

Contra Baumann on Francis

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 19, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

It is with great reluctance that I confess I found [Paul Baumann's recent essay in Slate](#) [1] about Pope Francis deeply disappointing. Baumann is a serious Catholic intellectual, and a far more gifted writer than I am. But I fear he has succumbed in this essay to the media's relentless desire to be contrary, to make a counter-intuitive argument when common intuition might be a better guide.

For example, Baumann writes:

In this light, the inordinate attention paid to the papacy, while perhaps good for business, is not good for the church. Why not? Because it encourages the illusion that what ails the church can be cured by one man, especially by a new man. In truth no pope possesses that kind of power, thank God.

These are the words of a management consultant, not a Catholic intellectual. It is not an illusion, but an article of faith, that "what ails the church can be cured by one man," but that man is not Pope Francis, as I am sure he would allow, but Jesus Christ. Indeed, even a casual observer of this pontificate must recognize that it is this pope's canny ability to redirect our attention away from himself and onto Christ that makes him so revolutionary.

In the event, Baumann is not a very good management consultant. Even if we constrict our line of vision to the terrestrial, I think Baumann here misses what appears to be one of this pope's most sterling reforms: He consults people. Already, he has formed a Council of Cardinals, from all over the world, to function as true papal advisors yet not be part of the curial court. Already, he instructed those preparing the next synod to consult and consult widely about the issues to be addressed. Already, he has blown apart many of the features of the papal court that restricted access, conferred far too much power on papal handlers, and kept the pope aloof from all but the trusted few. Pope Francis seems to know that he can't know all there is to know, and is reaching out to others to solicit their advice. Others may be under the illusion that one man, one new man, can fix all the problems, but Pope Francis seems to know better.

The contrariness and strange inattention to the possibility of any divine influences stalks most of this article. Baumann writes:

The church desperately needs to reclaim its cultural and spiritual equilibrium; it must find a density and richness of worship and mission and a renewed public presence, which far transcend mere loyalty to the pope. Lacking such equilibrium and self-possession, the church cannot find its true voice. But to find this voice, Catholics will have to turn not to Rome but toward one another, which is where both the problems and the solutions lie.

Baumann's concerns are, to be sure, far different from those that keep Cardinal Raymond Burke up at night, but what they share is a self-referential vision of the Church and what ails her. Baumann says the Church lacks "self-possession," but the whole point of Pope Francis' exhortations is to remind us that we do not belong to ourselves or for ourselves. We belong to Jesus Christ and to His own, the poor. We do not need to turn to each

other so much as we all need to turn towards Christ and then, and only then, notice out of the corner of our eye that we are in this Church thing together.

Bringing the different wings of the Church together will not be an easy task. But, again, look at Baumann's list of what divides:

These divisions, and the disputes they provoke, are mind-numbingly familiar. What is a 'faithful' Catholic to think about artificial birth control; homosexuality and same-sex marriage; divorce; the exclusively male, celibate priesthood; the possibility of electing bishops; the role of the laity, especially women, in church decision-making; the relationship between popes and bishops; religious pluralism; and clergy sexual abuse and the unaccountability of the hierarchy? These and other questions go to the heart of Catholic self-understanding, yet a church notorious for valuing discipline and unanimity remains deeply divided on all of them. Catholics on both sides of every issue claim to be the true heirs of the Second Vatican Council. All agree that Vatican II promulgated the most authoritative understanding of the church's teachings. Yet they read the council's documents in diametrically opposed ways.

As I argued yesterday, I think the pope is asking us to remember that all these issues are derivative of our Christological commitments, and that too often we have forgotten that, both the left and the right. Yes, the left and the right read the conciliar texts in different ways and reach different conclusions. But, Pope Francis seems to want to remind us that what unites those various conciliar texts was a commitment to follow Jesus more closely, and with our eyes open. Some people see different things with their eyes. Some prefer to keep their eyes closed, to be sure. But, the key is not to let the disagreements blind us to the essential question: Are we following Jesus?

And, as Baumann acknowledges towards the end of his piece, Pope Francis is certainly reminding us that what 'goes to the heart of Catholic self-understanding?' is not these neuralgic issues, but our encounter with the poor. The Second Vatican Council called our special attention to share the joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties of 'those who are poor or in anyway afflicted,' not the joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties of the readers of *Commonweal* or the readers of *NCR* for that matter. I have another confession to make. I am increasingly impatient with the complaints of wealthy, urban, educated American Catholics of any ideological stripe. This Lent, before we start asking where and why we stand on the hot button issues of sex and gender, or worrying about power relationships between the Vatican and the local churches, perhaps we should ask ourselves why it is that we in the well-fed West have found the traditional Christian, and not only Christian, practice of fasting a thing to be minimized: No meat on Friday, go for the lobster. Someone has their priorities wrong, and I do not think it is Pope Francis.

I think Baumann's conclusion that a successful papacy is not good for the Church is completely wrong. I think the interest in this pope is a great thing for the Church because the things that people love about him are the things that are most Christ-like about him. In a world of phonies, he is authentic. In a world of materialism, he lives simply. In a world of stuffed shirts and stuffed cassocks, he is spontaneous. In a world of celebrities and gross displays of power, he is humble. In a world that loves to self-justify, he introduces himself as a sinner.

The great Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper wrote, 'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'' Baumann is a wise man and a gifted writer. Why does he seem so disinclined to voice the hope that Pope Francis is inviting us to a new experience of Pentecost, to hear the Master cry 'Mine!'? If we do not really believe that the Spirit moves the Church, sometimes in spite of herself, then really, why bother with any of this? I know Baumann knows that. I wish he had shared it with the readers of Slate.

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