Vatican



Pope Francis talks with members of the Society of Jesus at the apostolic nunciature in Bratislava, Slovakia, Sept. 12, 2021. During a private meeting, the pope spoke to the Jesuits about his health, the pastoral work of Jesuits in Slovakia, and how he deals with suspicions or criticisms. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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ROME — Pope Francis has issued a thinly veiled criticism of the U.S.-based Eternal Word Television Network, known as EWTN, saying that while he may be worthy of personal scrutiny, the church does not deserve attacks such as those regularly made by the station.

"There is, for example, a large Catholic television channel that has no hesitation in continually speaking ill of the pope," said Francis. "I personally deserve attacks and insults because I am a sinner, but the church does not deserve them. They are the work of the devil. I have also said this to some of them."

The pope's comments came during a Sept. 12 meeting with Jesuits during his Sept. 12-15 visit to Slovakia. His remarks were published by the Jesuit journal La Civiltà Cattolica on Sept. 21.

In recent years, EWTN, which is headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama, and is one of the Catholic Church's largest media enterprises, has become known for its regular antagonistic coverage of Pope Francis and partisan political focus. No other Catholic media conglomerate has regularly featured such open criticism of Francis.

Most notably, host Raymond Arroyo has regularly promoted and interviewed the schismatic former papal nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò. Viganò has previously called for Pope Francis' resignation.

Arroyo also regularly hosts a "papal posse" of commentators known for their anti-Francis views, including Fr. Gerald Murray, a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, and author Robert Royal.

In his 2020 book, *The Outsider: Pope Francis and His Battle to Reform the Church*, British Vatican journalist Christopher Lamb reported that the the apostolic nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, had expressed displeasure to EWTN CEO Michael Warsaw over the network's coverage of the papacy. Warsaw is a consultor to the Vatican's Dicastery for Communications.

During his remarks to the Jesuits in Slovakia, the pope also directly addressed priests who are openly critical of his ministry.

"Yes, there are also clerics who make nasty comments about me. I sometimes lose patience, especially when they make judgments without entering into a real dialogue. I can’t do anything there," he said. "However, I go on without entering their world of ideas and fantasies. I don’t want to enter it and that’s why I prefer to preach, preach. … Some people accuse me of not talking about holiness. They say I always talk about social issues and that I’m a communist."

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Francis has made regular unscheduled stops to meet with his Jesuit confreres during his international travels and their free-ranging exchanges are published in La Civiltà Cattolica.

While meeting with the Slovakian Jesuits, the pope also spoke freely about those that are skeptical of his more welcoming approach to marriage and family life, his recovery from his recent surgery and traditionalist priests.

When asked by one Jesuit about concerns over "gender ideology," the pope said there was a need to distinguish between those seeking to push an ideology that one could choose their own biological gender and engaging in pastoral outreach to LGBTQ persons.

"The 'gender' ideology of which you speak is dangerous, yes. As I understand it, it is so because it is abstract with respect to the concrete life of a person, as if a person could decide abstractly at will if and when to be a man or a woman," Francis said.

"Abstraction is always a problem for me. This has nothing to do with the homosexual issue, though. If there is a homosexual couple, we can do pastoral work with them, move forward in our encounter with Christ," he continued. "When I talk about ideology, I'm talking about the idea, the abstraction in which everything is possible, not about the concrete life of people and their real situation."

The pope also recalled the controversial 2014 and 2015 Synod of Bishops on the Family, where pastoral care for divorced and remarried couples and LGBTQ concerns were openly discussed, prompting a rift among conservative prelates participating in

the event.

"It frightens us to go forward in pastoral experiences. I think of the work that was done … at the Synod on the Family to make it understood that couples in second unions are not already condemned to hell," the pope recalled. "It frightens us to accompany people with sexual diversity. We are afraid of the crossroads and paths that Paul VI spoke of. This is the evil of this moment, namely, to seek the path in rigidity and clericalism, which are two perversions."

In July, Francis sent shockwaves through Catholic traditionalist communities when he significantly restricted the celebration of the traditional Latin Mass.

In response to pushback of the decision, the pope shared the story of a cardinal who told him of two newly ordained priests seeking permission to study Latin and to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass.

"With a sense of humor he replied," the pope recalled: " 'But there are many Hispanics in the diocese! Study Spanish to be able to preach. Then, when you have studied Spanish, come back to me and I'll tell you how many Vietnamese there are in the diocese, and I'll ask you to study Vietnamese. Then, when you have learned Vietnamese, I will give you permission to study Latin.' "

"So he made them 'land,' he made them return to earth. I go ahead, not because I want to start a revolution," Francis said. "I do what I feel I must do. It takes a lot of patience, prayer and a lot of charity."

Francis, who kept up a demanding schedule during his four-day travels to Hungary and Slovakia, also responded with humor when asked how he was faring after his surgery and 10-day hospitalization in July.

"Still alive, even though some people wanted me to die. I know there were even meetings between prelates who thought the pope’s condition was more serious than the official version," said Francis. "They were preparing for the conclave. Patience! Thank God, I'm all right."

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Hungary and Slovakia** feature series. View the full series.
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