afterwards. Employers are also morally responsible to ensure that their workers have enough time off for rest, family enrichment and all basic religious observances. Furthermore governments have a moral responsibility to protect the basic rights of the poor against those who would exploit them, and to pass laws regulating labor and protecting basic welfare. All in all, the Gospel prioritizes justice for the poor as the basis of its social teachings, and the church needs to do the same.

Rerum Novarum set the standard for Catholic social teaching for the next century basically. In all of its problematic involvement in wars and politics, from the skirmishes that gave rise to World War I all the way through the Viet Nam era, the Catholic Church maintained a principle of justifying all of its limited participation in political processes in terms of standing up for the basic needs and rights of working class Catholics.

Painting with broad brush strokes here, the next major shift in Catholic social teaching really came with the Vatican II council. Until the 1950s it seems that Catholic bishops had effectively forgotten that officially they still had a church council going on. In 1870, when the Papal States collapsed, Pius IX had suspended discussions at the First Vatican Council, but he had never got around to either reconvening or closing it; nor

³ An English translation of the full text of this document is available at: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9syll.htm> (downloaded August 25, 2014).

had his next five successors. It was John XXIII who finally decided that something needed to be done about this, and it needed to be done in such a way as to draw a line under the previous discussions, and then to start a new discussion on how to make the church important again in the lives of its 20th century worshippers. Thus in 1960 he officially closed Vatican I and in 1962 he officially opened Vatican II.

Vatican II is a complex subject of study unto itself, but for purposes of setting the stage for the dynamics of Catholic politics in the first decades of the twenty-first century there are four things about it in particular about this conference that should be pointed out: First of all, the next four popes to be elected after 1962 were all among the delegates who met at this conference and it was here that Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger developed their complex working relationship. Secondly, the council took great strides towards ceremonial liberalization, opening up to new ways of worshipping and emphasizing the critical role of lay people in the life of the church. Thirdly, however, it failed to make any significant new progress in terms of defining the Catholic Church's "preference for the poor" in practical terms, though this had been one of John XXIII's priorities in calling the conference. Fourthly, and perhaps most significantly, in the process of relinquishing so much in terms of exclusivity, the priests' aloof status and ceremonial control, it had to give something back to the clergy in terms of the church's sense of self-importance, and it did this by way of *teachings on sexuality*. It was at Vatican II that the Catholic Church fully developed the doctrine that the Monty Python team so aptly summarized in their classic song, "Every Sperm is Sacred".⁴

John Paul II's legacy

From here we come to the election of Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II. Again painting with rather broad brush strokes here, his papacy can be divided into two rather distinct eras: the late Cold War era and the post-Cold War era. In these two eras the Polish Pope pursued two very different sorts of social policy.

In the late Cold War era his emphasis was primarily on bringing about the liberation of workers from the various forms of oppression they found themselves under, particular in terms of totalitarian Marxist regimes. Less emphasized, but equally important to him at this phase of his career, was the protection of workers from the excesses of capitalist abuse. To quote from his first encyclical letter: "*The person who, on the one hand, is trying to draw the maximum profit and, on the other hand, is paying the price in damage and injury is always man. The drama is made still worse by the presence close at hand of privileged social classes and rich countries, which accumulate goods to an excessive degree.*"⁵ The solution he proposed was social solidarity and cohesion built on a principle of brotherly love, protected wherever necessary by social legislation needed to protect the weak from abuse at the hands of the powerful. Anything which turns a human being into nothing more than a tool in the production process is evil. Everything which promotes full appreciation of each other's humanity is Godly.

⁴ From the 1983 film, *The Meaning of Life* (released by Universal Pictures).

⁵ *Redemptor Hominis* (1979): 16

Gradually, over the course of the Reagan administration, John Paul's critique of capitalist abuses ceased. In his last major statement of Catholic socio-economic policy, the encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul goes as far as saying, "*Exploitation, at least in the forms analyzed and described by Karl Marx, has been overcome in Western society.*"⁶ (That may well have been the most politically short-sighted statement ever officially made by a pope!)

With the demons of Communism now defeated, the pope turned his attention to the issues that would come to define the second half of his papacy: reinforcing the church's teachings on human sexuality. This turning point is most clearly marked by his (1993) encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, where he lays out a case for the seeing the difference between absolute and relative aspects of Christian ethics. Essentially, the "thou shalt's" are relative to situations: honoring your father and mother and caring for the poor are things that need to be done differently in different cultural and economic contexts. As essential as these commands are to the life of faith, we cannot set any absolute eternal benchmarks as to how they must be carried out in practice. When it comes to the "thou shalt not's" however, there we can set standards that will remain absolute and unchanged for all time. These absolute standards, on which the church cannot compromise because they are part of God's eternal law, include prohibitions against lying, stealing, murder... and any form of "artificial birth control". It was in his next encyclical, however, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), where he really threw down the gauntlet in terms of Catholic political priorities, with an emphasis on "protecting life from conception until natural death". Abortion was to be the political issue to trump all other political issues.

Robert George's intellectual leadership of the Religious Right

This became particularly conspicuous in the politics of Catholic bishops and intellectuals in the United States, being de facto led by Princeton law professor Robert George. A very sympathetic profile of George in the New York Times Magazine in 2009 describes his interaction with the more left leaning bishops:

He told them with typical bluntness that they should stop talking so much about the many policy issues they have taken up in the name of social justice. They should concentrate their authority on "the moral social" issues like abortion, embryonic stem-cell research and same-sex marriage, where, he argued, the natural law and Gospel principles were clear. To be sure, he said, he had no objections to bishops "making utter nuisances of themselves" about poverty and injustice, like the Old Testament prophets, as long as they did not advocate specific remedies. They should stop lobbying for detailed economic policies like progressive tax rates, higher minimum wage and, presumably, the expansion of health care — "matters of public policy upon which Gospel principles by themselves do not resolve differences of opinion among reasonable and well-informed people of good will," as George put it.⁷

⁶ *Centesimus Annus* (1991): 41

⁷ Kirkpatrick, David: "The Conservative-Christian Big Thinker". *New York Times Magazine*, December 16, 2009 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/20/magazine/20george-t.html>)

Professor George was the primary driving force behind *the Manhattan Declaration* which was released that same year. Its other authors are credited as being Baptist seminary professor Timothy George (no relation, in spite of the coincidental family name), and former Nixon henchman turned evangelist in prison, the late Charles Colson. But it is generally acknowledged that these co-authors were on board for primarily to bring a broader spectrum of political endorsements; intellectually it was Robert George's baby. He essentially formulated their three areas of political focus: 1. "Sanctity of life": meaning that abortion and euthanasia are to be curbed in every way possible, and between the lines implying that birth control of other sorts as well is to be seriously discouraged. 2. "Dignity of marriage": meaning that all forms of "alternative" and extra-marital sexuality are to be restricted and discouraged, especially pornography and gay rights of any sort. Marriage as an institution is also not to be made still vaguer within our culture by allowing it to apply to homosexual unions as well. 3. "Freedom of religion": taken here less to mean freedom to worship as one chooses and more freedom to publicly hold to the standards of one's religion, meaning most specifically that Catholic employers should not have to provide health care benefits for their employees which would cover any sort of contraceptives. These are the issues which have replaced social justice concerns as the political face of Catholicism within the United States since the second half of the John Paul II papacy.

Pope Benedict XVI's efforts to preserve his predecessor's legacy

Joseph Ratzinger, a.k.a. Pope Benedict XVI, carried forward the line of his colleague and predecessor by expediting the process of the latter's canonization and by writing encyclicals in which he actually attempted to harmonize the teachings of the two phases of John Paul's reign. In *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) in particular he lays out a case for taking anti-birth control teachings as part of an emphasis on social justice and solidarity. The only reason that it is problematic to have too many children being born into the world, according to the current pope emeritus, is if they are not being properly cared for and educated in particular countries, and thus these children are not able to contribute to the overall well-being of others in turn for the investments being made in them. As long as all children are able to play a constructive role in society, the more children we have the more wealth will be generated for everyone. Thus the key to building a healthy global society is through "openness to life" (the emphasis of the second era of John Paul's reign) being combined with "solidarity" (the emphasis of the first era of John Paul's reign).

The means by which Benedict speculated that this should be done are every economic conservative's worst nightmare: reform of the United Nations "so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth."⁸ This stronger version of the UN would then have the power to redistribute wealth on a global scale in order to prevent humanitarian crises from arising due to a shortage of resources in areas with particularly fast growing populations. Unstated but subtly implied in this argument is that such an organization would also need the moral guidance provided by close collaboration with the Catholic Church to keep it from becoming corrupted by power and to keep it on the straight and narrow path.

⁸ *Caritas in Veritate* (2009): 67

This is not an immediate action plan in any sense; it is long-term speculation regarding how Catholic social teaching of different eras could be brought together into harmony with each other without contradiction or obvious dysfunctionality. As such it fulfills the requirements of Professor George's instructions to the American bishops given above. It also managed to fly just under the radar of international press coverage of the papacy at the time, which was more occupied with Benedict's recommendations against Africans using condoms and the like. Thus its most important implication went broadly unnoticed: *In order for a Catholic family teaching (including the prohibition on birth control) to be functionally possible without creating unsustainable humanitarian crises, a systematic and powerfully enforced global redistribution of economic resources will be necessary.* Or to state it more directly for those who have been in economic moral panic since his retirement, *the "redistribution thing" was actually Pope Benedict's idea to begin with.*

The radical shift signaled by Francis' papacy

That brings us to the one thing that Benedict XVI did as pope which drew more attention than all the rest of his travels and public statements put together: his announcement of his intentions to retire. This cleared the way for the selection of one of the most surprising, and for many one of the most refreshing characters in a very long time to come onto the religious political scene: the former bar room bouncer and long-term man-of-the-people, Argentinian Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who as pope assumed the name **Francis I.**

Francis's message to his church is revolutionary in its profound simplicity: we must not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:18). Religious theories about what constitutes love and how we should require others to act so that these ideals can be realized are too often standing in the way of the church being an authentic expression of God's love in the world. We need to get past all that. In this context his statement from October 17, 2013 rings quite true: When faith gets distilled down to its pure logical principles it *ceases to be faith* — in the sense of being a loving relationship between God and mankind, which from there provides a basis for human caring for each other and solidarity between "people of good will". *"In ideologies there is not Jesus: in his tenderness, his love, his meekness."*⁹ Such ideologies are not steps towards discovering fellowship with God and each other; they are roadblocks to such discovery, for ourselves and those around us.

The problem is that the man whose writings established such ideologies as the political priority of the Catholic Church, John Paul II, has just been canonized as a saint, with great pomp and circumstance; and in the United States in particular the most powerful and influential of Catholics are strongly committed to the ideologies laid out in the Manhattan Declaration, and to prioritizing those absolute principles over relative matters like how to care for those who are hungry, thirsty, exposed, alienated or imprisoned (Matthew 25:36-37).

These ideologies have been carefully nurtured over the past 20-some years by the conservative intellectual journal *First Things*, founded in 1990 by the politically

⁹http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/10/17/pope_francis_at_mass_calls_for_greater_openness_/in2-738150 (Downloaded 25.08.2014)

active conservative Catholic priest (converted from being a politically active liberal Lutheran priest) Richard John Neuhaus. It would be fair to point out that the current highest ranking members of the U.S. Republican Party are just these sorts of ideological Catholics: John Boehner, speaker of the House of Representatives; Paul Ryan, vice-presidential candidate from the last election cycle; Chris Christie, governor of the state of New Jersey; Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida and direct relative of two former presidents; and Marco Rubio, Senator for the state of Florida and very likely presidential hopeful.

These men might be prone to agree with their ideological allies but religious opponents, Rush Limbaugh and Glen Beck, in considering *Francis himself*, with his rather Marxist leanings, to be the current illness within the Catholic Church. These gentlemen have too much invested in their ideological positions to change them just because the leader of their church happens to stand against them. Thus some sort of political and ideological showdown within the Catholic Church in the United States seems somewhat inevitable at this point.

Meanwhile Pope Francis has done nothing to de-escalate the conflict. In June of 2014 he responded to fresh charges of him being a Marxist with the heavily reported quote: *"I can only say that the communists have stolen our flag. The flag of the poor is Christian. Poverty is at the center of the Gospel... Communists say that all this is communism. Sure, twenty centuries later. So when they speak, one can say to them: 'but then you are a Christian.'"*¹⁰

Conclusion

Ultimately with this quote though he is trying to say that labels don't really matter; what matters is how much we are able to do to live up to Jesus's teachings of caring for those in need. The implication remains that anything which prevents the church from doing so is an illness. But rather than getting into a battle of, "You're sick!" "No, You're sick!" "No YOU'RE sick!" Francis is trying to say, "You stay in here and argue about labels if you want; I'll be out caring for the poor, the way Jesus taught us to."

In the coming US election cycles the Republican parties hopes rest largely on being able to mobilize their social conservative base to vote against those who approve of abortion and gay marriage. For this strategy to work they need to convince voters that their party's platform is the truest expression of Christian values in the political arena. Having a pope which labels these sorts of policies as an "illness in the Church" doesn't do much to help their cause, to say at the least. Further conflict over these issues is rather inevitable. It will be fascinating to watch how this plays out in the years to come.

¹⁰ This statement was originally given in an interview in Italian published in the newspaper *Il Messaggero* on Sunday, June 29, 2014. This was translated and widely picked up on by the international press in the following week, e.g.: <http://theweek.com/article/index/264174/pope-francis-just-expertly-trolled-his-critics>

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