

Brothers,

I have had some eye-opening discussions lately, and one in particular I would like to share with you. I happened to be at a used bookstore looking in the religious section where to my surprise they had some Catholic books. As I was browsing another lady came up looking in the same section and I started a conversation which took turn a turn I didn't expect. She expressed her dislike for the Pope and was considering leaving for the Orthodox Church. Having only known each other for less than two minutes I did my best to encourage her to pray for faith and trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church regardless of her leaders or our opinions of them, that Jesus knew what He was doing when He gave Peter the Keys to the Kingdom. He is the Al-Habayit, one who is "over the household" in the absence of the King. This means he is over the *whole* household, and we cannot selectively decide he is not *my* Pope. There are two key ideas I would like you to keep in mind: the 1 + 1 theory of education, and the cafeteria is closed.

I understand the concerns many have had about Pope Francis. His approach is decidedly different than his recent predecessors, it is an emphasis on outreach and mercy rather than theological development, which some have interpreted as a weakening of doctrine. To be absolutely clear, he has not and will not change the core teachings of the Church. Two of the largest points of contention in the public eye are the Synod and his declaration, *Fiducia Supplicans*.

Assumptions

One of the most dangerous things we can do regarding another is to assume intentions or actions. Much of the concern I have seen has propagated from assumptions based on inaccurate reporting. His 2013 comment of "who am I to judge" in response to a reporter question regarding gay priests has been extrapolated within the media, which includes Catholic media, to assume his intent is to approve gay marriage within the church. We have to take great care understanding the difference between a journalist and an *opinion* journalist. Unfortunately, many including the journalists themselves confuse the two and either intentionally or unintentionally relay the story with more assumptions than substance. We would be better served to not jump to conclusions and read the whole story and understand the context, including the entirety of that quote which he replied which was "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" Right here we can see he included the necessary conditions being they must be searching for the Lord and be of good will.

Poor journalism and assumption-based judgements are rampant, and within the secular realm there is no shortage of examples, but the most prominent was that of the Johnny Depp trial. He was accused of abuse in the media and as a result lost millions in movie contracts and sponsorships on the word of one person. It was only as a result of the trial and all of the evidence presented years later did it become obvious how he was slandered, but at that point the damage was done, and history cannot be erased. Recently Fr. Carlos Martins, the priest in charge of the Treasures of the Church mission, had a news article published by The Pillar, which if not read carefully, seemed to insinuate he had abused a minor. Fairly quickly, other news outlets had published more clarifying information which indicated it was more of an overreacting parent. Our approach towards the

Church and her leaders needs to be one of trust, especially if we truly believe she is guided by the Holy Spirit.

Theory of Education

When we read Scripture without trust we could become very easily discouraged. For example, when we read in Leviticus regarding laws about slavery, or if we read in Judges and learn about the wars God commanded the people of Israel to engage in we could assume God is neither good nor just, lay down the Bible, and walk away. The 1+1 theory of education goes like this, you do not teach a kindergartener calculus, nor expect a 1st grader to contemplate a doctoral level of philosophy. It takes steps, one at a time, to get to where we are today. We teach basic math, then algebra, then geometry, and so on.

In Leviticus, the context we understand is that God did not simply allow for slavery, but he was bringing a people from a harsh and cruel world they were used to, the abusive slavery they experienced in Egypt, and limited slavery to more of an indentured servitude where you could not abuse your slave, you must take care of them, and set them free after 7 years and pay them after they were done. In Judges we see God allowing and even commanding for war, but against a people who had categorically rejected Him and who committed terrible atrocities including the sacrifice of their own children. We see God's mercy when he promised he would not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of 10 just people living in the city. When we rush to judgement, we miss the rest of the story. If we stopped reading halfway through Judges, we do not learn that eventually God Himself comes down from heaven to save us from the slavery of death itself. However, it take the 1+1 process to get there, it takes one step at a time to bring us from a world of death and cruelty to one of love and mercy.

Blessings

Fiducia Supplicans was published last year, with many taking the aforementioned approach to this teaching. Some have been upset that he had mentioned and allowed for blessings to be given to people in irregular relationships including same-sex relationships. Taking just that sentence could bring about a great fear that Pope Francis is intending to take something further. That is, unless, we approach from a place of trust that perhaps we are not seeing the whole picture and imprinting intentions upon someone that are not there. If we look at the Church as a whole, we see there are priests and even some Bishops, particularly in Germany, that have been pushing the boundaries and intentionally blessing couples in same sex relationships. With that context, we can understand more fully what the document is intended to be: limitations on what can be done and when so that if a rebellious priest or bishop decides he wants to exceed those limits, there is now a written rule that can be held against him. Blessings are just that, a blessing, asking for the grace of God to come down on us and bring us closer to Him, but on His terms, not ours. What were the conditions which Pope Francis stated earlier in 2013 needed to be there? They need to be *searching for God* and the must be of *good will*. We have to recognize this includes other couples as well, where one or both parties may be divorced, or couples living together before marriage, and trying to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit on how to move forward.

Pope Francis himself did an interview in which he was questioned about his allowing of blessing of same-sex couples, and he immediately corrected the reporter for clarification and said the

blessings of persons is allowed, we do not and cannot bless the relationship because the Church cannot bless sin. However, all people need blessing, all people need God, and we all need the chance and grace to draw closer to him. And yes, to draw closer to Him does call for our repentance of sin. It does not mean we can persist in sin simply because we have desires as our desires may be disordered. All people are called to chastity, be they single or married, lay or clergy. The chastity takes different forms, and we are called to live that out whatever our station in life.

Jesus meets us where we are.

In the Gospel of John we are all familiar with Peter denying Jesus three times before the cock crows (John 18:15-27). Most of us are familiar with the story of Peter's redemption in which Jesus asks him if he loves him three times, and three times Peter responds that he loves Him (John 21:15-19). However, I would guess that most of us have not been familiar with the subtlety that is lost due to the translation from the original Greek language. In Greek language there are 4 words, or four different levels of love. In increasing levels, they are as follows:

Eros: Erotic or passionate love

Philia: Love of friends and equals

Storge: Love of parents for children

Agape: Love of mankind

Agape is the greatest and highest form of love, and this is what Jesus poses to Peter the first two times he is asked, but Peter is not ready. As a result, Jesus comes down to his level. With this context the conversation goes something like this:

Jesus: Peter, do you love(*agape*) me?

Peter: Yes I love(*philia*) you.

Jesus: Peter, do you love(*agape*) me?

Peter: Yes I love(*philia*) you.

Jesus: Peter, do you love(*philia*) me?

Peter: Yes I love(*philia*) you.

Peter, the first Pope, one who betrayed Jesus, and who had now witnessed His resurrection, still could not respond with the full and deepest sense of love that Jesus did. Yet, Jesus still called on him and met him where he was. He knew Peter was not where he wanted him to be, but he loved him and listened to him and met him on the level of love where he was. Eventually, Peter comes to love him with that highest form of love to the point where he would die in a manner like Jesus, crucified for His name.

How does this apply to the Synod?

Some have had concerns with the Synod, from persons involved to the topics of discussion which have included the roles of women in the church, all the way to its very nature which had taken a ground-up listening approach. Given that the Synod and the documents surrounding it are much greater in length I cannot do it justice with what is meant to be a simple reflection. Speaking broadly, the method employed over the years-long approach appears to imitate the approach Christ took with Peter in meeting him where he was, listening and responding in a manner that can be heard, but not lowering the standard of morality to which we are all expected to strive for. A doctor cannot heal a patient who will not open up to him, and the Church cannot heal and bring to salvation those who are not open to Her. Whatever the reason in a given case, many have come to distrust the Catholic Church and the hierarchy that leads it. We can respond to the synodal approach with a sense of distrust and skepticism and belief that the Holy Spirit is not guiding the Church. Or, we can respond with the opposite and trust that through listening to Her people the Church and Her leaders can more effectively run and evangelize to those who need it the most.

Limited Perspective

We can limit our own perspectives, intentionally or not. We have been blessed to live in a nation of abundance which can distort reality in that we very easily adopt the attitude of "having it my way." If I do not like a club, I can leave it. If I do not like my job, I will find a new one. If I don't like what I am hearing on the TV or radio station, I simply change it to what I want to hear. If I do not like this president, he is not my president. This can very quickly result in living in an echo chamber, where only our own thoughts and ideas are acceptable. No need to listen and debate on the merits of a position, just the repetition of talking points. This is then transposed onto our faith lives: If I do not wish to attend this parish, I will go to the one down the street. If I do not like this Pope, he is not *my* Pope, therefore I will not support him, or even actively work and speak out against him.

The Church is unique in that it is not simply a body of representatives, for as Catholics we believe She has been founded by Jesus Christ Himself, and continuously guided by the Holy Spirit, and will remain in place until Jesus' second coming. If we expect those working in a governmental administration to support their leaders in order for it to function well, how much more so should we expect those who are in the Church, clergy and lay people, to support Her leaders? Yes, we trust in the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit, and we are also called upon to form our own consciences well so that if we perceive one of our brother or sisters erring, we can help correct him properly. Sowing distrust through talking behind their backs instead of approaching them directly with our concerns is no foundation for any relationship, personal or professional.

Hoping and praying for a new Pope is not the attitude we should adopt as Catholics. Praying for him is absolutely necessary, but doing so with the attitude of, "I am right, and he is wrong, and if he doesn't change his position, I am leaving the Church entirely," is dangerous to our spiritual lives. In doing so we treat the Church like a secular club that can be abandoned on a whim. We treat the Church like Martin Luther with a sense of pride because I know how better to run the Church. If the Church needs correction, The Holy Spirit will correct it, but it will not be done through a new Protestant rebellion. If our faith is dependent upon "if I see something I don't like then I am leaving," then it is not a faith rooted in God, but in our own pride and self-gratification.

The Cafeteria is Closed

The second phrase I started this reflection with is what I need to close with: The cafeteria is closed. This phrase was often associated with Pope Benedict XVI's papacy. It refers to Catholics who like to pick and choose what they want from a Church. Some believe in the true presence in the Eucharist, some do not. Some believe abortion is evil, some do not. Some believe perpetual virginity and sinlessness of Mary, some do not. The reality is because these teachings are rooted in truth, we cannot abandon them on a whim without consequence. Here in Texas many are comfortable with carrying out the death penalty when we deem it necessary, but the truth is as Catholics we are pro-life from womb to tomb, and as such we are called to seek out the abolition of the death penalty as a recourse to punishment (CCC 2267). We cannot pick and choose what we want to be true, it is an all or nothing proposition. How do we know this? Look to the book of Revelation:

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth." (Rev 3:15-16)

If we cannot accept all the Church's teachings, we ought not to call ourselves Catholics. If we do not understand the teaching, seek understanding. If we still cannot understand, we are called to accept with trust and faith. We do what we can, and we leave the rest to God.

We pray for Pope Francis, (soon to be installed) Bishop Kelly, and our parish priests for their protection and guidance of the Church. We pray for ourselves for a spirit of trust and faith, and for the grace and strength to carry out His Will in our lives.

Sincerely in Christ,

Bill Marin

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