Opinion
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Pope Francis speaks during his general audience at the Vatican Jan. 12. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Pope Francis gave his annual address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See last week. Per usual, he recounted his trips, discussed the need to get everyone vaccinated against COVID, and highlighted problems like migration, conflict resolution and environmental protection that are dear to his heart.

The Holy Father also voiced his concerns with "cancel culture," specifically warning that, "Under the guise of defending diversity, it ends up cancelling all sense of identity, with the risk of silencing positions that defend a respectful and balanced understanding of various sensibilities. A kind of dangerous 'one-track thinking' [pensée unique] is taking shape, one constrained to deny history or, worse yet, to rewrite it in terms of present-day categories, whereas any historical situation must be interpreted in the light of a hermeneutics of that particular time, not that of today."

The New York Post was quick to call attention to the pope's words. "Pope Francis attacks cancel culture and its 'dangerous one-track thinking' " screamed their headline. "His warning also comes after protests across the US saw statues of historical figures removed or defaced," the article concluded. "Schools, hospitals and other buildings also saw their names changed to remove references to now-controversial historical figures."

That is true. It is also true that his warning came after breakfast, after Christmas, after the appointment of an interim prefect of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, after I made this scrumptious duck terrine and a bunch of other unrelated events. The pope was not endorsing the worldview of Laura Ingraham.

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What was he saying? I confess, his choice of words was opaque. But I think we can parse them so that they fit with his general approach to issues.

Francis warns against "cancelling all sense of identity" and suggests this is done "under the guise of defending diversity." He is identifying the problem of the relationship of the individual to the group or, relatedly, of the local to the universal, and it is a perennial issue that only the Catholic faith gets right consistently.

Identity politics and its cultural offshoots are all in some sense committed to the idea, first articulated by German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, that cultures are incommensurable. As my great mentor Leon Wieseltier, in his essay "Against Identity," acutely observed, "Identity is very social, but it is not very sociable. For the definition of the individual that it provides is not least a negative definition, a definition not only in terms of what one is, but also in terms of what one is not; and such a definition of the same will often be experienced by the other as a rejection. Identity is an insulation; a doctrine of aversion; an exaltation of impassability."

The Catholic Christian cannot accept, let alone exalt, impassability. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Or, as we sing at church some Sundays, “In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north, but one great fellowship of love, throughout the whole wide earth.”

But the universality of the Catholic Church subsists in its catholicity. The church is not properly understood as an international organization, in part because it is older than the nations. More importantly, catholicity means that the faith can spring up everywhere, in all continents and in all communities and in every kind of human heart. The faith is the same insofar as Christ is the same, "yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), but it is as varied as the human hearts in which it comes to birth.

It is why concepts like the common good, so central to Catholic social teaching, differ from Marxist ideas about class identity and also negate any libertarian hypervaluation of the individual. The common good is for each and for all. It cannot deny or denigrate the dignity of each individual person, but it demands that each individual person is misunderstood unless seen as part of the whole.

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Libertarians forget, and even denigrate, the social bonds that tie us one to another. Marxists forget, and even denigrate, the transcendent value of each and every human person over and against the forces of history. Only Catholic doctrine — both social and anthropological — gets the balance exactly right.

Vinson Cunningham, in an essay in Commonweal commenting on *Fratelli tutti* brilliantly elucidated these issues in the context of Pope Francis' work on the Aparecida document:

> *The document describes the need to cherish the "variety and wealth" of Latin America's indigenous and mixed-race cultures, and it laments the tendency of globalization and consumer culture to flatten and homogenize them. One of the great bogeymen of the document is a "cultural colonization" that acts as global capital's handmaiden, "spurning local cultures and tending to impose a uniform culture in all realms." But it also refuses to indulge any kind of provincialism, and is notably alert to the dangers of cultural stagnation; instead, the document insists on the possibility of fruitful exchanges between cultures, and on the need for groups to change, develop, and stretch toward harmony with others as*

> *history rolls forward. Cultures, just like the Church, aren't edifices rotting atop their foundations but boats stroking through time, charting their own irreproducible courses toward "a common historic destiny."*

The pope repeated his concern about cultural colonization in his speech last week, referencing specifically "ideological colonization." Such colonization is embedded not only in the ideology of global capitalism that rejects "the cultural roots that constitute the identity of many peoples," but also to ideologies that "reject the natural foundations of humanity," an obvious reference to the gender ideology the pope has condemned previously. How interesting that the pope's criticisms cut against both the left and the right in U.S. cultural politics!

The pope's mention of "one-track thinking" is, similarly, a reference to the ideological disposition to find simple answers, and preferably one answer, to complex problems. I will say it is always easy to spot an overly ideological effort: They have a leveling effect and they tend to become imperialistic, reaching beyond whatever original kernel of truth they might contain in ways that distort.

I want to give a big shout-out to the pope for the final sentence in this section of his speech, in which he applied that concern against ideological "one-track thinking" to history, saying it is "constrained to deny history or, worse yet, to rewrite it in terms of present-day categories, whereas any historical situation must be interpreted in the light of a hermeneutics of that particular time, not that of today." The scrupulous study of history is always an anecdote to ideology as I explained last year in my review of Michael Breidenbach's book *Our Dear-Bought Liberty: Catholics and Religious Toleration in Early America*. Such scrupulosity requires first and foremost that we consciously refrain from applying our own standards and worldviews on the people and ideas of epochs vastly different from our own.

The pope has repeatedly said that one of the touchstones of his intellectual approach is the belief that facts are more important than ideas. I do not think he was saying much more than that here. The rush by certain conservative media to claim the pope was seconding their views is laughable, not least because conservatives have a long track record of cancelling things to which they object.

Don't be fooled. This pope does not fit into America's ideological categories, and he never will. That is one of the best reasons to thank God for his leadership every day and twice on Sunday.