

The Pope's Remarkable Interview

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 20, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

Like Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, RI, I am disappointed with Pope Francis. The release of his interview for a group of Jesuit magazines prevented me from enjoying my nap yesterday as the phone rang off the hook. As I said to one friend, "my butt is sore from falling out of my chair as I read through the text."

Of course, the mainstream media focused immediately on the Pope's explaining why he has not spoken much about abortion, same sex marriage and contraception. Conservative complaints to the contrary, that probably is the lede here precisely because it is such a break from the stance of so many U.S. bishops and from the bishops as a body. Remember, this interview was given before Bishop Tobin published his article expressing his disappointment that Francis did not spend more time talking about abortion. Tobin is not alone. We did not have a Fortnight for Immigration Reform or a Fortnight against Poverty or, perhaps what Francis would really like, a Fortnight for Mercy. As one wag said yesterday, "Has anybody checked the roof at the USCCB, because I am pretty sure the fifth floor just went through it."

Pope Francis' comments are not such a break from the teaching and theology of Pope Benedict. One of the central intellectual concerns of Joseph Ratzinger and, as well, the entire *Communio* project, was to end the manner in which modernity sought to reduce our religion to ethics. That reduction has been a principal concern of mine at this blog. Pope Francis says it neatly: "The dogmatic and moral teachings of the Church are not all equivalent. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the Church is likely to fall like a house of cards. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow. The message of the Gospel, therefore, is not to be reduced to some aspects that, although relevant, on their own do not show the heart of the message of Jesus Christ." Again, when Robbie George devised the "five non-negotiables" for the Church in the public square, was that not precisely the reduction of religion to ethics (and to politics) that the pope is here warning against? Was one of those "non-negotiables" the "mercy of God"?

My favorite part of the interview, however, came when the Holy Father discusses certitude and mistakes. Francis states, "Yes, in this quest to seek and find God in all things there is still an area of uncertainty. There must be. If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. Our life is not given to us like an opera libretto, in which all is written down; but it means going, walking, doing, searching, seeing.... We must enter into the adventure of the quest for meeting God; we must let God search and encounter us."

Oh, my. How is one not to understand this but as a rebuke to a certain style of culture warrior bishop of the kind we find so prominent here in the U.S. I read those words and my first thought was of Bishop Olmsted in Phoenix, issuing a two page statement revoking St. Joseph Hospital's right to call itself Catholic and declaring that Sr. Margaret McBride had excommunicated herself because the hospital had permitted a procedure Olmsted believed was an abortion. I actually think the hospital may have made the wrong call in that case, but what I remember most was that Olmsted's statement mentioned canon law two or three times and the ethical directives

of the USCCB a few times. It did not once mention the mercy of Jesus Christ.

I read these words of Pope Francis, and I think of the outrageous sermon delivered by Archbishop William Lori when he took possession of his see. The whole event had the flavor of a campaign rally. In his sermon, Lori did not preach Christ and Him crucified but James Madison and him justified. It was appalling. Not only was the moral analysis ?certain? the political response was ?certain? too. Lori had mastered the riddles of salvation history, distilled the ethical and legal rules, and the only challenge that remained was the challenge of politics, and he shared his thoughts on that as he spoke his manifesto.

I read these words and I think of the tortured arguments that led the bishops to oppose the Affordable Care Act. I read these words and wonder what the pope must think of the bishops? campaign against the HHS mandate, not so much the legal merits, but what such a large focus on such a small issue betrays about the spiritual health, the spiritual maturity of the American hierarchy. I read these words and I think of all the insulting blog posts written about Notre Dame when it invited President Obama to speak at their graduation. I read these words and I think of all the times that devoted sons and daughters of the Church like Sr. Carol Keehan and Professor Stephen Schneck and those of us here at NCR have been called bad Catholics, or cafeteria Catholics, or Catholic Lite, because they, and we, did not jump on the culture war bandwagon, and now the reservations they and we voiced are precisely those we now find spoken by our Holy Father.

I read these words and I find myself overjoyed that the Holy Spirit was so active in the Sistine Chapel last March. I wonder, really I do, just how different the USCCB meeting will feel this November. Do they grasp how much this pope is challenging their way of doing business, their oh, so American tendency to reduce religion to ethics, thence to legalism, finally to politics? Do they realize that in addition to taking a call from Mr. Weigel or Professor George or Bill Donohue, perhaps they should reach out to some of us who resist the effort to turn the Church into an agent of the culture wars and an arm of the Republican Party? Lord, how I wish the ad liminas were scheduled for next year!

This pope is clearly not backing down. He notes that he was ?reprimanded? for not talking more about abortion, same sex marriage and contraception, but he then reiterates his prior stance. And, frankly, I would not mind hearing the pope speak more about these things because he speaks about them so differently from the way we are accustomed to hearing them spoken about: no condemnation, no fetish for certainty, no exclamation points around the rules. Pope Francis speaks about other people as a pastor should speak about them, as children of God. He shares his own struggles, opens up his own faith journey, and the effect is dazzling. I am reminded of what Chesterton said: ?A century or two hence Spiritualism may be a tradition and Socialism may be a tradition and Christian Science may be a tradition. But Catholicism will not be a tradition. It will still be a nuisance and a new and dangerous thing.? Pope Francis is reminding us, all of us, that our faith is new and dangerous. His words are not the words of someone who has withdrawn from the world but of one who has been schooled in the ways of grace by walking in the world, by risking himself in the world, by giving himself to others. He wants us to be uncomfortable, as Christians should be uncomfortable, in this vale of tears, and he makes it easier to be so by sharing his own uncomfortability. In Pope Francis, we find a pastor, to be sure, but we find something else too, we find an apostle, someone who credibly witnesses to the empty tomb. It is breathtaking.