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Pope Francis calls us to be truly Christian

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I believe Pope Francis is working hard to convey an important message to Catholic clergy and laity. That message has not yet been fully understood. That is because we are all busy trying to parse the pope's words to fit into what we want to hear. Conservatives are eager to explain that the pope really hasn't said anything different and doesn't really mean what it sounds like he means. Liberals are desperately trying to find hints of change on issues that are important to them.

Yet Pope Francis is interested in making a very different point. He is trying to reteach us what it really means to be Christian. He is talking about our relationships with others. He is reminding us that Christianity is all about being followers of Jesus Christ. It is not about denouncing everyone who disagrees with us but about sharing Christ's love with the world.

Pope Francis continues to teach core Gospel values in his daily homilies. In one of his recent homilies, Francis preached on the sign of Jonah as presented in Chapter 11 of the Gospel of Luke.

Francis speaks of the "wicked generation" as having "an attitude of perfect piety." For Francis, good works are a consequence and a response to the merciful love that saves us. The Jonah Syndrome refers to those who perform works without this merciful love of God.

Francis is speaking about getting caught up in the externals of religion -- confusing true religion with ritual and carrying out certain devotions or customs of the faith with careful due diligence. Chapter 15 of the Gospel of Matthew makes the point even more clearly. Why didn't Jesus' disciples perform the ritual hand-washing prior to eating their meals? Jesus says it is what comes out of the heart that defiles a man, not eating with unwashed hands.

I believe Francis is trying to help us see what is really important about being Christian. In recent years, we

have gotten caught up in the performance of ritual and like the Pharisees have latched onto a particular form of the Mass or the recitation of certain prayers as central to being a Christian. Just as Pharisees felt that following the law to the letter was what made them righteous, we need to avoid falling into the trap of thinking we are saved by carefully following certain prescribed rules.

Additionally, I believe the sign of Jonah takes us even further into our beliefs. When Francis tells us to quit obsessing on issues of abortion, gay marriage and contraception, he is reminding us that being Christian is about something other than proclaiming the truth of our dogmatic and moral beliefs. We are called to live our lives as followers of Christ. We will be judged on the way we treat each other, not on the intensity of our condemnation of abortion. Matthew tells us that at the final judgment, we will be asked about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick and imprisoned, etc.

The problem with Christianity is that being a real Christian is difficult. It is not difficult to tell others what they are doing wrong. It is difficult to love our enemies and be nice to those who treat us poorly. This is why it is so easy to fall back on the externals of our faith and to seek our righteousness in this way. To be judged on the way we live our lives and whether we always treat others fairly is pretty scary, and surely we all fail miserably many times over. Yet we compound that failure if we believe that somehow our badge of Christianity can be how observant or pious we are and how active we are in condemning the evil in others. Again, are we seeing the speck in our neighbor's eye but remaining oblivious to the beam in our own?

Pope Francis is calling us to expect more of ourselves. He is enunciating the mission of all to go out and serve the people, especially the poor, to be the good Samaritan to those in need, and to make this a better world to live in for all of us.

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