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Right-wing complainers about Pope Francis need to understand who's healthy

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

The keen observer of all things ecclesiastical, David Gibson, tells us that Pope Francis has unsettled and divided those who designate themselves as traditional or right-wing Catholics.

Just when Pope Benedict XVI had reassured traditionalist Catholics that his reform of the reform would overturn the Second Vatican Council and make it safe for them to stay out of the sanctuary and yield it to the clerical culture cardholders who, backs turned to the faithful, could make the Mass mysterious again by mumbling it in Latin, along comes Pope Francis who, to traditionalists' horror and discomfort, is recalling the church to Vatican II and emphasizing its themes.

Philadelphia's arch-conservative archbishop, Charles Caput, is uncomfortable with the idea that Pope Francis' election has rendered Pope Benedict XVI's return to Vatican I kaput. He sounds, according to Gibson, surprised and somewhat hurt that the new pope did not, like the resigned one, sign on to Blessed Pope John Paul II's efforts to restore the faith to the stiffness that marked the vestments and customs of pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

Catholics on "the right wing of the church," Chaput said as Pope Francis prepared to leave for World Youth Day in Brazil, "have not been really happy about (Francis') election," and sounding, as Charles J. Reid Jr. observes, like the prodigal son's brother who despite his goodness didn't get a good seat at the party, insists Francis "will have to take care for them, too, so it will be interesting to see how all that turns out in the long run."

The short run has certainly upset many Catholic conservatives. Catholic World News, for example, reported that "traditionalist Catholics were dismayed by the decision of Pope Francis to include young

women in the traditional foot-washing ritual at the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday."

Distinguished traditional Catholic Jeffrey Mirus immediately issued a multipage analysis to calm the Catholics who felt the new pope violated the "mandatum," as the foot-washing ritual is known, and revealed his "true colors," those of Vatican II rather than Vatican I.

Mirus reassures Catholics that the pope's modification of the men-only foot washing is within his power but concludes, like a juror still holding out, "whether the pope intends to change the norm remains to be seen." But the men's-feet-only mandatum, he insists, remains officially in place.

Other well-known traditionalists, such as Cardinal Raymond Burke, have hurried to reassure Catholics that Pope Francis' liturgical practices -- his preference for simplicity, for example, has disturbed lovers of Vatican I ornate -- are really in perfect conformity with those of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

However, others remain so shaken by a pope who moves out of the papal apartments and personally schedules his own appointments that they have suggested conspiracy theories that rank right up there with the grassy knoll hypothesis of President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

It is hard to say whether this is frightening or hilarious, but Elizabeth Scalia at First Things suggests Francis is manipulating the press to insinuate Catholic teaching into mainstream press reports. Her wily Francis is a closet conservative, getting the press to lower its guard so he can get the fullest exposure for the conservative convictions he holds in secret. Scalia compares this papal approach to Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

George Weigel, biographer of Pope John Paul II and well-known promoter of 19th-century Catholicism, was set to win the Timing is Everything Award: His new book on evangelical Catholicism was scheduled to appear at the flowering of Pope Benedict XVI's reinterpretation of Vatican II. But Benedict resigned, Francis is here, and Weigel's book seems anachronistic in its proposals. The wonderful madness of his ideal evangelical Catholicism drifts on the wind of his proposal that all priests everywhere be allowed to face the people only when preaching and, their backs turned to the people, regularly say Mass facing Jerusalem, toward the East whence Christ will come again.

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Your witness; we have no further questions. Weigel's timing does not serve his vision of an evangelical Catholicism.

Pope Francis, however, arrived just in time to arrest such nostalgic flights back to the storied glory of a Catholicism that never existed. Pope Francis must be doing something right to cause so many traditionalists to lose their theological balance in criticizing him. His-not-so-secret weapon is his fundamental healthiness.

His healthiness is like the sun toward which healthy people turn naturally when it disperses the gloomy darkness of the long, cold winter. This may upset those, like Archbishop Chaput and various Catholic observers, who prefer the stay-at-home weather of a church that turns in chilled fear away from the world. There is nothing to be afraid of, the healthy Francis says, in the world the church is called to serve in joy. That is the equivalent of saying "Follow me," the irresistible invitation of Jesus himself.

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