

Parsing the Pope

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 5, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

It would be amusing, if it were not so sad, to see many conservative Catholics attempt to qualify Pope Francis' comment - "who am I to judge?" when asked about the circumstance of a Vatican prelate against whom charges of homosexual conduct were leveled.

There have been many superficial reactions focusing on the public relations angle. [There is Raymond Arroyo](#) [1], for whom public relations is more his thing than theology, writing, "The entire episode reminds us that papal handlers do have their place. As cumbersome as they are, and as much as they distance the pontiff from his people, handlers can protect the pope from this sort of misinterpretation. Off-the-cuff, vigorous expressions have their place, but so do unambiguous, vetted statements - especially when dealing with a media unversed in Church teaching." No fear that Arroyo will take to heart the pope's repeated urgings to risk making a mistake in order to get out to the peripheries of life.

More troubling have been the reactions of some bishops. Emblematic would be [the statement issued by San Francisco's Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone](#) [2]. Among other things, he stated:

While the Church does not judge individuals, the Church does judge actions, for we know that some acts violate human dignity while others make us more truly human according to the image in which God originally made us. With regard to sexual acts, the Church has always faithfully taught, and always will, the teaching she has received from her Lord, namely, that they find their proper order and purpose within the marital union of husband and wife, and outside of the bond of marriage they are sinful. Both natural and revealed law teach us this truth. While everyone struggles with this to some degree, healthy societies encourage and support people to live in accordance with it.

Here is a man who clearly thinks that his primary duty as pastor is to defend the moral law. Certainly, his words do not suggest he has ever talked to gay people and acquired the "smell of the sheep" from them. In an early section of the statement, in which he affirms the dignity of all people, including gay people, there is a lack of human warmth that is astounding.

If you look around, who can deny that the moral law could use a little help? In the last century, the indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations became accepted practice, and this before the dreaded 60s. And, to be sure, the sexual revolution of the 60s brought more harm than liberation for most people. But, in the U.S., for a variety of reasons, morality has been reduced to sexual morality and it seems to be the only thing some bishops want to fret about. Still, the question remains: Is defending and articulating the moral law the principal job of a bishop?

In the Scriptures, Jesus proclaims the advent of the Kingdom of God and, with it, divine judgment too. He was never shy about raising the specter of judgment, although He tended to reserve the severest admonitions for those who put their trust in money. More importantly, Jesus called His disciples not just to a strict moral life,

but to a prior stance towards other human beings, especially those in need, and reserved to Himself the judgment of others, a judgment He dispenses with great mercy: "Than neither do I condemn you," he said to the woman caught in the act of adultery.

The early Church was certainly aware of the need for the moral law, but that concern did not dominate the early Church. They wrestled most intently with making sense of who Jesus was, and what His death and resurrection meant. The early Church took pains not to suggest they were subversive, as when St. Paul affirmed that all authority is from God or when the Christian community in Jerusalem, which was very different from Paul's communities of Christians in the Hellenic world, nonetheless abandoned Jerusalem when the Jewish revolt against Rome began. But, the willingness to conform had limits: The early Church abhorred the practice of abortion and infanticide, which were quite common, and in a culture that practiced easy divorce, the early Church insisted on a strict following of the Master's admonitions against divorce.

In the Middle Ages, much was written about usury. It is an interesting window into the values of that time that the canons of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris forbid bankers to donate money to the construction until they had made restitution of their ill-gotten gains, but allowed the prostitutes of the city to contribute because they had earned their money. The Church's opposition to usury developed as the economic circumstances had changed: In order to preserve the concern against exploitation of the poor, the Church came to permit limited interest charges on lending. The next time someone tells you that the application of a teaching cannot change, ask them when was the last time they heard a sermon against usury. There is a vestige of that teaching, however, in the Church's concern that the debt of poorer nations is oppressive.

In our modern world, religion is usually permitted to enter the public square provided it leave its dogma at the door and assume the stance of an ethical authority. Time and again, the writings of the late Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel and Mary Eberstadt make the case that a nation cannot govern itself unless its citizenry is capable of self-governance. There is obviously something to this, as the exploits of Anthony Weiner demonstrate. But, there is complicity with modernity at work here, a complicity with dreadful consequences: The Church's authority is rooted in the authority of Christ. If we set aside our teachings about him out of concern for pluralism, and assume the role of an ethical authority, the consequent teachings must stand on their own, and they were never meant to, and they must persuade on their own, and they don't.

There is a strange Kantian influence here as well. A dear priest friend, who is a font of wisdom in the ways of the Spirit, wrote to me this weekend about Archbishop Cordileone's statement. My friend, let us call him "the Fons," suggested that it was bizarre to state "that we don't judge people but we judge actions. Actions are done by people so how can you not really judge an action without some of the judgment falling on the person?" The pope of course did not make this distinction because he saw that mercy has to enter into the equation and also because the pope is not a Kantian, living in a world of intellectual distinctions, the sum of which do not add up to reality. The Fons recalled Peguy's observation that Kant's hands were clean because he had no hands, that is, he lived at the level of abstract principles and did not concern himself with the messiness of actual moral decision-making. Whatever else he was, Kant was not a pastor.

There is a strange, regrettable, self-secularization at work in all this. In his book 'Secularisation,' Edward Norman made the point that more worrisome than the secularization of the ambient culture is the way religious leaders have willingly imbibed the habits and categories of thought drawn from the secular realm. A religious leader who presents himself primarily as a defender of the moral law has accepted secular norms in restricting his ministry. The leaders of the Church must be ministers of God's mercy as much as they are teachers of the moral law. That, it seems to me is the essence of what Pope Francis is trying to tell the entire Church, but especially the clergy. Francis is trying to re-establish the authority of Jesus by following His admonition to leave the judging to God. Fr. Jim Martin, S.J. had [a fine essay in yesterday's Washington Post](#) [3] on just this subject.

Instead of trying to parse the new pope's words in ways that empty them of their content, I suggest that those bishops who are wrestling with how to respond to Pope Francis' way of leading the Church be quiet for bit. Watch. Listen. You might learn something. Pope Francis is getting us back to the basics of discipleship. When he stated, 'who am I to judge?' he was not overturning 2,000 years of moral teaching but he was inviting Christians to place themselves in the crowd, stones in hand, gathered around the woman caught in adultery, and to listen to the words of the Master: 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.'

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[1] <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/the-messy-alluring-grace-of-pope-francis>

[2] <http://www.sfarchdiocese.org/about-us/news/2013/Statement-of-Most-Reverend-Salvatore-Cordileone-3764/>

[3] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/pope-francis-the-merciful/2013/08/02/14d22cec-fafd-11e2-a369-d1954abcb7e3_story.html