Vatican



Pope Francis answers questions from journalists aboard his flight from Antananarivo, Madagascar, to Rome Sept. 10. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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ABOARD THE PAPAL FLIGHT FROM MADAGASCAR — September 10, 2019

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Pope Francis warned Sept. 10 that ideology is "infiltrating" the religious teaching of some quarters of the U.S. Catholic Church, and said that in past centuries such infiltrations have led to schisms.

In a press conference aboard the papal flight back to Rome after his three-nation visit to Southern Africa, the pontiff said that while he was unafraid of schism, he was also praying that one would not occur.

Asked about conservative U.S. Catholic groups that vocally criticize his papacy, the pope said that some critique him for stances on social issues that are identical to the stances taken by his predecessor Pope John Paul II.

"The things I say on social matters are the same that John Paul II said. The same. I copy him," said Francis. "They say, 'too Communist pope.' "

"Ideology is infiltrating doctrine," he said. "And when doctrine slips into ideology, there is the possibility of a schism."

"I pray that there will not be schisms," he said. "But I am not afraid."

Francis also implied that some conservative Americans who criticize him are hypocrites, saying that while he appreciates those who offer constructive criticism of his pontificate, he does not appreciate those who critique without intending to dialogue.

"If your critique is not right, be prepared to receive a response and have a dialogue, a discussion, to come to a just point," he said. "This is the dynamic of true criticism."

"The criticism of … throwing the stone and then hiding your hand, this does not help," he said, calling it the work of "small, closed-in groups, who do not want to hear the response to the criticism."

Conservative U.S. Catholic criticism has been a staple of Francis' six-year papacy, with right-wing outlets such as EWTN and First Things taking aim at everything from the pontiff's effort to fight global climate change to his focus on the merciful nature of God.

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A number of bishops have also been frequent critics, including U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, who Francis removed as the chief judge of the Vatican's highest court in 2014.

At the beginning of his Sept. 4-10 visit to Mozambique, Madagascar and Mauritius, Francis had called it an "honor" that some conservative U.S. Catholics criticize him.

Francis' warning on ideology infiltrating the U.S. church came during a 65-minute press conference in which the pontiff also called on the U.S. and the U.K. to respect a demand from the United Nations that they cede control of an Indian Ocean island airbase.

Related: Francis: US, UK should respect UN call to cede Indian Ocean air base

Distinguishing between critics he appreciates and those he does not, the pontiff gave the example of someone who honestly says: "This thing from the pope, I do not like. I will make a critique and I'll wait for the response. I'll visit with him, speak with him, write an article, ask him to respond."

"This is loyal," the pope said of that kind of criticism. "This is loving the church."

"Making a criticism without wanting to hear the response, and without having dialogue, is not wanting well for the church," said Francis. "There is a set idea behind it — changing the pope … or making a schism, I don't know."

He later traced the history of the various schisms that have occurred in the 2,000-year history of the Catholic Church, saying that schismatics always "detach themselves from the people, from the faith of the people, from the faith of the people of God."

"A schism is always snobbish ideology detached from doctrine," said the pope.

"An ideology, maybe a correct one, infiltrates doctrine … and it becomes 'doctrine' in quotation marks, for a period of time," he said.

Francis also warned against clerics who are too rigid in their practice of Catholic teachings.

"Today, we have many schools of rigidity within the church, which are not schismatic but are Christian paths that are pseudo-schismatic, which will end poorly," he said.

"When you see Christians, bishops and priests who are rigid, there are always problems behind that," he said. "There is not the health of the Gospel."

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