

Pope Francis and the three temptations of the church

Thomas Reese | Aug. 13, 2013

Analysis

The church faces three temptations, according to Pope Francis: the temptation to turn the Gospel message into an ideology; the temptation to run the church like a business; and the temptation of clericalism. In an [address July 28 to the episcopal council of CELAM](#) [1], the Latin American conference of bishops, Pope Francis laid out these temptations and how the church should respond to them. [I began to look at the issue last week](#) [2]; this week, I continue the analysis.

Making the Gospel message an ideology

This temptation, the pope argues, has been present in the church from the beginning. It attempts to interpret the Gospel apart from the church or the Gospel itself. Francis says you must look at the Gospel with the eyes of a disciple. There is no such thing as "antiseptic" hermeneutics.

Other forms of the ideological temptation include sociological reductionism and psychologizing. The first interprets the Gospel message through the lens of social science, whether from a Marxist or libertarian perspective. Here, the Gospel is manipulated for political reasons. It is a temptation of both the right and the left to use the Gospel to serve political goals. Fear of this temptation probably led Francis to be cautious toward liberation theology while at the same time very negative toward libertarian capitalism.

The temptation to psychologize the faith, on the other hand, is individualistic. "Here we have to do with elitist hermeneutics which ultimately reduces the 'encounter with Jesus Christ' and its development to a process of growing self-awareness." This is a self-centered spirituality that "has nothing to do with transcendence and consequently, with missionary spirit."

Although he does not mention it, another danger of this temptation is that it fosters a passive, "feel-good" spirituality rather than an active spirituality that works to make the world a better place. He believes this kind of self-centered spirituality can be found even in spirituality courses and spiritual retreats.

Related to this self-centered spirituality is the temptation to the Gnostic solution. "It is ordinarily found in elite groups offering a higher spirituality, generally disembodied," he says. Gnosticism first appeared among early Christians, and it reappears throughout the church's history in new and revised versions. "Generally its adherents are known as 'enlightened Catholics' (since they are in fact rooted in the culture of the Enlightenment)."

The reference to the Enlightenment makes it clear he believes this is the temptation of liberal Catholics. They end up "in a preoccupation with certain pastoral *quaestiones disputatae*" (disputed questions), which he does not list. Would these disputed questions include things like women priests and birth control?

The final ideological temptation is the Pelagian solution. The Pelagians believed sanctity was the result of human effort without God's aid. This is the temptation of conservative Catholics to "a form of restorationism." They seek a "purely disciplinary solution" to the church's problems "through the restoration of outdated manners

and forms which, even on the cultural level, are no longer meaningful." One can see why Francis rejected the grandiose papal apparel.

In Latin America, he says this restorationism is found "in tendencies to doctrinal or disciplinary 'safety' " in small groups and even some new religious communities. But he sees this approach a "static" and regressive process that "seeks to 'recover' the lost past." As archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Jorge Bergoglio was no fan of the Tridentine Mass and did not allow it until it was mandated by Pope Benedict for the entire church.

Functionalism

The second temptation of the church is to functionalism, which Pope Francis believes has the effect of paralyzing the church. "More than being interested in the road itself, it is concerned with fixing holes in the road." It "has no room for mystery; it aims at efficiency." This is the temptation of church bureaucrats. "It reduces the reality of the church to the structure of an (nongovernmental organization). What counts are quantifiable results and statistics." Francis does not want the church to end up "being run like any other business organization."

Clericalism

The last temptation of the church is to clericalism, which, as its name implies, is a particular temptation for bishops and priests, but Francis argues that often, the laity is complicit. "The priest clericalizes the layperson and the layperson kindly asks to be clericalized because deep down it is easier." He believes that "the phenomenon of clericalism explains, in great part, the lack of maturity and Christian freedom in a good part of the Latin American laity."

Freedom of the laity, he argues, "finds expression in communal experiences: Catholic as community." Greater autonomy, which on the whole he believes is a "healthy thing," is expressed through popular piety. "The spread of bible study groups, of ecclesial basic communities and of pastoral councils," he says, is also "helping to overcome clericalism and to increase lay responsibility." Liberal clericalism can disdain popular piety while conservative clericalism fears giving the laity a greater role in the church.

Although these were presented as temptations for the Latin American church, it is obvious that they are universal. They are alive and well in Rome and in the United States.

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