

Pope Francis' First Year

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 5, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

One week from today will mark the first anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. It has been quite a year and the anniversary invites us to look back and examine some of the narratives that have emerged, trying to discern the true significance of this extraordinary event in the life of the Church that is the pontificate of Francis.

The first, and most expected, lens through which Francis has been viewed is the degree to which his pontificate represents continuity or discontinuity from that of Pope Benedict and Pope John Paul II. This lens is bifocal and has two key components, theology and papal leadership.

In terms of theology, there is obvious continuity between Francis and his predecessors. One of the dominant themes of his first year has been that the Church cannot be "obsessed" with issues of sexual morality and that we Catholics are called to create a "culture of encounter." Yet, it was Pope Benedict who, in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, wrote these words:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should have eternal life" (3:16). In acknowledging the centrality of love, Christian faith has retained the core of Israel's faith, while at the same time giving it new depth and breadth. The pious Jew prayed daily the words of the Book of Deuteronomy which expressed the heart of his existence: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (6:4-5). Jesus united into a single precept this commandment of love for God and the commandment of love for neighbour found in the Book of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (19:18; cf. Mk 12:29-31). Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere "command"; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.

Pope John Paul II was deeply committed to the proposition that the reduction of religion to ethics was the heart of Christianity's problems in the 20th century and it was John Paul II who embraced Fr. Luigi Giussani who made the "culture of encounter" central to the spirituality of the group he founded, *Comunione e Liberazione*.

So, let us stipulate that there is great theological continuity between Francis and his predecessors on this central theological question of what the Church is and how she should interact with the world. But, let us also stipulate that many on the left stopped listening to John Paul II and never really cared to listen to Benedict, and so these insights were ignored. And not just by the Catholic Left. Let us stipulate, also, that the fans of John Paul II and Benedict in the United States, while they would not have contradicted their heroes, they were quite content to ignore what they said. Catholic conservatives in the United States passed over those words about Christianity not being an ethical choice or a lofty idea, and they insisted that to be a good Catholic, one must insist on five, and only five, non-negotiable items in the political life of the nation, all of which had to do with the neuralgic issues of human sexuality, and all of which neatly cohered with the agenda of today's Republican Party.

Similarly, Catholic conservatives overlooked Pope John Paul II's repeated insistence on the rights of workers to

unionize and, instead, focused on a couple of lines in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus annus* about capitalism inviting human creativity and, just so, being a good thing. And, we all recall George Weigel advising us to read Pope Benedict's encyclical on social justice, *Caritas in Veritate*, with red and gold pens, the red highlighting the parts that Weigel contended came from the bureaucracy at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and which should be dismissed, and the gold highlighting those parts Weigel believed came from Benedict himself. In all my years of Vatican-watching, and reading Vatican-watchers, that essay by Weigel remains the height of hubris. With Pope Francis, who is as often as not speaking *ex tempore* and not from a text, and whose language is more earthy and accessible than that of his predecessors, conservative commentators cannot wash away, or discount, or trivialize Francis' commitment to social justice.

This leads to a point of obvious discontinuity. Yes, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict were committed to the Church's social justice teachings. But, Pope Francis has placed those teachings front and center. If the Church's commitment to the poor, its historic and well-founded suspicions of modern consumer capitalism, and its moral horror at the gross income inequality that plagues our planet and each of the societies within that planet, were embraced by previous popes, they have been made the leitmotif of this first pontiff from the global south. And, precisely because his words are so accessible, there is no spinning them into an apology for capitalism. This, more than anything, accounts for the excitement Pope Francis has generated on the Catholic Left. For years, we have heard ourselves labeled "social justice Catholics" with the knowledge the label was hurled as an epithet. Now, we are the ultramontanes. It feels good.

Let us attend to another point of discontinuity. It can be fairly said that in the pontificate of John Paul II, pastoral theology was made to be a subset of moral theology. Responding to what he perceived as theological chaos in the post-Vatican II era, rightly or wrongly, and I think there was a bit of both, John Paul II came down hard on those who were trying to push the envelope on matters of moral theology. This is not the place to rehearse my suspicion of much so-called academic theology in the post-Vatican II era. Suffice it to say that I was not entirely unsympathetic with John Paul's concern, although I always felt his methods were heavy-handed and that he and the curia he led failed to adequately engage those they suspected of going too far. No one could credibly claim that there was not a large measure of old-style, Polish clerical authoritarianism in John Paul's character.

Benedict's encyclicals were more pastoral, which was strange seeing as he, not John Paul II, was the systematic theologian. A theologian friend of mine, who is quite conservative and also quite fond of Benedict, nonetheless thought his encyclicals did not measure up to those of John Paul II. Looking back, we can say that both men in different ways prepared the ground for Francis. John Paul II laid down a firm, maybe too firm, theological foundation, one that need not be revisited anytime soon. Benedict adopted a more pastoral approach to his teaching office.

Under Francis, it can be said that moral theology has been returned to its proper place as a subset of pastoral theology, not the other way round. Indeed, you could say that one of the principal differences between Francis and his predecessors is that he has placed far less emphasis on his job as teacher of the faith and far more emphasis on his job as pastor of the flock. A good pastor does not spread foolishness or falsehoods, to be sure. But, a good pastor also understands, to use Cardinal Sean O'Malley's memorable phrase, that "the truth is not a wet rag we throw in other people's faces." Again, I do not think Benedict treated the truth as a rag to throw in other people's faces, but his acolytes in the U.S. surely did.

There was a funny instance of cultural misunderstanding in December when Time magazine announced that Pope Francis was to be their "Person of the Year" that illustrated the degree to which conservative American Catholics had succeeded in setting the terms within which the Church is understood. Time originally ran a caption to one of their photos that read, "First Jesuit Pontiff won hearts and headlines with his common touch and rejection of church dogma and luxury." The pope did not, of course, reject any dogmas of the Church.

Indeed, just the opposite. When a conservative cultural commentator on Fox News says that the Church's teaching against artificial contraception is a "core doctrine" of the Church, they do not know what they are talking about. The core dogmas of the Church are set forth in the Creed and have to do with the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ's passion, death and resurrection. The mercy of God is a central dogma of the Church, and Pope Francis has placed it back at the center of our self-understanding as Catholics. Yet, the editors of Time could not see that and who can blame them when only modern day Jansenists are seen as faithful Catholics.

Pope Francis has repeatedly demonstrated his aversion to wet rags. Nothing he has said detracts an iota from the content of the Church's teachings on this moral issue or that. But, he is a pastor, first and foremost and he was, for many years, a pastor in a country where unspeakable poverty is the norm, not the exception. The simplicity of his personal life, about which I will write more tomorrow, lends credibility to his call for the Church to be "a poor Church, for the poor." Benedict, I am sure, cared about the poor but his personal tastes tended to the Baroque, and words spoken on behalf of the poor by a man clad in layers of silk, sitting on a golden throne, well, the message did not always come through. With Francis, he has placed service to the poor at the center of what it means to be a Catholic, which is where it has always belonged. Caring for the poor never made the list of "non-negotiable" items articulated by conservative U.S. Catholics, but shame on them and blessings on Francis for reminding the entire Christian community, and the world beyond, that serving the poor is the heart of the Gospel. It is what Jesus did and, just so, it is what His followers must also do. And Francis understands his role as leader of the Church to set the example.

Finally, it must be said that Francis appears to be a better judge of character than his two immediate predecessors. John Paul II was unable to grasp that the cult of Fr. Marcial Maciel was so sugar-coated, there had to be something rotten underneath. When confronted with incontrovertible evidence of Maciel's depravities, John Paul II's confidants kept everything hidden. He also staffed the curia with men who indulged, or connived at, or ignored, rank financial corruption that matched the moral corruption of the sex abuse scandals. Benedict appeared to want to change that culture of corruption ? he sacked Maciel, for example ? but he chose assistants who were unequal to the task. And, in an understandable effort to make an accommodation for those who missed the traditional Latin Mass, he unwittingly started a movement, an ideology, that threatens the unity of the Church.

The personnel changes wrought by Francis indicate he is more discerning. His recent selection of Cardinal George Pell to lead the reform of the Vatican finances is brilliant: Cardinal O'Malley said he told the pope that he needed a rugby player for the job, and he found one. Similarly, replacing Cardinals Raymond Burke and Justin Rigali on the Congregation for Bishops with Cardinal Donald Wuerl, is a strong indicator that Pope Francis wants to place men he can count on at the dicastery charged with selecting the next generation of leaders for the Church. The new Secretary of State, Cardinal Parolin, is almost universally respected and Francis' other key appointments have been similarly well received. Changing the culture of the curia will not be easy, it will require new personnel as well as new policies and new structures, but Francis appears undaunted in trying to effect such a change.

Tomorrow: Francis, the man who is pope and why he has such appeal.

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