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Francis is leading us back to core Christianity

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The Francis Chronicles

Everyone is rightly talking about the extensive interview Pope Francis had with the editor of the Italian Jesuit magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which was published last week.

It is truly a remarkable interview, and Catholics and non-Catholics alike were shocked and amazed by many of the statements attributed to Pope Francis. In one way, however, the more amazing thing is that we should be surprised. Why should it be so surprising for this pope or any pope to express the core beliefs of our faith? Why is it shocking for a pope to say that the central message of our faith is found in how we treat one another? John's epistle tells us that Christians can be identified by how they love one another.

You can also find this kind of rhetoric from almost any pope, bishop or pastor. Pope John Paul II constantly focused on the worth, dignity and value of every individual. Yet what is different today is that no one doubts that this pope means it, that he lives it every day. To say you care about the poor while you live a life of luxury doesn't carry the same impact for people. Francis keeps reminding us that we need pastors and bishops who are living with the people and are avoiding the trappings of power.

Despite the ongoing rhetoric on the value of each individual, we have failed to demonstrate our awareness of this value in our treatment of gays, the poor and others with whom we disagree. This pope seems to expect all of us to follow through on what we are saying. The fact that we are so amazed by this interview demonstrates how far we have strayed from the original message of Jesus and the Gospel. This interview highlights the challenges the church faces in reconnecting to its people.

One major problem, I believe, is that as Catholics, we have been led to commit ourselves more to an institution than to following Christ. We have identified ourselves as Catholics more strongly than we have identified as Christians. Following the rules of the church and doing what the hierarchy tells us to do have

been the hallmark of being Catholic. Catholics in general are more likely to know what color vestments the priest wears at Mass during Lent than what Jesus had to say during the Sermon on the Mount. Yet our religion is not about fidelity to an institution but about our faith and acceptance of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Francis is reminding us of what is expected of the Christian. He speaks in simple biblical categories and tells us stories like Jesus. We are reminded that sounding erudite or impressing people with our ability to enunciate the finer points of canon law is not what being a Christian is all about. It is, in fact, a rigid doctrinal bent that has failed to connect with the faithful. Francis says, "If a person ... is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good."

We have endowed the church with such an aura of perfection that it is almost impossible to criticize it for its flaws. Dialogue or dissent cannot be utilized to help the church be better. The bishops of the Second Vatican Council understood this problem and began speaking of the church as the People of God on a journey rather than the body of Christ. While Pius XII's focus on the mystical body of Christ highlights a beautiful metaphor based on the words of St. Paul, it nonetheless has made it difficult to introduce reform into the church. As members of Christ's body, we can't very well be imperfect.

The church has become too much of a bureaucratic institution known for its fiats and anathemas -- but this has separated us from our mission. Anyone daring to speak a word of compassion for others has been immediately attacked by the Catholic thought police for failing to clearly affirm Catholic doctrine. The church stands prepared to criticize and condemn every questionable action or statement immediately. We have become the gatekeeper of right and wrong, and in so doing, have divorced ourselves from all the richness contained in Catholicism and Christianity.

Arrogant insistence on not just the truth of what we believe but also the necessity that everyone else must believe the same thing has returned us to a medieval notion of authority in the church. It has fostered an inability to understand that other people of goodwill can differ in what they believe. Free will and freedom of conscience demand that we accept the fact that others can and will disagree. People not only have a right to disagree, they need to be allowed to disagree.

Our religious leaders have much to answer for and much they could improve upon. Fortunately, they are also among those that the Lord loves. Pope Francis is leading us on a journey of renewal and a return to the message of the Gospels. There are signs that others, including the clergy, are beginning to respond to that message. It will not be an easy or quick journey, but the Holy Spirit is still present in the church.

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