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Refugees stand outside their shelters as Pope Francis visits the government-run Reception ar

Refugees stand outside their shelters as Pope Francis visits the government-run Reception and Identification Center Dec. 5 in Mytilene, Greece. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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December 8, 2021

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Pope Francis delivered a strong rebuke to Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, Bishop Robert Barron, auxiliary of the same archdiocese, and groups such as "Catholic Answers" and EWTN in a Dec. 4 speech to the clergy, religious and seminarians of Athens, Greece.

OK, that is not precisely accurate. The pope did not mention any American clergy or organization during his talk in the Cathedral of St. Dionysius. But, in a deeper sense, it is profoundly true.

Here is the specific part of the Holy Father's speech that seemed to show the difference between his approach to evangelization and that found among most conservative U.S. Catholics. Calling an attitude of acceptance essential to

evangelization, the pope said such an attitude "does not try to occupy the space and life of others, but to sow the good news in the soil of their lives; it learns to recognize and appreciate the seeds that God already planted in their hearts before we came on the scene. Let us remember that God always precedes us, God always sows before we do. Evangelizing is not about filling an empty container; it is ultimately about bringing to light what God has already begun to accomplish."

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The pope recalled St. Paul's visit to Athens and what he said at the Areopagus. "He did not tell them: 'You have it all wrong,' or 'Now I will teach you the truth.' Instead, he began by accepting their religious spirit. … He draws from the rich patrimony of the Athenians. The Apostle dignified his hearers and welcomed their religiosity. Even though the streets of Athens were full of idols, which had made him 'deeply distressed,' Paul acknowledged the desire for God hidden in the hearts of those people, and wanted gently to share with them the amazing gift of faith."

The pope finished with a phrase he often uses. Speaking of St. Paul, he said: "He did not impose; he proposed."

This is the pedagogy of accompaniment. It can scarcely be labeled "heretical" or "confusing," as some conservatives are wont to do. It is rooted in the example of St. Paul. And, as we know from all the biographies of the pope, and from watching him these past years, it is a pedagogy that has allowed him to engage the culture in arresting and profound ways.

Compare this with the way Gomez denigrated social movements in a recent speech, calling them "pseudo-religions," influenced by ideas and theories that are "profoundly atheistic," akin to the Manichaeans in some, unflattering aspects and to the Gnostics in other, and, finally, that they are "also Pelagian, believing that redemption can be accomplished through our own human efforts, without God." If I could borrow a phrase from Spiro Agnew, the Gomez speech placed him among the "nattering nabobs of negativism."

> A faith-filled life is attractive to others in a way that can be called contagious.
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Or consider Barron. Back in 2012, he recorded these comments about "effective evangelization." I have trouble imagining Francis using that adjective, but no matter. Barron shows a video of New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan entering St. Patrick's and says: "He knows a great secret. The secret is the most effective way to evangelize is to share the contagious joy of being a friend of Jesus Christ."

Now, I do not disagree with that. A faith-filled life is attractive to others in a way that can be called contagious. But Barron then adds a comment that struck me when I first heard it — and strikes me still — as manipulative: "That's the opening move." Opening move? It is not only a one-way street, it is a one-way street in which the evangelizer is orchestrating the encounter entirely. Listen to the rest of the video and see if this manipulativeness is not evident.

You can go to the website of Catholic Answers, or watch almost any show on EWTN and you will find a similar approach to evangelization: We have the answers, and if people were not so easily duped by the evil of the world, they would recognize that we have the answers, embrace our answers, and submit.

Barron may have more joy in that video than Gomez managed in that dour speech, and both are more nuanced and complicated than most shows on EWTN, but the foundational problem is the same: There is no sense that God is already at work in the life of the other person, and the faith is presented as a series of propositions to which people are expected to give their assent.

Pope Francis arrives to lead a meeting with bishops, priests, religious, seminarians and catech

Pope Francis arrives to lead a meeting with bishops, priests, religious, seminarians and catechists at the Cathedral of St. Dionysius Dec. 4 in Athens, Greece. (CNS/Paul Haring)

To be sure, there are people who respond to a highly propositional approach. In his masterpiece *Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh has the novel's narrator, Charles Ryder, express wonderment at his friend Sebastian's Catholic faith. "No one had ever suggested to me that these quaint observances expressed a coherent philosophic system and intransigent historical claims." Waugh, like the novel's narrator, certainly conceived of the faith to which he converted as a "coherent philosophic system." But Francis — and Popes Benedict XVI, John Paul II and Paul VI

before him — conceives of the faith less as a system of thought and more as a way of life that springs forth from the event of Jesus' death and resurrection.

I confess I vacillate between the more affective and the more rationalistic poles of Catholicism. There really are "intransigent historical claims" at the heart of Catholicism and I get anxious when people treat the "coherent philosophic system" that characterized post-Tridentine Catholicism like putty or simply discard it as if it no longer had value.

Still, the greater danger is always the idolization of a particular iteration of Catholicism. Intellectual vacuity is a problem, but the creation of idols is a violation against the First Commandment.

Before I read the text of the pope's speech, I received an email from a priest friend, who wrote to me about his work with some young people in a coalition of groups that support immigrants in which he is the only faith leader in this mix.

"I have come to treasure these young people. And they know it," he wrote. "Lately, they have opened spaces for me to offer reflections. We shared a Henri Nouwen text one time. Recently, I gave them a Václav Havel quote on hope. Slowly they have opened a spiritual aspect that had been closed. The other day they were wishing somebody Happy Hannukah. On another day, one of them called on me and said how pleased she was as a Catholic to have 'our priest' with us. To me this is what accompaniment means. No sermons, no Communion texts, just staying in the room, affirming them. I see the human person is fundamentally spiritual and will open to that when the ground is open to them. Why are the restorationists so afraid of this secular world?"

He finished with a quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "Aurora Leigh":

> Earth's crammed with heaven,
>
> And every common bush afire with God;
>
> But only he who sees takes off his shoes,

Our wonderful pope did not literally take off his shoes when he greeted the migrants on Lesbos, or the Orthodox bishops in Athens and Nicosia, but he did so affectively. He reaches out to people like they are "afire with God." He looks out on the world

and sees more than doom; he sees an earth "crammed with heaven." He spreads the Gospel — he evangelizes — every time he spreads his arms to embrace another person as the child of God they already are.

This story appears in the **Francis in Cyprus and Greece** feature series. View the full series.