Opinion
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Pope Francis visits Casa Hogar el Buen Samaritano (Good Samaritan Home) in Panama City Jan. 27, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Tomorrow, the church of Rome will bury its bishop and the universal church will bid goodbye to its pastor. This much beloved pope will be laid to rest in his tomb in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore.

Can we hope that the criticisms of this pope will go into the grave with him?

There have been three primary types of criticism hurled at Pope Francis, and each betray something unhealthy in the human heart, something that resists the call of the Gospel, something that will likely outlast this pontificate and attach itself to any successor who is likely to emerge.

The first group of critics are those on the left who complained that Francis did not sufficiently embrace the progressivism of the age, specifically its celebration of personal autonomy as the hallmark of social justice and sexual freedom. This criticism was found among cultural elites, highly educated people, especially theologians and activists. Its idol was ideology.

The reactions to the document *Dignitas Infinita*, which looked at the ontological, moral, social and existential aspects of human dignity, manifested these criticisms from the left most clearly. The document recognized the centrality of gift and grace in any truly Christian anthropology. It did not address any of the issues from a pastoral dimension, but it did establish some theological guardrails to guide the church.

And it set off a firestorm of vehement objections. I was not surprised by the content of the objections, but by the slander directed at the pope and by the venom of the attacks. The critics put one in mind of the citizens of Nazareth who challenged Jesus' authority, asking, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" (John 6:42).

Such attacks will continue to be launched against the new pope, whoever he is. The Catholic Church will never embrace gender ideology.

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The second line of criticism flows from the failure to recognize the foundational role of compassion in any Christian social ethic. This is the criticism of the Trumpian apologists, men like JD Vance who mistakenly tried to latch onto the theological principle of an *ordo amoris* to justify the elimination of foreign aid programs. It is also the provenance of those apologists for free markets whose myths about the invisible hand are more dear to them than Christian belief in invisible grace.

One wonders: When Vance hears the parable of the good Samaritan, with which character does he identify? The innkeeper, who is just glad to get the extra revenue? The priest who walks by on the other side of the road?

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Finally, there is the most consistent group of critics, those who resented what they termed Francis' accommodations to the ambient culture. They erected two idols: one, the god of abstract, universal and Kantian moral clarity; and, two, the posture of resistance to the ambient culture, which they perceive as hostile to religion.

To be clear, there is much toxicity in the ambient culture, but the singular focus of these critics on sexual mores evidences a blindness to what impedes the preaching of the Gospel in our time. It is affluence that breeds the culture of indifference, dulls the moral senses, and turns would-be Catholics into so many young rich persons who still walk away sad (cf. Matthew 19:22). This is what unites the second and third groups of critics.

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This line of critique ran from the four cardinals who demanded clarifications from Francis in 2016 by submitting five *dubia* after the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*, to EWTN's Raymond Arroyo, and to countless conservative bloggers. They all accuse Francis of diluting church teaching in the name of pastoral solicitude and argue that a true pastor does not sugarcoat the truth, even hard truths.

A typical example was Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy's overheated response to *Fiducia Supplicans*, the Vatican document on blessings, including blessings on persons in same-sex unions. "Attempting immorally to exploit God's blessings makes

a mockery of his divine goodness and love," the priest, who once served as director of the U.S. bishops' doctrinal committee, fulminated on The Catholic Thing website.

Weinandy claimed this document was not really magisterial, because "any pontifical teaching or teaching from bishops that overtly and deliberately contradicts the perennial teaching of previous councils and pontiffs is not magisterial teaching, precisely because it does not accord with past magisterial doctrinal teaching."

The stance in this third category of critics is identical to that of the older son in the parable of the prodigal son. How dare you celebrate the prodigal's return? Where is my fatted calf?

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Francis was allergic to the idols of ideology, nation, money and Kantian certainty. He earned the criticisms he received. They will persist into the next pontificate because they are eternal temptations and, sadly, there will always be those who fail to grasp the unique liberation that comes from communion with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. They do not see what Thomas Merton saw when he entered the monastery, calling it "the four walls of my newfound freedom."

Of the three categories of criticism, it is the last, the resentment of God's grace bestowed on others of questionable moral virtue, that is most destructive to the proclamation of the Gospel. Francis understood that the parable of the prodigal is the one closest to the heart of the kerygma.

The great French convert and poet Charles Péguy also understood that the parable of the prodigal holds pride of place among the parables precisely because it eviscerates pride. Thinking about Francis' death and legacy this week, I returned to my copy of Péguy's epic poem "Portal of the Mystery of Hope" and found these words seem so apt for understanding Francis:

Innumerable men, from its first telling, innumerable Christians have cried over it.
(Unless they had a heart of stone.)
Have cried because of it.
Through the centuries men will cry.
Just by thinking about it, just by seeing it, who could,
Who could be capable of holding back their tears.
Through the centuries, through eternity men will cry over it; because of it.
Whether they be believers or unbelievers.
Through eternity, until judgment day.
Up to the judgment itself, through the judgment. And
It's the word of Jesus that has carried the farthest, my child.
It's the one that's had the greatest luck.
Temporal luck. Eternal luck.
It has awakened in the heart a certain point of resonance
A special resonance.
It has also been especially fortunate,
It's famous even among the impious.
It has found, even with them, a point of entry.
Alone perhaps it has remained driven into the heart of the impious
Like a nail of tenderness.
Then he said: A man had two sons.
And he who hears it for the hundredth time,
It's as if it were the first time.
That he heard it.
A man had two sons. It is beautiful in Luke. It is beautiful everywhere.

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.