Opinion
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Juan Carlos Cruz, a Chilean victim of clerical sexual abuse, speaks during an interview at the Vatican April 24. (CNS/Alessandro Bianchi, Reuters)



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I cringed when the news broke that Pope Francis reportedly said, "God made you like this. God loves you like this," to a gay man. The Holy Father told this to Juan Carlos Cruz, one of the Chilean survivors of sexual abuse with whom he met earlier this month.

The cringe came upon me not because what the pope said was wrong, still less that it was offensive. I cringed because I knew the right-wing critics of the pope would have another field day.

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As expected, LifeSiteNews pounced immediately, with an article by Doug Mainwaring demanding the pope retract his remarks:

> *In this alleged comment, the Jesuit Pontiff made a giant leap from his already confounding, impenetrable, "Who am I to judge?" suggesting to the world that the Church is treading down a path to justifying LGBT identity and activity as fully normal. Such a path would be impossible for the Church of Christ.*
>
> *The Vatican press office's Cristina Ravenda told LifeSiteNews, "The Vatican does not comment on private conversations of the Pope." Given the seriousness, we would expect Pope Francis to personally correct the record with haste if Cruz got the quote wrong.*

Of course, we expect these kinds of rantings from LifeSiteNews, which is a fringe group. Similarly, Fr. Zuhlsdorf suggested the pope might not have even said it, and used the occasion to expose his own homophobia. I half-expect Zuhlsdorf to start "praying away the gay" any day now.

Regrettably, there is fringe making its way into the faculty lounge at the Catholic University of America, and not only at the business school. Theology professor Chad

Pecknold wrote on Twitter, "The Lord does indeed love every person He makes. But God neither makes nor wills the disordering of sexual appetite. Anyone who actually claims such a thing has wittingly or unwittingly committed material heresy, and must be gently and charitably redirected towards truth." To which my friend and colleague Josh McElwee replied, "Care to name a spade a spade? Are you accusing the pope of heresy?"

Mind you, Professor Pecknold is one of the leaders of the Twitter magisterium, and the medium is not given to profound thought or meaningful distinctions or deep debate. But it is public, and the Catholic University of America makes much of the fact that it is the only pontifical university in the country, so it is remarkable one of their professors is so cavalier in charging the pope with heresy.

Cardinal Wuerl: Call your office! Fr. Charles Curran was kicked off the faculty at CUA for disagreeing with the magisterium, but he never accused the pope of heresy! Pecknold is a scandal, as much of a scandal as Tat-siong Benny Liew, the scripture professor at the College of the Holy Cross, who fancied the torture of the crucifixion as a kind of sexual fantasy. And, Pecknold teaches future priests who live at the Theological College seminary and take their courses at CUA. His mandate to teach theology should be stripped and, as I recommended in the case of Holy Cross, if the CUA department that recommended him for tenure must pay his salary even though he is not teaching, and lack the money to meet other needs, they will think twice before hiring another like him next time.

The left in such situations causes me to cringe as well. Francis DeBernardo of New Ways Ministry told the Daily Beast, "Our hope, though, is that Pope Francis would say these words publicly, not just in the context of a private conversation. … Such a message stated publicly would do an immense amount of good towards effecting healing and reconciliation with so many people alienated from the church because of sexuality issues." There has to be a lot of heavy theological lifting before the pope can do what DeBernardo asks, which is to change the teaching of the Church. I remain doubtful about the outcome of that lifting.

The problem here is that too many people, on both the left and the right, view moral laws through a Prussian lens, East Prussian to be exact. Kant formulated his "categorical imperative" and we all seem unable to escape the post-Kantian understanding of how moral rules operate. The Pecknolds and the Zuhlsdorfs of the world seem to think pastoral accompaniment consists of repeating abstract moral

laws. The left thinks it needs to change the laws in order to be "affirmed." A plague on the whole Kantian fallacy.

St. Thomas Aquinas had a more supple understanding of how rules relate to human decision making and moral formation. Indeed, the pre-Vatican II moral manuals displayed this suppleness too. They were written before an Anglo-Saxon reading of Aquinas enlisted the Angelic Doctor into the ranks of the Kantian army. Pope Francis, like many Latin Americans, was spared the John Finnis and Germain Grisez reading of Aquinas and they understand that rules are applied, and in the application, one makes allowances for circumstance and perspective and history.

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To give an example, I remember the day Sonia Sotomayor was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. I called Monsignor Lorenzo who, like Sotomayor, was Puerto Rican. I asked if he knew her and if he knew if she had any pro-life sympathies. He replied, "Well, she is Puerto Rican so of course she is opposed to abortion. Even Puerto Ricans who have had an abortion are opposed to it." Some people see his words as mere evidence of moral hypocrisy but I see a deep sympathy with the human condition and a radically un-Kantian understanding of moral norms.

I will leave it to the theological heavyweights to explore this Kantian concern. What is apparent and important is that Pope Francis takes his role as chief pastor of the church as importantly as he does his role as principal teacher of the faith. It is not that the two are in conflict, but that they can be distinguished for a reason: Humans are not robots and the Blessed Mother did not give birth to a summa.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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