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Conservative Catholics 'have not been really happy'

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 24, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

My colleague John Allen's interview [1] with Archbishop Charles Chaput is fascinating in several regards. As Allen notes, God bless Chaput for giving voice to what others are thinking but reluctant to say.

The most important thing Chaput said about Pope Francis was this:

> This is already true for the right wing of the church. They generally have not been really happy about his election, from what I've been able to read and understand. He'll have to care for them, too, so it will be interesting to see how all this works out in the long run.

Setting aside the fact that I do not recall Archbishop Chaput voicing the expectation that Popes John Paul II or Benedict XVI would have to care for those mostly on the left who were "not really happy" about their elections, I wonder what Archbishop Chaput has been reading and what he has been trying to understand? What, in short, makes the right wing of the church so unhappy with this new pope?

The central, overarching theme of the pontificates of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI was the new evangelization, an effort to reignite an appreciation among the Catholic faithful for the core tenets of the faith and, with that, a renewed sense of missionary zeal for Western cultures that have grown "forgetful of God," as Benedict used to say. Both popes had much to say on this topic, but it seems Pope Francis is the one who is actually walking the new evangelization walk.

Pastors around the world are reporting increased levels of Mass attendance and more frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation. Is this not what conservative Catholics have been calling for these past few decades?

There are numerous reports from Brazil this week, man- and woman-on-the-street interviews with people, especially young people, who were previously alienated from the church but are now giving her a second look. All of them cite something Pope Francis said or did as the reason for their renewed interest. (Kudos to my old friend Miguel Marquez at CNN for a wonderful story on the excitement Pope Francis is generating in Brazil.) Is not this renewed interest in the church precisely what the new evangelization aimed to achieve?

Why, then, would conservative Catholics be so upset? If what they wanted all along is coming to fruition, why the long faces? The answer is simple, and Archbishop Chaput's guarded, even grudging, comments about Pope Francis point us to the reason: Pope Francis, within a matter of months, has destroyed the prevailing narratives about secularization and Catholic identity among Catholic conservatives, and he has done so without even trying.

Pope Francis does not speak about a "smaller, purer church." There is not a Jansenist bone in his body. He certainly calls, almost daily, for a purer church, for one filled with Christians who are energized by their faith, and he certainly encourages all Catholics to avoid the temptation to be "part-time Christians." But the purer

church of which Francis speaks is not smaller; it is not an elite consisting of those who are rock solid against same-sex marriage. It is a church in which everyone is trying to become a better Christian, to focus more intensely on the Lord's promises, especially his promise of mercy. Francis does not focus on the sin of men; he focuses on the mercy of God. Consequently, his call to conversion of heart is encountered not as a chastisement, not as a finger-wagging exercise, but as an encouragement. It helps, too, that Pope Francis always includes himself and the clergy in this call to conversion.

Pope Francis does not present himself as a culture warrior, though some of his remarks about economic realities are quite trenchant. You cannot mistake him for a politician. He never speaks as if he just got off the phone with Professor Robert George or Mr. George Weigel and is parroting their talking points. Pope Francis seems to have internalized an observation made by Cardinal Francis George that, in order to evangelize a culture, you must first love that culture, an observation that Cardinal George wrote but has been unable to get his conservative intellectual friends to grasp.

Pope Francis also does not bask in nostalgia for a supposed Golden Age of Catholicism that, in fact, never existed, even when our seminaries were full and the pastors could not build the Catholic schools fast enough. Quite the contrary. Pope Francis has spoken explicitly against those who wish to live the world of 40 years ago. He never urges the faithful to go backward, always forward, and he has been equally outspoken in reassuring the faithful, especially the clergy, that it is better to move into the future and risk making mistakes than to become "self-referential," a recipe the pope rightly says leads to a church that is sick.

How has Pope Francis expressed his own understanding of the new evangelization? First, I would point to the daily Mass homilies. The pope let it be known that he did not plan to travel as frequently as his predecessors, but with modern means of communication, he is reaching out to the faithful every day with these small, intensely penetrating sermons. Not only the content, but the format is important. Within days of his election, when he stood on the steps of the Church of Santa Anna greeting the parishioners, I said he was becoming the "parish priest to the world." These small homilies have only confirmed that comment and, more importantly, confirmed every parish priest in the world in the importance and possibilities of their ministry.

His gestures of simplicity have also gone a long way toward enfleshing the new evangelization in this new pontificate. When he calls on priests to adopt more simple lifestyles and says it breaks his heart when he sees a priest with a newest-model car, his words resonate in part because of the pictures we have seen of him on the bus with the cardinals the day of his election, and now, in that small Honda driving into Rio de Janeiro. His preference for simple vestments also strikes home: It is difficult to speak convincingly about poverty when wearing a 3-foot-tall, Pius XII-style miter. I have seen this before in the last 10 years in Boston, where the simplicity of Cardinal Sean O'Malley has changed hearts and minds, lowered interpersonal barriers and made it easier for people to look past their pastor to the one whom that pastor serves. Simplicity of deed evidences a simplicity of heart.

And what a heart! Pope Francis is not afraid to let the world see how the suffering of others moves him. We see this when he stops the popemobile as it goes round St. Peter's Square to hold a child who is disabled in some way. We saw it in his decision to go to Lampedusa, his first visit outside Rome, to be with the migrants who have braved the crossing from Africa and to mourn those who died in the attempt. When Pope Francis speaks about the need for solidarity with the poor, his words are not buried in a complicated text, nor can they be dismissed as the work of lefty speech writers at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. When the pope is speaking without a text, as he does in those morning homilies, red and gold pens are of no use. The pope's concern for the poor resonates within the Catholic imagination not only because of the great saints who were raised to the dignity of the altar on account of their work among the poor, most obviously his namesake, Francis. This concern for the poor resonates because it is the concern that Jesus showed when he walked the earth.

In a word, this pope is very good at making us Catholics sense the dogmatic fact of the Incarnation. Last month, I had an interview with Bishop Jaime Soto [2] about the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the U.S. bishops' principal antipoverty program. In that interview, he said of the work that CCHD does, "I think so much of what the church does here and throughout the world is making the Incarnation happen again." That is what Pope Francis so obviously does: He makes the Incarnation happen again. Put differently, he is apostolic, carrying on the work and preaching the words of the Word made flesh. That is why Pope Francis is making the new evangelization a reality, not a bumper sticker.

I do not wish to diminish the work of Francis' predecessors. As regular readers know, I have a great affection for Pope Benedict and I am not unaware of Pope John Paul II's gifts, either. I can say without qualification that Benedict's writings have brought me closer to the Lord. But I can also see why Pope Benedict left some people cold who now find themselves warming to Francis. Let us take one seemingly counterintuitive example. Pope Benedict used to distribute Communion to the faithful at Mass. Pope Francis does not do so. But at Benedict's Masses, the people receiving Communion from the pope came up to the altar, knelt on a prie-dieu, and received the sacred host. Benedict wanted to send a message, no doubt, that there is nothing casual about receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, but the message he really sent was that you had better kneel when taking Communion from the hand of the pope while everyone else at these large Masses has to climb over their neighbors to get to the aisle so they can have a sacred host handed to them over someone else's shoulder. Francis takes himself out of the equation entirely, goes and sits down, and lets others distribute communion. Both methods wanted to keep the focus on Christ, but I would submit that Pope Francis' style is the more effective.

It matters, too, that Pope Francis is not a theologian. He is a pastor. He has a pastor's touch, and you could see that the night he first came out onto the loggia, when he invited the crowd to join him in the "Our Father," "Hail Mary" and "Glory Be," prayers that even the children would know. It is no slight against Benedict to point out that he had a desk job for 25 years before his election, and I thought he made the transition from doctrinal enforcer to supreme pastor with grace and dignity. (That transition, you will recall, provoked "palpable unease" among the same Catholic conservatives who now are not "really happy" with Pope Francis!) But the pastoring comes as second nature to Papa Bergoglio. He is less Paul than Peter.

I have related this before, but it seems a good point on which to close. When I bring a friend to St. Peter's for the first time, of course I try to give the grand tour of that impressive basilica's architectural and artistic wonders. But as we near the confessio, I ask them to reflect on this point. There, under the altar, are the bones of the man who was Jesus' best friend when he walked the earth. The thought is almost unimaginable, to be Jesus' best friend. And when we say this pope was a good one or that pope was a bad one, what we usually mean is that they did, or did not, show themselves to be a friend of Jesus. Every pope in my lifetime, and Francis is the sixth, has had a very different personality from the others, and all have showed themselves in different ways to be a

friend to Jesus. But, what excites many of us Catholics today about Pope Francis, and something that I suspect escapes Archbishop Chaput and some of his fellow conservative prelates, is that it is easier for the flock of Christ to discern that their pastors are friends of Jesus when those pastors are actually friendly. It seems a small thing, does it not? But I think the main reason people are responding with love and affection for Pope Francis is that he is so obviously welcoming them with love and affection. Look at the video from his first night in Rio. He looked nonplussed as the national anthems played, but when people came up to greet him afterward, his whole demeanor was cheerful. This pope lets people see that he likes them. "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son." Pope Francis is "making the Incarnation happen again," in Bishop Soto's happy phrase. And the world today, as 2,000 years ago, is responding. If the right wing of the church is unhappy about this, that is a question for themselves and their confessors, not for Pope Francis.

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