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Pope Francis disappoints, but not completely

by Pat Perriello

NCR Today

It was inevitable, and the time has come. I need to write my first critical blog post on Pope Francis. It turns out that the Vatican guesthouse, Domus Sanctae Marthae, does not appear to be far enough away from the apostolic palace. Francis is unfortunately starting to sound too much like a pope. The powers that be may be getting to him even at his current residence.

I speak of his one-year anniversary interview with Italian daily *Corriere Della Sera*. The most troublesome part of that interview is his comments on the issue of child abuse by priests. It is the first time I have ever heard him sound as if he is merely spouting Vatican talking points. Perhaps he was annoyed that the United Nations came out so strongly against the church when he felt they had been trying to cooperate with the U.N. investigation.

In any event, he felt the need to defend Vatican actions and repeat the tired old positions we have been hearing for too long: The church has been transparent; child abuse happens more often among families; and only the church is being attacked. Playing the victim is so unlike Francis. His willingness to downplay the harm priests have done to children in their care is disturbing. He is likely, however, to experience considerable pressure to address the abuse issue more forcefully in the coming months.

Pope Francis' words on the role of women in the church also leave something to be desired. He still has a long way to go when it comes to women. There is little evidence that he really gets it. He has a tendency to couch everything in terms of the Virgin Mary. While that is not a bad thing in itself, it can be too easily confused with an image of women only staying home and being good mothers.

Let me quickly add, however, that it would not be possible for any of us to agree with the pope on every issue. I thought there were still many positive elements in other parts of the interview. There is his continued effort to position himself as a very human individual, which is truly refreshing. As he said, he

likes to be among the people. He also talks of wanting to be with his sister, who is ill, in Argentina. He bristles at being thought of as a superhero. Yes, he is indeed the human pope.

I also felt that his remarks on civil unions and contraception were generally positive. Much has already been written about Francis' comments in the interview regarding civil unions. The reality is that Pope Francis acknowledged the significance of economic and health care issues when it comes to marriage. He recognized the legitimate interest of civil society in regulating these issues. In other words, he opened the door to the distinction between civil unions and marriage in the church.

Pope Francis did not countenance a change in doctrine on contraception and praised Pope Paul VI's courage in writing *Humanae Vitae* in the 1960s. Yet he also praised Paul VI for emphasizing the role of confessors and for requesting pastoral attention to the issues families face. The truth is, Paul VI's genius was successful until the last decade or so, when extremely conservative bishops decided to bring this issue into the public forum once again. For years, Catholics and their confessors addressed the issue of contraception in the private forum of individual conscience. It would be a giant step forward if we could get back to recognizing contraception as a matter for individual conscience.

We will need to continue to challenge Pope Francis on major issues as his papacy continues. We should also not forget to support and celebrate the dramatic and positive changes he has already brought to our church. It is not possible for Francis to complete the changes he is initiating. The great hope is that his papacy can begin the process of bringing the medieval church closer to its people and making it more sensitive to human needs rather than insisting on a pharisaical approach to rigidly follow all the rules.

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