



WHY DOES THE POPE DISLIKE ME?

by Jayd Henricks
8.31.23

He did it again. During a recent visit to a Jesuit school in Portugal, the Holy Father once more criticized the Catholic Church in the United States. But this time, he did not pull any punches. Pope Francis made it abundantly clear that he does not like the Church in America. He thinks U.S. Catholics are backward-looking and an obstacle to the Holy Spirit. He thinks many of them have rejected Vatican II and want to turn the clock back to some pre-conciliar time. I can't help thinking he doesn't like me—or at least the caricature of me in his head when he thinks about Catholics in the United States. Among other things, the pope said:

You have seen that in the United States the situation is not easy; there is a very strong reactionary attitude. . . . I would like to remind those people that *indietrismo* (being backward-looking) is useless.

You have been to the United States, and you say you have felt a climate of closure. Yes, this climate can be experienced in some situations. And there you can lose the true tradition and turn to ideologies for support.

One of the Jesuits in the audience claimed that in America he “saw many, even bishops, criticizing your leadership of the Church.” The pope responded: “Those American groups you talk about, so closed, are isolating themselves. Instead of living by doctrine, by the true doctrine that always develops and bears fruit, they live by ideologies.” Whom exactly does Pope Francis have in mind here? It isn't clear—the Holy Father is often ambiguous, and not just in his complaints—but I guess it's people like me.

I am a “conservative” Catholic, but I am no traditionalist, in the TLM sense. I was deeply formed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and am committed to the *Novus Ordo* (the Mass of Vatican II). I embrace the universal call to holiness as developed during Vatican II. I love the Scriptures. I support the preferential option for the spiritually and materially poor. I view the Catechism of the Catholic Church as a north star for our faith. I think the Church has much to say to the modern world.

I also reject the notion that doctrine can change, as opposed to develop. I think certain actions are intrinsically evil. I do not think it is compassionate to affirm individuals in their sin. I think the Church's tradition is a great spiritual treasure.

These things should be uncontroversial, and yet the impression the Holy Father creates is that to hold all of these positions is to be a rigid, backward-looking Catholic as opposed to one led by the Holy Spirit. He seems to think that the rock-solid belief many American Catholics have in the deposit of faith and the Church's historical moral teachings is a rejection of authentic development of doctrine. But this portrayal is a cartoon.

Pope Francis notes that doctrine “progresses,” but that this “change develops from the roots upward, growing in accord with [St. Vincent Lerins'] three criteria [for authentic development articulated].” I don't know a traditional Catholic who disagrees with this. But I do know many who vehemently disagree that the Vatican's free-wheeling questioning of long-held teaching meets these criteria. Pope Francis oversees a curia where the Relator General for the Synod on Synodality claims the Church's teaching about homosexual acts is “false,” where the head of the Pontifical Academy for Life endorses a book that calls for a complete reversal of the Church's teaching on contraception, and where the head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith espouses an openness to blessings for same-sex couples—to name just a few recent examples of churchmen flatly opposing the authentic development espoused by the Holy Father. Meanwhile, Francis gives the Germans freedom to push heretical positions. And yet somehow, he brands as “backwards” the Catholics who dislike it when high-ranking Vatican prelates bandy about serious errors.

In response, many Americans have been critical of the Holy Father—including me. Supporters of Pope Francis call out critique as if it is something new and vile, which is particularly odd since Francis himself has said he welcomes fair and honest criticism. Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI all were severely criticized. There is nothing disobedient about it, so long as it is done with charity, humility, and in defense of the faith. In fact, Scripture demands it (see Gal. 2:11; Matt. 18:15; Luke 17:3; Lev. 19:17).

The pope talks frequently about dialogue and believes criticism should be given face-to-face, so it is frustrating that he never seems to directly engage the Church in America. The bishops of the United States completed their ad limina visits with the Holy Father about three years ago, and yet in dozens of reports the Holy Father never raised concerns he might have with the U.S. Church. If he's so fretful about the situation in America now, why did he not express those concerns with the bishops during their visits, or why does he not meet with Archbishop Broglio (the current head of the USCCB) and other leading U.S. bishops to talk about it? Maddeningly, Pope Francis seems content to use third parties to take cheap shots at the American faithful.

This is also frustrating because the Church here in the United States is actually doing well, at least compared to the Church in Europe and South America—including, notably, Argentina. Seminaries have been largely reformed, vocations are growing among faithful religious communities, lay apostolates are leading evangelization efforts, some Catholic schools survive even without the help of government funds, and each year tens of millions of U.S. church dollars go to the Vatican, to help the poor overseas, and to international aid. This prompts the question: Does the Holy Father appreciate the extraordinary good that comes from U.S. Catholics? It seems no.

What a shame that my spiritual father, the spiritual father to millions of Catholics in the United States, sees us so negatively. As the Francis papacy unfolds, an increasing number of Catholics sense that he is not friendly to them: those who are struggling to title and raise large families; those who are practicing NFP instead of contracepting; those who are struggling for holiness and chastity while living with same-sex attraction; those who are making heroic sacrifices to stay in good standing with the Church in order to receive the Eucharist . . . the list could go on. None of these Catholics are living “by ideologies”—they are striving to live by the teaching of the Church, just as the Holy Father is—even if he doesn't like us. In the midst of all this misunderstanding, I am trying hard to love Pope Francis. I just wish he made that less difficult.

Jayd Henricks is the president of Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal.

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