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Pope rejects church of 'small-minded rules' in Jesuit interview

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 19, 2013 NCR Today

In a wide-ranging interview [1] for 16 Jesuit publications around the world, including *America* magazine in the United States, Pope Francis once again has waded into hot-button questions such as homosexuality, abortion and the role of women, not breaking with traditional doctrine but trying to shift the church's emphasis from condemnation to mercy.

"The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules," Francis says. "Ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all."

The pope also warns against a "restorationist" mentality in Catholicism and insists that "thinking with the church" cannot mean solely thinking with the hierarchy. Francis also pointedly says, "I have never been a right-winger."

Among other things, Pope Francis says the church has no right to "interfere spiritually" in the lives of gays and lesbians, expanding on his now-famous "Who am I to judge?" line about homosexuals during his airborne press conference during a flight from Brazil to Rome in late July.

Much of the interview, in fact, extends on points Francis made initially during his press conference aboard the papal plane July 28, though this time at greater length.

As the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Francis says, he received letters from gays and lesbians who said they were "socially wounded" because they felt the church condemned them.

"The church does not want to do this," he says.

The pope says when someone once asked him if he "approves" of homosexuality, he answered with another question: "Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?"

In saying these things, Francis argues, he's doing no more than rephrasing the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which denounces homosexual acts but says homosexual persons are to be treated with "respect, compassion and sensitivity."

Francis also defends himself against criticism that he hasn't taken a sufficiently tough line on the culture wars, especially abortion.

"We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods," he says in the interview. "I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that."

He indicates, however, he's not likely to change approach.

"It is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time," Francis says, "especially because the teaching of the

church on these matters is already clear.

More generally, the pope says Catholic leaders must find a "new balance" between their primary spiritual mission and their involvement in contentious political questions, warning that if they don't, the church's foundation will "fall like a house of cards."

As he did on the papal plane, Francis clearly rejects the ordination of women to the priesthood.

He indicates, however, that he wants the church to do a better job of hearing women's voices.

"Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed," the pope says. "The church cannot be herself without the woman and her role."

In general, Francis seems to suggest he wants the church to come off as less judgmental and more pastoral, though without becoming morally "lax."

The interview with Francis was conducted by Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of *La Civilta Cattolica,* a Jesuit journal based in Rome, over three meetings this August at Francis' apartment in Rome.

The pope approved the transcript in Italian, and *America* then commissioned a translation into English.

At other points in the interview, Francis reflects on the origins of his Jesuit vocation, his leadership style and his early experiences of the papacy.

He indicated he wants to be a reforming pope, but that one shouldn't expect massive changes quickly.

"Many think that changes and reforms can take place in a short time," he said.

"I believe that we always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change. And this is the time of discernment."

The full text of the interview can be found here [1].

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