

A MATTER OF STYLE

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Why is it that many Catholics applaud the way Pope Francis is leading the Church, while others fear he is leading the church astray? That question merits the attention of *all* Catholics.

It is not enough to like or not like “the changes”. Ultimately, being Catholic is not about our own likes and dislikes anyway. It is about faithfulness to Christ in the Catholic tradition. The desire to be faithful is common ground between both supporters and critics of Pope Francis’ leadership. But the Catholic tradition is about being faithful *in an ever changing world*. Historically, the Church has always adapted to changing social and cultural conditions, in order to carry out its unchanging mission. Not to adapt is to not be faithful to that tradition or to that mission.

Clearly, Pope Francis believes the social and cultural conditions of our time require a different style of leadership – and expects the same of other leaders within the Church. Pope John XXIII’s pastoral instincts were already in the same direction when, at the opening of the Second Vatican Council, he famously said the Church needed to act by “making use of the medicine of mercy rather than severity.. and by showing herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness.” Those who still clamour for harder preaching, stricter rules and harsher punishments were already on a different path years before Pope Francis came along.

Personhood and conscience:

But the needed change of style has deeper roots. It is based on what it means to be a person, and what it means to fully respect the primacy of conscience. A deeper appreciation of what these mean has been growing in the Western world over many years, and gradually recognized in the Church. It is less evident in the Churches of the East. And it is non-existent wherever ‘religion’ is still promoted by force or fear. It is a development that was both acknowledged and affirmed by the Second Vatican Council:

The dignity of the human person is a concern of which people of our time are becoming increasingly more aware. In growing numbers people demand that they should enjoy the use of their own responsible judgment and freedom and decide on their actions on grounds of duty and conscience, without external pressure or coercion. (*On Religious Liberty – Dignitatis Humanae, n.1.*)

Proper appreciation of these developments requires a correspondingly different way of exercising authority: a different way of leading, and a different way of expecting to be led. An earlier way of leading and of teaching tended to be “controlling”. Often, people’s experience was that their decisions had already been made for them. They didn’t need to understand the issues; it was enough just to obey.

A true appreciation of personhood and of conscience fosters personal responsibility in others. It relies more on catechesis and moral formation than on regulation and penalties. It is more akin to author-izing or en-abling others to grow as persons. It requires a formation aimed at helping them to understand the issues and to choose well. It moves away from social patterns and leadership styles that were more typical of feudal societies, and that prolonged over-dependence and personal immaturity.

Slow to see:

The Church has not always been the first to appreciate the need to shift from feudal dependency to taking personal responsibility. Various human and civil rights that we now take for granted (even the idea of democracy!) were originally condemned by Popes Pius IX and Pius X. In our own time, Church leaders have sometimes found it easier, by resorting to blanket bans, to exclude individuals' scope for exercising their own conscientious judgments. The following are three topical examples:

- (i) Canons 960 and 961 forbid general absolution for the forgiveness of serious sins (outside situations of emergency). These canons do not forbid the use of general absolution for those desiring the sacrament of reconciliation "out of devotion". But a lazy and controlling style of leadership finds it easier to simply forbid general absolution for all. (I leave it to psychologists to explain what kink in human nature sometimes "needs" to feel more is forbidden than actually is.)
- (ii) The Church teaches that it is wrong to contracept the love of husband and wife. That teaching does not extend to contraception in other situations. (Married love is not being contracepted where there is no marriage!) But a lazy way of leading finds it easier to make a blanket ban by attaching the wrongness to contraceptives themselves.
- (iii) Holy Communion is not for those who are conscious of unrepented serious sin. This can be the case for people living in irregular marital situations. But it is not always and necessarily the case that people in irregular situations are actually guilty of serious sin. Proper pastoral responsibility allows for what Pope John Paul II called the "law of gradualness" and for circumstances that mitigate culpability. These are well spelled out in the traditional books on moral theology. But a less pastoral leadership (and some critics of Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia*) simply ignore those principles and assume that all people in irregular relationships are "living in sin". (When the question is asked: "who are we to judge?" it is not objective moral law that is being questioned but people's subjective degree of guilt.)

In all these examples, the individual's right to exercise personal responsibility is being obstructed by a way of exercising authority that belonged to an era when the significance of personhood and the paramountcy of conscience were less appreciated. It is not coincidental that the same Pope who opposes clericalism is promoting respect for individuals' consciences. But nor is Pope Francis being novel: Pope John Paul II had reminded us that the Church's official teaching is "at the service of conscience". Church teaching informs conscience, but faithfulness to conscience is what we shall be judged by.

Clericalism, however, is the mindset not only of those whose leadership diminishes people's scope for exercising personal responsibility: it is also the mindset of those who prefer to be led in that way. Mere conformity to authority and to the law can be a cop-out for those who don't want to take personal responsibility. They prefer others to do the thinking and deciding. Those who still hanker for those times will certainly have difficulty with Pope Francis' style of leadership.

The law and false security:

There is a further problem with mere compliance with the law: the law on its own cannot fully reveal what is God's will for the individual in every set of circumstances. Sometimes God's will for them will be the same as what the written law prescribes. Sometimes it will be only partly the same; and sometimes

quite different. This reality is also acknowledged in traditional Catholic moral theology, which is why it developed various ways of explaining occasional necessary departures from the letter of the law – e.g. “exemptions”, “dispensations” “epikeia”...

What matters is the value or values which the law is intended to protect and promote. A law-based morality looks only to the written law. A value-based morality looks to the values which are the purpose or “spirit” of the law. To look no further than the letter of the law is stunting. Fulfilling the law’s purpose is “life-giving”. Pope Francis emphasizes the need for discernment in the sense that St Ignatius taught. This means including but looking beyond the use of “intelligence and common sense”, beyond “reason and prudence”, and beyond “the Church’s sound norms” – and being guided by the Spirit who “alone can penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every situation...” (*Gaudete et Exultate* 172,173)

Is it any wonder they take fright who can only feel secure behind the letter of the law clearly spelled out for them. They fear Pope Francis’ style leads to “relativism” and “subjectivism”. Yes, that is a risk. But that is what good moral and spiritual formation is intended to prevent - and providing that is hard work! Those who have failed to provide sound catechesis must take some responsibility for the insecurity of those who depend excessively on the written law.

Sooner or later, failure to provide sound catechetical/moral formation, and failure to allow scope for people to make their own decisions, back-fires! It is been claimed, for example, that the pro-abortion vote in Ireland was really a vote “against the Church”. People voted the wrong way, but they were fed up with being told what to do. Making right decisions still matters – greatly; but so does the way people come to their decisions – freely! Affirming the Church’s teaching and respecting conscience go hand in hand; it is not one *or* the other!

The trappings of authority:

A significant shift from one model of exercising authority to another raises questions about the symbols of authority inherited from the previous model. Tonsure and skullcap were given at the time of entry into the clerical state, which signified apartness and privilege. Today, priests no longer wear the black skullcap, but use of the purple and scarlet skullcaps to signify “higher rank” lingers on. The mitre had been part of the uniform of officials at the imperial court in fifth century Byzantium. The shepherd’s crook could aptly replace both those insignia. At least it has a biblical allusion.

The title “Excellency,” which is still used by Roman Congregations to address bishops, was given in 1930 when Pope Pius XI wanted to match Mussolini’s gesture of giving that title to his mayors. Some cling to these insignia and titles precisely to signify the kind of authority they originally signified. Some find them incompatible with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 23:1-10. Some regard them as harmless embellishments. Some shrug them off as “toys for the boys”. Others see them as left-overs from models of authority that the Church is being called to move away from. Perhaps others are waiting for someone else to make the decision for them.

A matter of style:

The Church’s mandate to teach has not changed; the way it teaches has needed to change, based on greater respect for the person and for conscience. Pope Francis’ style of leadership invites people to become more fully human and more fully alive through the exercise of personal responsibility. This is our dignity and our calling. It is based on our being “made in the image of God”.