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Damien Thompson Hits His Thumb

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Damien Thompson has an essay at the Spectator, where he is an associate editor, about Pope Francis, why he was elected and what the principal goal of his pontificate is. Thompson, who is a gifted writer, is a less gifted analyst. He correctly spies an often over-looked hermeneutical key to understanding Pope Francis: he is a Jesuit. But instead of hitting the nail on the head, Thompson hits his thumb.

Thompson's central claim is that the Catholic left is wrong to be hoping for doctrinal change from Pope Francis, that he was elected to do one thing: reform the Roman Curia, the pitifully disorganised, corrupt and lazy central machinery of the church. Thompson writes that, "The Pope has declared a spiritual culture war on the bureaucrats who forced the resignation of his predecessor," although I am not sure I would characterize the pope's efforts to reform the curia as a "culture war," in part because the Vatican curia is at best a sub-culture and the pontiff's spiritual armament is more invitational than war-like.

This paragraph is especially troubling:

Last year Francis described his "court" as "the leprosy of the papacy". By "court" he may have been referring to monarchical trappings but employees of the Curia suspected that he was talking about them. For those good priests who found themselves trapped in a sclerotic bureaucracy it came across as a needless insult. "Morale is tremendously low," says a Vatican source. "And matters aren't helped by Latin American clergy swanning around Rome telling us how they're bringing us simplicity. There's a new ultramontanism of the left. You can disagree with anything the church teaches so long as you think Francis is fabulous."

I imagine that most "good priests" in the curia, and there are many, were as horrified as the cardinal-electors by the corruption within the organization. If morale is low now, because of the pope's insistence

on simplicity, then perhaps these good priests are not so good after all. Thompson's source, whom he quotes approvingly, is undoubtedly correct about there being a "new ultramontanism of the left," but I think the Holy Father's aims, whatever the aims of those who invoke him, are not so easily cast into simple left-right terms as this source seems to think.

Thompson clearly thinks the Holy Father is ignorant of the situation of the Catholic Church in the English-speaking world, blinded by his Latin American experience. Thomson writes:

"The Pope is hungry to spread the Gospel and in Latin America he sees that being done most effectively by left-wing priests in the slums," says a Vatican insider. "What he doesn't realize is that in North America and other English-speaking countries, it's the conservatives who have fire in their bellies, who evangelise, often with minimal encouragement from their bishops." And no one is likely to explain it to him.

It is surely the case that there is a kind of conservative Catholic in the English-speaking world with fire in the belly. But, here is where Thompson's analytical skills fail him. Having identified the pope's being a Jesuit as a key to understanding the man, Thompson fails to see that the Holy Father, above all, is engaged in an old struggle for the Society of Jesus: He is confronting the Jansenists of our day, the very same conservative Catholics in the English-speaking world whom Thompson thinks have the fire of the Gospel in their bellies. It is not the Gospel, but a hyper-moralistic concern against spiritual contagion that animates the conservatives Thompson champions. And, quite clearly, this is not what animates Pope Francis.

Heresies have long shelf lives. The pope has previously warned, correctly, about neo-pelagianism and new forms of Gnosticism. These temptations grow from the same spiritual soil as orthodox beliefs and practices. They are perennial. The Jansenists of our day, like their predecessors, and like the Donatists before them, see the essence of Christian life in preserving their own moral purity. It is easy to see how this concern can lead to a spiritual pride "I thank thee God that I am not like other men" and has proven ill-suited to attracting converts to the faith. Of course, every Christian should be concerned about their spiritual purity, but the essence of the Gospel lies elsewhere. The essence is seen not in Pope Francis' words but in his gestures, the caress of a horribly disfigured person, missing evening prayer in Korea in order to stay longer with the infirm at a hospital, and confronting the materialistic culture in which we live that sees the poor as parasites, the crippled as a burden, and the marginalized as insignificant. Whatever else can be said about contemporary Anglo-American culture, ours is not a culture in which the hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty.

The "fire in the belly" conservatives in our Church continually show their inability to properly assess the values in play. Yesterday, the archdiocese of Cincinnati sent out an email discouraging participation in the Ice Bucket challenge, which raises money to care for people suffering from ALS and to help find a cure. (Funding for research into a cure is limited because there are not that many people who suffer from this disease and the pharmaceutical companies do not foresee much profit in pursuing a cure.) The archdiocese said that the ALS Foundation had funded one study that involved embryonic stem cell research. I am as opposed to embryonic stem cell research as any one, but to throw water on a generally humane, if baffling, charity fundraiser because one study used an ethically repugnant method is like saying all Catholics should forswear marriage because one study showed that some husbands cheat on their wives. I view with similar disdain these decisions forced upon the Catholic Campaign for Human Development to avoid any partnership with an organization that belongs to a different partnership with a group that supports same-sex marriage.

Where is the imagination? Did the officials in the archdiocese of Cincinnati reach out to the ALS

foundation and voice their concern about embryonic stem cell research? Did they mention that the University of Notre Dame, among others, is doing great work with adult stem cells? Why should CCHD be forbidden from working with a group that spends all of its time serving a similar goal, because that group is also aligned with a different group that once signed a piece of paper supporting same sex marriage? Did not the pope say that he would rather a Church that makes mistakes in its efforts to help the poor than a Church cooped up in the sacristy?

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It is true that the corruption of the curia was one of the reasons people today view Pope Benedict's pontificate as a failed one, although the newly sainted Pope John Paul II deserves as much of the blame as his successor for the placement of corrupt individuals in positions of power. And, both pontiffs placed men with strong Jansenist sympathies in positions of authority. They bought into the "fire in the belly" theory that it was the conservative Catholics who were really interested in spreading the Gospel. They promoted men who heaped scorn on those who help the poor, suggested shutting down CCHD, who came to view the Catholic Health Association as "the enemy" rather than the very healing hands of Jesus at work in the world, attached to a mind that reached a slightly different conclusion about the moral significance of certain parts of the Affordable Care Act.

I will not dignify with a response the gratuitous swipes that Thompson takes at the English bishops, Episcopal conferences in general, or Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga.

Pope Francis is doing a lot more than reforming the curia. He is asking all Catholics to recalibrate the lens through which we view our discipleship, to be less Jansenistic and more missionary, and he is inviting the clergy specifically to be less focused on their own perks and more focused on spreading the Gospel by the witness of their lives, a witness that necessarily entails simplicity, humility and deep compassion. This is not a left vs. right, or Latino vs. Anglo recalibration. It is a Jesuit vs. Jansenist recalibration and it comes not a moment too soon.

It is true that the Holy Father is not likely to change any particular doctrine of the Church, but he is certainly asking us to remember all the doctrines of the Church, not just those that flow from the sixth and ninth commandments. Most importantly, he is reminding us that our God is a God of consolation. This Jesuit pontiff is the great casuist of the day, seeking to apply the laws of the Church with the mercy of God. Reforming the curia is not small beer, to be sure, and I hope the pope's reforms are significant and long-lasting. But, he is more concerned, it seems, not with beer large or small, than he is with reminding us that new wine should never be put into old wineskins, and that the ever-new wine of God's grace is as available today as it was two thousand years ago on a hillside in Jerusalem when the apostles found, to their amazement, that the tomb was empty.

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