

The Alternative

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Dear Reader:

This issue of the Newsletter is on Pope Francis who has managed to capture the imagination of the world press and many people who have not previously shown much interest in papal activities. The sense of someone who might be interesting started with his choice of a name. Many people who hate the Catholic Church profess great love for Francis of Assisi. They might not actually know much about the man from Assisi but they think he was the first environmentalist and was not a real Catholic.

Pope Francis, like Pope John Paul II, is a theatrical performer. Francis' low-key style of performance is more appropriate to what is needed by officials of the Catholic Church today. To call him a performer is by no means a criticism. But it does raise a question of where that performance leads. Can he reform the structure of the Catholic Church? Does he even wish to?

Without pushing the comparison too far, Pope Francis has some of the problem that Barack Obama has. The president was swept into office on the basis of a quasi-religious movement. Even if he had wished to make radical changes in the government of the United States he was bound to find himself paralyzed by a militarized country that takes its direction from powerful corporations. Obama made a great contribution on his first day in office by changing the face of the United States in its relation to other countries. Other badly needed changes have proved to be nearly impossible.

It should also be noted that in the midst of the fervor of a religious movement people might not listen carefully to what the hoped-for-one says. Some disappointments at what president Obama has done have not been failures to do what candidate Obama promised to do. Andrew Bacevich noted, in response to a question of why Obama did not quickly end the war in Afghanistan, that candidate Obama had said he believed in war, just not "dumb" wars. And in Obama's view the war in Afghanistan was, if not exactly a smart war, a necessary war.

Pope Francis may have raised unrealistic hopes about what to expect. Especially among "ex-Catholics" there seems to be a belief that he can singlehandedly bring about a new church. But he confronts a hierarchic structure that is even more complex than the United States government. Home office at the Vatican has mysteries and secrets that are buried a thousand years deep. No individual has the knowledge, skill and time to reform the worldwide institution. That is not to say that he will not and should not try. His successes may not be evident for decades into the future.

PAPAL GLASNOST

By Gabriel Moran

Some people have likened the moves of Pope Francis to Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* in the 1980s. There are any number of differences that one can point out between the Roman Catholic Church and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Church has a much longer and richer tradition than did the USSR. And whereas there were few fervent believers in the Soviet system when Gorbachev made a bid to reform the system, Roman Catholicism still has tens or hundreds of millions of people who are called "the faithful." Still, both systems exhibit the apparent stability of powerful organizations that are held together in a hierarchic pattern of authority that may be more fragile than it appears.

Systems of this kind are practically impossible to change by using the official language within the system. And assaults from outside the system have little effect. But the man (usually) at the top of the system, someone like Pope John XXIII, can open a window that might set off unexpected changes. The danger is that like Gorbachev, Pope Francis may initiate changes that will have effects beyond his intention and control.

The Pope has changed the tone of language which is spoken at the top. The significance of his moves so far has been less in what he has said than how he has said it. And many of the changes did not require any language at all. That approach is no doubt the way to begin changing a system that prides itself on its unchangeableness. Not even the pope can simply declare that an important doctrine has been erroneous and will now be reversed.

The Roman Catholic Church's great strength is that its long tradition contains such variety that it can draw upon a different strand of that tradition when the necessity of change becomes apparent. The Church does not deny its past; instead, it emphasizes something from the past which differs from the current picture. Such a strategy may seem fraudulent and sometimes it is. But given the ambiguity of all language and the variety of contexts in which church teaching has existed a *near* reversal of doctrine can sometimes be defended.

The Church likes to move at a pace at which change can be brought about during decades and centuries. Today's world does not allow for that kind of movement. Theologians, canon lawyers, and bishops no longer have the luxury of slowly sifting through opinions of ancient writers to discover a new emphasis and then say: "As we have always taught..." without the claim being patently false. At some point the present Pope will have to confront changes in the church's teachings. The time frame for him is not decades and centuries but months or a few years. The window of opportunity is open for a short time. But if he moves too quickly he risks setting off a flood of changes that will be destructive of the good along with the bad.

One of the first statements of the Pope that caught the public's attention was his answer to a question about gay people. "Who am I to judge?" was his reply. It was a great first step in a change of attitude for church officials. However, several people, including a few late night comedians, came back with the comment that judging is precisely what popes

do. They were right. There are other things that popes do but teachings (“doctrines”) are about judging. It is not sufficient for the pope or a bishop to say that they do not judge. Their job in some areas is to correct false judgments from the past that are still on the books.

In his interview in *America* the Pope went a little further on the gay question by asking rhetorically “when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?” (His casual use of the English word “gay” was itself a papal revolution). His comments have raised the expectation that the Church’s official teaching is going to change from its illogical position of praising gay people while condemning all homosexual behavior. The attempt to combine compassion for people and harsh judgments about how they live is unsustainable.

When Cardinal Timothy Dolan has been asked about his view of gay marriage, he first says how much he respects gay people and that God loves them. But then he says, as he did in his response to the Pope’s interview, that the Church cannot change its teaching. Why? Because these truths have been revealed by God and the bishops’ mission is to preserve these unchanging truths. It would be fascinating if a reporter were to ask the Cardinal to explain what he means by that. Where are these revealed truths and can we get a list of them? The answer he would give to a reporter would most likely be formulas from an outdated seminary manual dressed up with a few biblical phrases.

The Catholic Church does believe in a *divine* revelation that needs interpretation by the Catholic Church and other religious bodies. Cardinal Dolan’s assertion about the role of bishops is based on a “Christian revelation” containing “revealed truths,” a doctrine that is a product of the sixteenth-century. Probably the clearest thing in divine revelation about gays is that humans should love one another. If one looks at the long history of the Roman Catholic Church it is obvious that moral teachings have been hammered out in political give-and-take. These teachings may be valuable and true but they are always in language that is open to some change.

The Pope no doubt shocked many church officials by suggesting that they were “obsessed” with “gay marriage, abortion and the use of contraceptive methods.” The first step in moving away from an obsession is to keep quiet about the obsessive concern and start talking about other things. Until recently it appeared that the bishops had used this strategy regarding “artificial contraceptives.” The church had recognized the need for the control of birth in the 1930s, but it refused to explore safe and effective means to that end. By the 1960s many Roman Catholics had come to their own conclusions. In 1968 it seemed likely that Pope Paul VI would acknowledge that nonviolent forms of controlling fertilization are compatible with Catholic tradition. Instead, he made things worse with an incoherent encyclical affirming the status quo.

When most Roman Catholics disregarded the papal teaching, the bishops seemed to recognize that it was not worth trying to defend a position that was so unresponsive to the needs of the world and in conflict with the convictions of their own people. A discrete silence about contraception was observed in most of the church. But then rather suddenly

in 2012, the issue resurfaced and the bishops tried to exercise their authority where they had lost it decades ago. Current church officials seem unable to make a few clear distinctions, something that had been a hallmark of Catholic tradition. These distinctions would enable the Roman Catholic Church to be a contributor to discussions about the control of population growth.

On the “obsession” with abortion, the Catholic Church has a clear distinction in its tradition that would allow it to compromise with secular society. This compromise would result in today’s abortions being earlier and safer while the Church worked with other groups to lessen the need for abortions. For more than a thousand years of church history the intellectual leaders and officials of the church believed that a human being, an “ensouled” individual, did not exist in the early stage of pregnancy. The view began to change only in the seventeenth century and traces of the older view remain to this day. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who are usually invoked on any questions of church teaching, agreed with the common teaching of medieval bishops and popes. Augustine wrote that “the law does not provide that the act pertains to homicide for there cannot yet be said to be a live soul in a body that lacks sensation when it is not formed in flesh and so not yet endowed with sense.”

It is important to note that this belief was not based on their deficient or non-existent biological knowledge. Instead, they thought it was irrational to say that a spec of matter is a baby. They did not know when a human individual comes to exist, just as no one today knows. A frequent suggestion in the middle ages that the answer is 40 days was no doubt symbolic but it perhaps was not a bad guess. The church did oppose abortion but it did not equate early abortions with murder.

The Vatican announced in November that in preparation for the Synod on the Family in 2014 it is sending out a questionnaire with 38 questions to Catholics about these contentious moral issues. What exactly this move means remains to be seen. It could be simply an attempt to find out how to get Catholic people to accept official teachings. That seems to be the purpose implied in the Vatican document: “Church teaching has always been clear that marriage is a lifelong bond between one man and one woman open to having and educating children, and the synod’s goal will be to communicate this message with greater incisiveness.” Anything more than that would be denounced by church officials as creeping democracy.

If democracy is thought to be a system in which policies and beliefs are determined by majority vote, the Catholic Church cannot be a democracy. But if democracy means a respect for the individual and the protection of minority views, the Catholic Church is plainly in need of becoming democratic. Questions to married Catholics about sexuality and marriage could be enlightening to bishops who lack experience in that area. But what happens if 90% of the responses to one of those questions are “Yes, we use contraceptives; it would be immoral not to do so.” Would the bishops shout louder or rethink their position?

The Pope has to move fairly quickly from changing the tone of church pronouncements to articulating moral teachings that are compatible with the church's long tradition and are responsive to the present. If he does so, some people will find the changes too modest for the needs of the time. Other people will think that the changes are too radical and that the pope is ruining the church. The changes cannot be seen as the idiosyncrasies of one man. The pope has to get a major part of the present church population on board and perhaps some of the millions who have left the church but are still interested. No one knows the right pattern to follow. The Pope has shown good instincts so far. Now comes the difficult part.

IS THE POPE LIBERAL?

Michael Peppard

What is it that people perceive in Pope Francis that makes them think he is a liberal? Apart from the headline-grabbing remarks about sexual ethics, which were only a small part of his interview, what else about this pope has attracted the attention and sympathy of liberals? In my view, the answer is Francis's temperament. A temperament is not an ideology, much less a policy program, but it is nevertheless central to one's engagements with political bodies and other institutions. A liberal *temperament* is what TV personalities, such as *The Daily Show's* Jon Stewart, saw even before the *America* interview appeared. And although Andrew Sullivan is a self-described conservative, it seems to be the pope's temperament to which Sullivan has responded enthusiastically.

There's more than one way to define the liberal temperament. I'd define it as a temperament that tends toward open-ended thinking and is generally confident in humanity's ability to achieve progress in the near future. A liberal temperament is comfortable with spontaneity, ambivalence, and ambiguity. Some people have all of these qualities, some only a few. In any case, one can have a liberal temperament without subscribing to the political or theological positions we commonly describe as liberal. Almost by definition, a liberal temperament does not lead to predictable ideological outcomes.

For Alan Wolfe, the liberal temperament "has more to do with psychology than politics or morality." It is fundamentally "impatient with arguments rooted in fear and self-protection." A person with this temperament remains consistently "open to a sense of discovery, anticipates the future with excitement, and approaches the world with a generous spirit." Such a temperament is "trans-ideological," and those who would identify themselves as liberals often lack it.

In terms of temperament, Pope Francis almost always sounds liberal in what he says, and his actions have reinforced that impression. He argues against those who "want everything clear and safe," those who "always look for disciplinarian solutions," and those who "stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists." He has harsh words for anyone who desires "to establish order in the sense of pure conservation, as a defense." He insists that "we must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but

rather on starting long-run historical processes. As for his actions, Pope Francis spontaneously departed in the first days of his pontificate from how a pope is supposed to behave.

The traits of a liberal temperament are not always positive. Spontaneity, ambivalence, and impatience with The Way Things Have Always Been Done can sometimes lead to disaster. Tradition, Chesterton's "democracy of the dead," is usually wise and true. Many fears are valid. And a "generous spirit" can be a euphemism for "gullible." Regarding the pope's temperament, the conservatives Rod Dreher and R. R. Reno have expressed some misgivings. Reno believes that the pope appeared "naïve and undisciplined" in some parts of the interview, and that he should have anticipated the way secular liberals and dissenting Catholics would make use of his remarks. Reno describes some of the pope's rhetoric as straight "from the standard playbook of progressive reform."

The *Washington Post's* conservative columnist Michael Gerson also recognizes that the pope's temperament is not exactly conservative. Gerson describes the pope as "subversive," "disarming," "disruptive"; as a "troublemaker," "radical," and "reformer." But Gerson is not worried. Indeed, he believes that Francis is reclaiming one of the oldest traditions of what it means to be a Christian: "When the church becomes ossified, legalistic and hypocritical – as all institutions periodically do – it is the radical reformers who carry on its most authentic tradition."

Gerson concludes by emphasizing Francis' personalism; "This teaching – to always consider the person – was disorienting from the beginning. The outsiders get invited to the party. The prodigal is given the place of honor. The pious complain about their shocking treatment. The gatekeepers find the gate shut to them. It is subversive to all respectable religious order, which is precisely the point."

Like Gerson, I see a connection between Pope Francis' temperament and the personalism of Jesus' own ministry. Francis does not emphasize dogma, but he does have one "dogmatic certainty": "God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs, or anything else – God is in this person's life. This attitude imitates that of Jesus whose example of holiness had more to do with personal encounter than rules."

Pope Francis' approach also bears some resemblance to that of St. Paul. Like Paul, Francis emphasizes "finding new roads" at the "frontiers, margins, and horizons." Paul took on Peter in the most direct way on the question of whether the promises of Christ could be extended to the uncircumcised. The church as we know it would not exist but for that bit of factionalism. Greater than the contrast between Peter's position and Paul's, however, is the contrast between Paul and James, who stayed put in Jerusalem and held fast to more of the traditions, even sending emissaries to reprimand Paul for testing doctrinal boundaries (Galatians 1-2).

Notwithstanding his famous zeal, Paul's temperament was liberal to the core. He traveled all over the Mediterranean with little personal security, constantly attracted the anger of various authorities, improvised his method in every city, and adapted his preaching to the cultural contexts of different audiences. Most significantly, at the end of his long career, he remained positively and beautifully ambiguous about the defining feature of his life: the *how* of God's plan to redeem all people, both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 11). I do not mean to elevate Paul over James. But I am willing to say that, temperamentally, James was a kind of conservative and Paul a kind of liberal. They were both committed to Christ, committed unto death. But they expressed that commitment in different ways. They were both achieving God's work in the world, extending the Body of Christ like two hands – a right and a left.

Christian unity does not demand that we blur the differences between leaders, whether James and Paul or Benedict and Francis. We can borrow words common to the *polis* and use them, with care, to describe realities within the *ecclesia*, just like first-century apostles did. What Christian unity does demand is that we remain open to the influence of those whose temperaments are different from our own.

BEST POPE EVER?

By Chris Hayes

You know who I freakin' love? This new pope. Pope Francis. You know who I'm talking about, right? The pope. Are you watching this guy? Because you should be. It's early, but I'm thinking... *best pope ever*.

Now, I have a confession to make: like millions of other people in this country and around the world, I was raised Catholic, but stopped going to Mass—my freshman year at Brown, to be exact. And while I still have affection for the church of my childhood—the smell of incense, the saying of the Our Father, and all of the rituals—I haven't felt very warmly about the institutional Catholic Church, to say the least, in the years since. But somehow, this guy, Pope Francis, is turning me around.

I liked him from the beginning, because he, like my father, was a Jesuit—a liberal order that promotes social justice. I love me some Jesuits. Right out of the gate, Francis offered up a few gestures to demonstrate a break from his predecessor Benedict. Rather than living in the grand papal apartment, Francis resides in the modest Vatican guest house.

The Vatican's garbage collectors were the first employees he invited to morning masses. And instead of washing the feet of 12 priests during an Easter Week ritual, as tradition dictates, Francis washed the feet of 12 young inmates including two women and two Muslims.

I thought to myself at the time, well, that's cool, but he's new at the job. He'll probably start becoming more pope-like as time goes on. But no. He just keeps being awesome.

He showed up to World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, not in the imposing Popemobile, but in the back of a rental car. He's not above taking a selfie with the kids. He plans on driving a used car around town. And he's urged others to do the same: "It hurts me when I see a priest or a nun with the latest model car. A car is necessary to do a lot of work, but please, choose a more humble one. If you like the fancy one, just think about how many children are dying of hunger in the world." If you don't quite understand the concept of Catholic guilt, I'm pretty sure that's it.

Perhaps most amazing of all: the pope is now picking up the phone and calling people who write to him for advice and prayers—earning him the nickname "Cold Call Pope." He phoned a woman who had been raped by a police officer in Argentina, telling her she was not alone, and to have faith in the justice system. He's comforted a pregnant woman whose married boyfriend tried to pressure her into an abortion, Francis offering to personally baptize her baby.

Now all of that—while incredibly awesome—is symbolism.

But Francis has also shown he's pretty good substantively, as well. On the once taboo subject of homosexuality, Francis told reporters: "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" On the subject of atheism, Francis says non-believers should "obey their conscience" and that "God's mercy has no limits." He's even suggesting that he's open to a debate on married priests. His second-in-command told a Venezuelan newspaper that celibacy is not dogma, therefore the concept of priestly celibacy should "reflect the democratic spirit of the times."

Now, I don't have a whole lot of hope that the Church itself is going to come around and change tenets or official positions that I deeply oppose—its rejection of things like gay marriage, women in the priesthood, a woman's autonomy over her own body. I just don't see that happening any time soon.

But given the constraints of what being pope is, you can operate in one of two ways: you can be a jerk about it, or you can be awesome. And this guy is choosing to be awesome. And not only is that great for the Church, it's great for the world to have a pope talking about what this pope is talking about: grace, humility, peace and compassion for others.

Because that is the Church at its best, and the one that some part of me still loves.
Amen.

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