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Pope Francis on Pelagians, Gnostics and the CDF

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, an unofficial transcript of a discussion the Holy Father had with six religious men and women from Latin America, the leadership of the Religious Confederation of Latin America and the Caribbean (CLAR), was published. The Holy See's spokesman offered "no comment" on the transcript which is to say it was reasonably accurate.

As stunning as the words the Holy Father spoke were, and they were stunning, it was the pictures of the meeting that demonstrated the first, and I believe significant, reform of the new papacy. The pope sat with his six guests in a circle. Yes, his chair had a higher back and he was dressed in the papal whites. But, clearly, this was a conversation, a discussion. He was not sitting apart on a throne, with his guests lined up in a row, single file, facing each other, hands folded on their laps. Everyone, including the pope, is leaning in, they are talking. The contrast with the pre-conclave General Congregations of cardinals, in which one cardinal after another got up and have a five minute speech, many of them repetitive and none of them followed by questions or probing or discussion, the contrast could not have been more clear.

The words the pope reportedly spoke indicate a more conversational style as well. And such words. He mentioned the possibility of the religious orders getting a note from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

"Say you err, [or] make a blunder ? it happens! Maybe you'll receive a letter from the Congregation for Doctrine [sic], saying that they were told this or that thing.... But don't let it bother you. Explain what you have to explain, but keep going forward.... Open doors, do something where life is calling out [to you].?"

Mind you, he did not say ignore the CDF, and he began his comment by assuming a mistake had been

made. Given the highly publicized CDF's doctrinal assessment of the U.S.'s Leadership Conference of Women Religious, it is safe to assume the Holy Father did not have a hypothetical situation in mind when he raised this possibility. What the pope brought to the exchange was, first, perspective and, second, a remedy. A note from the CDF is not the end of the world. Keep doing what you are doing, keep getting out into the world and bring Christ to the world. Correction? Yes, of course. But, no hostile takeovers appear imminent in this papacy.

The pope allowed that there were two situations that he said worried him. First, he spoke about 'restorationists' ? 'And you feel like you've gone back 60 years!?' ? one group of whom sent him after his election 3,525 rosaries. The pope said he was 'bothered' by this need to count prayers and labeled it 'pelagianism.' He went on to comment: 'these groups return to practices and disciplines I lived ? not you, none of you are old ? to things that were lived in that moment, but not now, they aren't today....?'

I have been told by a friend who has known the pope for some time that the best word to describe him is 'astute.' Here we see this astuteness on display. He looks at a current phenomenon, the restorationist movements, and discerns a certain pelagianism there, the tendency to think that it is we who earn our salvation, the counting of prayers, merit. And, furthermore, he notes that he is old enough to remember the practices and disciplines that these groups advocate, even though his guests are too young and many of the traditionalists who advocate these practices are too young to remember them, but that such practices 'aren't today.' Whatever else you think of the traditional Latin Mass, it is not a pastoral plan for the 21st century. I note in passing that yesterday the Holy Father received Cardinal Raymond Burke in audience. I wonder if Cardinal Burke wore his cappa magna and galero to the audience? And, I hope the pope is keeping a list of Burke's friends whom he has helped to foist on several cathedras through the country. If he lacks that list, I shall be happy to provide him with one.

The second worry the pope listed was gnosticism. He said:

The second [worry] is over a gnostic current. These pantheisms... they're both currents of elites, but this one is of a more formed elite. I knew of one superior general who encouraged the sisters of her congregation to not prayer in the morning, but to give themselves a spiritual bath in the cosmos, such things.... These bother me because they lack the Incarnation! And the Son of God who became our flesh, the Word made flesh, and in Latin America we have this flesh being shot from the rooftops! What happens to the poor, in their sorrows, that is our flesh.

Again, he discerns a current trend and places it within the context of history: This spiritualizing of nature and self are a form of gnosticism. He is also, as in the case of pelagianism, identifying not just a historical link, but identifying a perennial spiritual threat: All but the holiest among us have our pelagian moments and many, perhaps not most, have a certain tendency to gnosticism in our spiritual lives. But, then he does something that Pope Benedict would have done, but Benedict would have done it with a treatise and Francis does it with a phrase: 'These bother me because they lack the Incarnation!....What happens to the poor, in their sorrows, that is our flesh.' He confronts the pantheisms of the day not with a theory but an event, the Incarnation, and further indicates that we encounter the Incarnation, the flesh of God, amidst the poor. Against the fuzzy spiritualities of gnosticism, Francis reminds his interlocutors, and the rest of us, about the tactileness of our Creed.

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The new pope continues to astound. His simplicity allows his rock solid faith to shine through in ways that are at once attractive and challenging. He is certainly not an 'anything goes' theologian, but he is

also so obviously disinclined to wave a finger, or bemoan the Church's circumstance, or whine about anything: Have a problem? Remember the Incarnation by going out amongst the poor. It is a simple message from a man of simple tastes who is, himself, no simpleton but a man schooled in the life of the spirit, the theology of the ages, and, as my friend says, an astute sense of people and situations. You can sense the contagion in people's voices, but you can bet there are grumblings among some in the hierarchy who can feel the sand shifting beneath their feet. Let them grumble. (And let's make sure Francis has a food taster!) But, my hope is that people will stop grumbling and follow the pope's advice: Go meet Christ amidst the poor and follow Him, wherever He leads. It is a simple message. It is an apostolic message. It brings to mind the words of the Gospel of Matthew, 7:28-29: "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching. For he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."

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