

## Pope Francis' First Year: The Reaction

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 10, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

In his 1926 book *A Preface to Morals*, Walter Lippmann wrote of the "acids of modernity" which eat away not only at belief, but at the disposition to believe. In the years since, there has been a sometimes unconscious, sometimes quite open, concurrence in Lippmann's view, accompanied as often as not by the conclusion that a betting man would put his money on modernity.

Two decades after Lippmann penned his observation about modernity, Evelyn Waugh's protagonist Charles Ryder was reflecting on his long and complicated relationship with the Flyte family and their Catholicism in the book "Brideshead Revisited." At a certain point in the novel, Ryder recalls thinking that he was finished with the Flytes and their religion, and he vowed to live in the world of his five senses. If he could not see, nor taste, nor touch, nor smell, nor hear a thing, he would consider it unreal and unworthy of his attention. His world would henceforth be the world of empiricism. Ryder concludes this recollection of his past thought with the observation, "I now know that no such world exists."

These seemingly disparate literary moments occur to me as a way of explaining what Pope Francis, in one short year, has come to mean to the world and as a way of understanding the outsized reaction to him as a religious leader.

I have long been suspicious when most Catholic Church leaders speak about secularization. The issue is important, to be sure, but it is often thrown around like a slogan. Secularization is often credited with a force, a power, as if it was an organized political party, when it is better understood as an amorphous forgetfulness of God in a world besotted with affluence. Sadly, many Catholic leaders who invoke secularization as a threat, and warn against it in the darkest of terms, conveniently put the concept to a psychological purpose: It allows them to blame everyone but themselves for the disaffection of so many Catholics.

One of the strangest dynamics in the recent history of the Church in the United States has been the degree to which its leaders, our bishops, have embraced this cultural meme that religion is in decline, that the decline is somehow inevitable, and that the best thing to do in the face of this decline is to hunker down, shore up our Catholic identity and turn defensively towards the world beyond. The defensive crouch has become the norm. Lines are drawn in the sand between "real Catholics" and "Catholic Lite," and loyal Catholics are denounced as collaborators with the imagined forces of secularization: Last year, at the annual bishops' conference meeting, one bishop voiced concern that Catholic Relief Services receives money from the federal government. Huh? In the defensive posture, theologians who question anything are viewed with suspicion and a kind of intellectual lethargy sets in as fine minds split hairs rather than wrestle with complexities. A few hot button issues garner special attention for the enforcers of orthodoxy, conveniently those that track with a conservative political agenda. The world is divided into allies and enemies and persecution is perceived where a difference of opinion is a more likely explanation.

The narrative was set and it was primarily a political narrative with President Obama usually cast in the role of principal persecutor of the Church. Allies were anyone who shared a distrust of Obama. Excuses were made for public figures who were indifferent to the poor, provided they were with the Church in opposing the

contraception mandate: Paul Ryan was defended by bishops while Joe Biden was viewed, at best, as the child who went bad. Instead of helping the poor sign up for health care, Catholics were warned that such help would be "illicit material cooperation with evil," a venerable moral concept that has been prostituted for political ends for too long.

Pope Francis has blown the narrative of essential and unavoidable religious decline to smithereens. Turns out that all those disaffected Catholics were not recruited by the secularization propaganda ministry and turned into fierce anti-Catholics at secret re-education camps. Some were disgusted by self-satisfied prelates who were quick to defend their prerogatives and not too quick to root out serial child molesters from the priesthood. Others were tired of seeing religious figures make excuses for bigots who want to treat their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters as second class citizens. Many resented the politicization of their faith, the crop of bishops and priests who better resembled Jerry Falwell than St. Francis of Assisi.

To be sure, many people walked away from the Church because ours is an age that promises all manner of more accessible varieties of salvation. Psychology can make you "whole." Consumer marketers are adept at helping you discover needs you never knew you had and then selling you something to meet that need, none of it having to do with faith. Science, which has brought countless blessings to humankind, learned to step out of its own epistemological limits and claim not only its undoubted right to make charts, but to explain the significance of charts in the world, denying, like Mr. Ryder, any reality which cannot be tested in a lab. And, there is Oprah peddling an easy, sentimental religiosity, "spiritual but not religious," light on demands and heavy on happiness. How are Christians, who worship a crucified God, to compete with that?

Pope Francis has reminded us how. We are to preach the Gospel and, it turns out, people are still hungry for the Gospel. We are to walk humbly with Jesus Christ and, it turns out, people are still encouraged and comforted and ennobled by the companionship of their savior. We are to reach out to the poor and the marginalized and, it turns out, people in this highly self-referential age are still capable of self-transcendence with a bit of inspiration and encouragement. We are to confront the loneliness of our modern world, with all its paraphernalia of self-actualization, with the community of faith and, it turns out, people do not want to be lonely. We are to confront our own sinfulness mindful of God's mercy and, it turns out, people are more likely to confront their sins if they are mindful of God's mercy. We are to seek joy where joy may be found, not in things and stuff and ideologies, but in relationships and simple worship and in the Word of God and, it turns out, real relationships of human worth, real worship of an awesome God, and the ineffable mystery the Scriptures unfold, these still have the capacity to build the Church up, not tear it to shreds. Most of all, we are not to judge and, it turns out, people, especially Catholics, are tired of being judged.

The reaction has been stunning. For the first time in my adult life, there is the sense that the wind is at our back in the Church, not in our face. It has become obvious that people really want the Church to succeed. All of us have had the experience this past year of a non-Catholic friend, or a Catholic who has walked away from the Church, saying to us ? I love this pope. He has touched a nerve. The nerve was there all the time.

You would think that every Catholic, and especially every Catholic leader, would be delighted at this turn of events. Alas, you would be wrong. Conservative theologian Germain Grisez said the pope reminded him of a man who had too much wine with dinner. Archbishop Charles Chaput republished emails he had received from Catholics who were distressed at some of the things the pope said. Ken Langone reported that one of the potential, seven-figure donors to the restoration efforts at St. Patrick's Cathedral was re-thinking his gift because of the pope's comments on the economy. And, just last week, I linked to an interview in which Bishop Robert Morlino was astonishingly condescending and grudging in his assessment of the pope. If such things are said on camera, you can imagine what is said behind closed doors! The neo-conservative narrative of religious decline and consequent need to strike a defensive posture was, for some U.S. Catholics, like a winter coat, protecting against the cold. Francis has taken the coat and encouraged everyone to recognize it is not that cold anymore.

The effect is disorienting for those who suddenly find themselves coatless and, what is more, wondering why they had the coat on in the first place when it was not very cold in the first place.

Yet, if people will simply remove their ideological blinders and listen to what Pope Francis is saying, they will discover that he has challenges for everyone. The word he uses more than any other is mercy. Mercy is the great antidote to progressive optimism, grounding the hope it provides not in our own capacity for moral success, but in God's capacity to forgive our sins. Mercy is the great antidote to conservative pessimism, for the same reason. There are "neo-Pelagians" in all ideological camps, indeed, it is the nature of ideology to invite a Pelagian spirituality. The ideologue discerns the hope of salvation in the strength of his own ideas. Pope Francis reminds us that our hope of salvation is discovered in the Cross of Jesus Christ. All of us, not just our befuddled conservative friends, can find plenty in the pope's words to challenge us.

Commentators on Catholic culture have a special responsibility. Of course, we are bound by our conscience as well as our job to debate ideas and call each other out when we stray. But, I believe, sincerely, that what the pope most wants is not for one side to win, but for both sides to recognize the need to encounter one another. He has called the Church to a "culture of encounter" and that call pertains not only to those outside the Church but also within. We who range ourselves in the Catholic Left have much to learn from our conservative friends. Our culture, which permits so many abortions, which generates such a huge incidence of failed marriages, and includes many people who really do detest the Church and all she stands for, that culture has need of Catholics who are unafraid to be a bit stiff-necked about what our faith demands. Conversely, our culture really does suffer from a globalized indifference to the poor and the marginalized, to the 47 percent, we really do have a military-industrial complex that far too eagerly encourages resort to war, and our economic system really does crucify society on a cross of gold, or at least a cross of stocks and bonds. These are things that conservatives need to learn from us.

But, the thing we Catholics of all political stripes need to learn are the things Pope Francis is most urgent in stressing. Get out of the sacristy and into the streets. The poor deserve a privileged place in our hearts not just for their sake, but because encountering and loving the poor is of the essence of the Gospel. Christ is the Lord of history, and just so mocks our cultural narratives of decline or progress. It is the encounter, not any promise of results, that constitutes the path, the way. Christianity is not an ideology, it is a way of living, better to say, following, following the Lord. He, remember, served the poor and indeed became poor for our sake. He, remember, was only quick to denounce the religious leaders of his day for the sin of pride; with others, he was slow to anger.

When Pope Francis was first elected last year, I called a friend who is a bishop in Latin America and knew the man. I asked what he was like. "I would say he is very astute," my friend replied. There is nothing of the simpleton about Pope Francis. He knows what he is saying and will let the sound and fury come and go, reliant on the fact that what he has to say will eventually be heard. When he famously said of a gay monsignor, "who am I to judge?" everyone focused on the fact he was speaking about a gay man. But, that was incidental. Pope Francis was really telling us something about what he thinks it means to be a Christian, and especially a Christian leader: content to leave judgment to God, determined to walk alongside those who struggle, and trusting always in the merciful judgment of God. It is this that has put Pope Francis on tee-shirts and the cover of Time. It is this that fills St. Peter's Square every Wednesday and Sunday. This astute man who is our pope knows that it is this that will make the acids of modernity less fearsome. And, if the Catholic community can follow Pope Francis' lead, who knows what will happen? The Spirit moves where it wills. But, if the past year has taught us anything, it is that the Spirit can still animate the Church. "And I am certain of this, that He who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion," the Apostle Paul tells the Philippians. That is what it feels like to be a Catholic in this first year of Pope Francis. The good work has begun again and we increasingly hope that work will be brought to completion.

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