

James Carroll profiles the Francis papacy

Pat Perriello | Jan. 14, 2014 NCR Today

Noted author [James Carroll has written a comprehensive article in *The New Yorker*](#) [1] on the Francis papacy. I would strongly recommend the article as required reading for those who closely follow the workings of the church. Carroll covers both the life of Francis prior to his elevation to the papacy as well as his activities during his first months as pope.

Carroll is an outstanding author with an intimate knowledge of the life of the church. His remarkable scholarly work, *Constantine's Sword*, is a tour de force on the relationship between Christians and Jews throughout the centuries, from New Testament times to the present.

The extensive article Carroll has produced in *The New Yorker* deserves to be given a sufficient amount of time to study and reflect upon. Let me, however, highlight a couple of points that stood out for me.

First, Carroll speaks about the difference between Francis and his predecessors, Benedict XVI and John Paul II. He notes that the difference in general is not an ideological one but an intuitive one. Most people tend to refer to it as a stylistic difference.

There is also, however, a difference in the vision of these pontiffs. Benedict, for example, saw the church in a constant struggle with the world, fighting relativism and other evil "-isms." Francis has evidenced a great desire to engage with the world around us and find goodness and value in the surrounding culture. He sounds a note much like the Second Vatican Council, especially in [Gaudium et Spes](#) [2], "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World."

Another area Carroll focuses on is Francis' understanding of truth. In a letter to Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari, the pope states, "I would not speak of absolute truth even to believers." The pope explains how truth is mediated through the individual, based on one's own circumstances, culture and situation. One recognizes that the life Francis has led has impacted his understanding of the truths of the church, just as it has each of us. Lest there be any doubt, the pope makes clear that the view of the church's teaching as absolute and unchanging without nuance or different understandings is simply wrong.

Finally, Pope Francis says that the notion of the church as a triumphal bastion of truth and virtue does not provide an appropriate image for the church. The church is not always gloriously triumphant. It is on a pilgrimage like the rest of us, searching for truth and seeking forgiveness for its own failures. Again, it was the Second Vatican Council that embraced the concept of church as the people of God rather than the body of Christ.

As the mystical body of Christ, the church can seem spotless and above criticism, but the church is not without sin. The church is not just the hierarchy. All of us sinners make up the church, the people of God, as we travel together to find our way to the Lord, who waits to receive us.

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[1] http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/12/23/131223fa_fact_carroll

[2] http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html