Opinion
Vatican



Pope Francis greets bishops during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 1. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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LifeSiteNews published an open letter to the bishops of the world, accusing Pope Francis of several counts of heresy, and urging the bishops to take action against him. This is a self-described continuation of the prior attacks on Francis, starting with the dubia from the five cardinals and then the 2017 "filial correction." Francis, wisely, has not responded to any of this nonsense.

The LifeSite article by Maika Hickson described the signers as "prominent clergymen and scholars," although I think all the names but one, Domincan Fr. Aidan Nichols, are more accurately described as obscure. Later, she calls the scholars "well-respected" and, again, I think Fr. Nichols was respected. After this foray into ecclesial politics, perhaps not so much.

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Let's take on one of the indictments of Francis, so you can get a flavor of what is wrong here: "II. A Christian believer can have full knowledge of a divine law and voluntarily choose to break it in a serious matter, but not be in a state of mortal sin as a result of this action." They cite the Council of Trent, various Scripture texts, the papal bull *Unigenitus*, which condemned Jansenism (which is kind of ironic) and Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and his apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*. Okay, we get the point. But the first Scripture verse they cite does not seem on point: Mark 8:38 reads, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." I would think Mark 3:1-6 is more fitting for the doctrinal claim they are making:

> Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

> Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.
>
> He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Or if you object that these men were Jews, not Christians, we might turn to St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man ..." (2:13-15). In Acts 15, the Council of Jerusalem decrees that Gentiles need not abide by the Mosaic law, which was most certainly a divine law. St. Paul in Acts first tells Timothy he should be circumcised, but by the time he writes Galatians, he comes out strongly against circumcision. What had changed? The circumstances. Heaven forfend.

I think you could make a similar argument against all of their points of indictment. But, that really is not the point is it? Trading proof texts from Scripture and tradition? This text has not been published in a peer reviewed theological journal, and it is most definitely not intended to persuade. It asserts. It takes a particular interpretation of the Catholic tradition and makes an idol of it, insisting that it and it alone is the only valid interpretation.

It is also clear that this line of argument really finds its roots not in the theology of John Paul II, still less the Second Vatican Council. These are neo-Feeneyites, adhering to the most extreme theological positions held before the Vatican II. (Fr. Leonard Feeney was an arch-conservative, whose views were so extreme he was excommunicated in 1953.) So, for example, they write that "[t]hese heresies are interconnected. The basis of Catholic sexual morality consists in the claim that sexual activity exists for the sake of procreation within marriage and is morally wrong if knowingly engaged outside of this sphere." Except that the Second Vatican Council and every pope since clearly taught that there are two ends of sexual intimacy, procreation *and* the unity of the spouses. This latter doesn't make the cut for the neo-Feeneyites.

They "prove" the pope is a heretic by citing some of his public statements and certain actions. The public statements mostly have to do with *Amoris Laetitia* and specifically whether or not, in certain circumstances, the divorced and civilly remarried can be admitted to the sacraments. We heard these arguments during the two synods that led to *Amoris Laetitia*. They do not dwell on this fact: It is not only Francis, but two-thirds of the bishops gathered in synod who endorsed this different pastoral approach to ministering to people in such irregular situations. Nor do they note that what is really at issue here is as much our Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as it is our understanding of marriage. Most importantly, they fail to recognize that Francis sees his role as a pastor, not as theologian-in-chief, and his goal is not to make doctrine pristine and irrefutable, but to make it come alive in the lives of the Catholic faithful. But this letter is not a document that is looking for nuance or subtlety.

My favorite part of the text is when the signatories do a reprise of the Viganò testimony and provide "evidence" of Francis' heretical inclinations in some of his public actions, most especially the promotion of certain prelates. "By publicly praising individuals who have dedicated their careers to opposing the teaching of the Church and the Catholic faith, and to promoting and committing crimes condemned by divine revelation and natural law, [the pope] communicates the message that the beliefs and actions of these individuals are legitimate and praiseworthy," they write. They do not mention if they also use a Ouija board to discern what the pope's actions do or do not communicate.

The three Americans mentioned among these evil prelates are Cardinal Blase Cupich, former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and Cardinal Donald Wuerl. Cupich was named bishop of Rapid City, South Dakota, by John Paul II. He was later transferred to Spokane, Washington, by Pope Benedict XVI. Francis transferred him to Chicago. Was Cupich's initial appointment to Rapid City a sign that John Paul II was a heretic? Was Benedict XVI a heretic for sending him to Spokane? McCarrick was first named an auxiliary bishop by Pope Paul VI, but he was promoted to Metuchen, New Jersey, by John Paul II, who promoted him to the archbishopric of Newark, New Jersey, then to the Archdiocese of Washington, and then named him a cardinal. McCarrick retired seven years before Francis was elected. Why is McCarrick's career evidence of Francis' heresy? John Paul II actually ordained Cardinal Wuerl a bishop and then later named him bishop of Pittsburgh. Benedict XIV named him to Washington and made him a cardinal. Again, are these prior popes to be confronted with the charge of heresy for these actions? This is nonsense on stilts.

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The stilts get longer in the next section of the indictment, where the open letter alleges further instances of Francis behaving in a heterodox fashion. For example, during the youth synod last year, Francis "wore a distorted rainbow-coloured cross, the rainbow being a popularly promoted symbol of the homosexual movement." I recall that Frédéric Martel, in his salacious book about homosexuality in the Vatican, also discerned homosexual significance in a rainbow colored umbrella at the Domus Sanctae Marthae. But isn't the rainbow the sign of God's covenant with Noah? And is it now also a symbol of the peace movement? Alas these anti-Francis, and virulently anti-gay, activists, like the openly gay Martel, see homosexuality everywhere.

The letter condemns the pope for his agreement with China, mistakenly stating that the Chinese government gets to select bishops, when in fact the government gets to nominate them, a procedure that was followed through much of the West for many centuries when rulers not only nominated bishops but a wide variety of ecclesial offices. Rome then, as now, must confirm the nominations — or not. Besides, this is diplomacy, not dogma, so why is this complaint evidence of heresy?

What is not silly is the lengths to which this crowd takes their opposition to the Holy Father. Here at NCR we have a long history of criticizing popes for certain decisions, but we never accused them of heresy and we never called on them to be ousted. Tom Fox, who has been editor, publisher or board member at NCR since 1980. told me:

> I can say categorically no writer for any of our publications, in these 39 years, has ever called one of our popes a heretic. As a Catholic, this thought is, at base, an oxymoron. Oh, yes, we've offered critiques of bishops and popes. We've seen ourselves at times as a loyal opposition. During periods when we've offered critiques we've also offered praise. We strongly criticized, for example, almost standing alone, in the 1980s, the sexually abusive behavior of priests and the complicity of bishops in that abuse. But we've always criticized with a sense of loyalty and hope for reform. No one can separate us from the Vicar of Christ. We are Catholics. We are the People of God.

Amen.

You do not have to guess at the motives of this crowd. It is evident as day. Or is it? Like previous critics of Francis, they believe in a golden age that never existed. They visualize a church that never existed, in which the whole work of the church amounts to repeating the catechism of the Council of Trent. They want a kind of comprehensive certainty that is not available to us humans in this life. And those who do not see things as they do should hit the highway. This attitude bespeaks a certain insecurity, and I feel sympathy for those for whom this pontificate is unsettling, just as I felt sympathy for those Catholics who missed the Tridentine rite and found the vernacular Mass unsettling. But history marches on, and the Spirit, like the wind, blows where it will.

Feeney, remember, clung to the proposition "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus" — there is no salvation outside the church. He admitted only his narrow interpretation of this claim. For this, he was excommunicated, that is, he found himself outside the church. Thanks be to God, he was reconciled to the church before he died. I hope that the signatories of this dreadful letter will also come to think better of their tactics and their assertions.

When the five dissident cardinals issued their dubia, I thought their action remarkable, but you can find deep disagreements about important issues in almost any decade of Christian history. This time, I had a different reaction. This much venom, directed at the pope himself, leads me to think that this letter is not merely the result of a disagreement with the pope, even a fierce disagreement. This much venom, page after page of assertions so unhinged from reality, I wonder if this is not the result of these signatories' entertaining the sneaking suspicion that Francis is right, that he has called the church back to the central kerygma of the Gospel: Jesus has come to proclaim and enact God's limitless mercy, and the measure of our receptiveness to this great grace is how we care for the poor. I suspect that, deep down, they know Francis is right, and it scares the living daylights out of them, requiring a conversion of heart, as well as mind, that they desperately wish to avoid.

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

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