

Question: I have difficulty with some things this Pope has said and with modern issues he has failed to address. For instance, when he came to the US he did not address the freedom of religion issue. He also said, “Who am I to judge”, and the media has taken this as a personal endorsement of the gay licentiousness behavior. Now he is asking us to welcome forced Muslim refugees who do not believe in Christ. Is it wrong for me to be critical of this Pope?

Response: The office of the Papacy that alone enjoys the charism of infallibility when making pronouncements *ex-cathedra* on matters of *morals and faith*, which are binding to all Christians (a dogma formally acknowledged at the Vat. I Council), all Christians while not bound by the Pope’s non ex cathedra utterances, they are nonetheless bound to *respectfully consider* them when they are “authentic”¹ (that is, they must listen and reflect upon those Pope’s non ex-cathedra utterances in union with the bishops before deciding for themselves). Hence the conciliar teaching of the 1st Vatican Council:

The religious assent of the will and intellect (of Christians) is to be given in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Pontiff even when he is not speaking ex cathedra” (Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Vatican Council I, vol. II, op. cit., pp. cap. II-IV, p. 869).

Now, the teaching office of the Roman Pontiff is distinct from the ordained man who fulfills this sacred office. While it is said that this Roman Pontiff Francis does not enjoy the status of theological doctoral alumnus like many of his predecessors, one cannot argue that this makes him less holy than them, and yet, some correctly argue that it nevertheless impacts his theological and political views. It is here that some Christians encounter an impasse – they find it confusing to understand and defend this Pope when he makes off-the-cuff and unrehearsed utterances that are sometimes fragmented, ambiguous and open to a plethora of interpretations. “Why”, they ask, “does the Pope not qualify with greater theological precision?” To compound the matter, there is Satan who is “the ruler of this world” (Jn. 12:31: 14:30; 16:11) and “the ruler of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2), and who inspires those secular media outlets (that knowing or

¹ The word “authentic” here is key, as it refers specifically to those papal utterances in union with the bishops who are faithful to Tradition – never alone and apart from said bishops. Only with the faithful bishops does papal teaching authority assume an “authentic” character. Consider the following two statements:

“Christ gave the Apostles and their successors the command and the power to teach all nations, to hallow men in the truth, and to feed them. *Bishops, therefore, have been made true and authentic teachers of the faith, pontiffs, and pastors through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to them. Bishops, sharing in the solicitude for all the churches, exercise this episcopal office of theirs, which they have received through episcopal consecration, in communion with and under the authority of the supreme pontiff. As far as their teaching authority and pastoral government are concerned, all are united in a college or body with respect to the universal Church of God”* (Pope Paul VI, Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, 2-3, 1965).

“*The bishops, when they are teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to the divine and catholic truth... The religious assent of the will and intellect is to be given in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Pontiff even when he is not speaking ex cathedra”* (Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Vatican Council I, vol. II, op. cit., pp. cap. II-IV, p. 869).

unknowingly doing his bidding) to spin to the advancement of their varied political agendas the Pope's unrehearsed comments.

In response, let us first bear in mind this Pope has not contradicted one divine teaching of the Church. Admittedly, he lacks the theological tools and articulate skills of his predecessor and, in my opinion, the greatest Pope theologian of all time Benedict XVI. Let us also recall that despite the dark forces that plague this world where the dandelion and wheat must “grow together” until harvest time (Mt. 13:30), God always provides for his Church, even in the face of the opposition of the secular media. Let us recall that God has pre-ordained for the office of papacy this Pope as He has every Pope before him. It is a teaching of the Church that the Holy Spirit continuously guides her and her ecclesiastical authorities also, despite their imperfections! Never lose sight of this.

As illustrated in my publication, “*Can a Pope Become a Heretic*” (posted on the website: LTDW.org), not one validly elected Pontiff in 2,000 years has contradicted or changed one article of doctrine contained in Sacred Scripture or Sacred Tradition. This is quite an amazing achievement, and it testifies to the guidance behind the Roman pontiff, despite his human limitations, and the Church over which the gates of hell shall never prevail (Mt. 16:18).

Now, with regard to the pope non ex cathedra utterances on matters of *faith* (doctrine contained in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, and articulated by the Magisterium) and *morals* (what is “good” over what is “bad”), as well as his utterances on *ethics* (what is “right” over what is “wrong”), the Pope may remain tacit or not choose to emphasize or de-emphasize this or that issue, and this, sometimes on account of socio-political motives. Should one disagree with the Pope’s emphasis or lack thereof on said issues, one is free to do so, so long as one, in being critical of his advice, never loses sight of the fact that he is the Vicar of Christ on earth who possesses the charism of *infallibility* on matters ex cathedra pertaining to faith and morals, and whose non ex cathedra teachings on faith and morals are to be respected. It remains one’s prerogative to follow one’s conscience, but always with respect to the teaching authority of the office the Pope.

Otherwise put, we are to walk the fine line Christ demanded of us when he spoke to his disciples in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt. 23:3): we must be bound to follow the *infallible ex cathedra* pronouncements of the Roman Pontiff; we are also required to respect his *non ex cathedra* utterances by a) listening to reflecting upon his words and b) follow the dictates of an informed conscience.

No less important to said allegiance or lack thereof is the intentionality and transparency of this Roman Pontiff that accompanies his faith and moral teachings and ethical advice. If few dare to make the baseless assertion that this Pontiff is deliberately seeking to mislead others in the political arena, many more will attest to the genuine nature of his love for the poor and simplicity and, as such, he and his teachings and advice should be viewed. To demand of this Pope the same theological exactness and precision with which we were endowed under the tutelage of the brilliant Pope Benedict XVI (the greatest papal theologian in Church history) is to do him a disservice. As to the approach of one openly badmouthing the Pope for his teachings on faith and morals or his advice on ethics, such an approach is contrary to God's advice to his mystics whose writings are approved by the Church. I here recall God the Father's advice to St. Catherine of Sienna on the approach all Christians ought to adopt in this regard:

"[It] is My intention that Priests be held in due reverence, not for what they are in themselves, but for My sake, because of the authority I have given them. Therefore the virtuous must not lessen their reverence, even should these Priests fall short in virtue. And, as far as the virtues of my Priests are concerned, I have described them for you by setting them before you as stewards of... My Son's Body and Blood and of the other Sacraments. This dignity belongs to all who are appointed as such stewards, to the bad as well as to the good... [Because] of their virtue and because of their sacramental dignity you ought to love them. And you ought to hate the sins of those who live evil lives. But you may not for all that set ourselves up as their judges; this is not My Will because they are My Christs, and you ought to love and reverence the authority I have given them.

You know well enough that if someone filthy or poorly dressed were to offer you a great treasure that would give you life, you would not disdain the bearer for love of the treasure, and the lord who had sent it, even though the bearer was ragged and filthy... You ought to despise and hate the Priests' sins and try to dress them in the clothes of charity and holy prayer and wash away their filth with your tears. Indeed, I have appointed them and given them to you to be angels on earth and suns, as I have told you. When they are less than that you ought to pray for them. But you are not to judge them. Leave the judging to Me, and I, because of your prayers and my own desire, will be merciful to them" (Catherine of Siena; *The Dialogue*, translated by Suzanne Noffke, O.P., New York: Paulist Press, 1980, pp. 229-231).

Cf. also the following link: <http://www.hprweb.com/2007/03/the-danger-of-criticizing-bishops-and-priests/>

In sum, God demands of his flock a genuine respect to his anointed, especially the Roman Pontiff, despite their imperfections. To correct the Pope in a respectful way is admirable, but to openly and publicly belittle his mistakes and encourage others to turn away from his papal teaching authority is nothing short of schismatic. For what pious child who sees his father not speaking when he ought or saying something that is incorrect (though the father believes what he says is correct), runs his mouth to the father or runs off to inform the other siblings of the father's mistake to his embarrassment? Would not the child, if he is pious, while acknowledging the father's imprudent silence or incorrect speech with no disregard to the 4th commandment,

question his father in a filial, and not a contemptuous, tone? Such ought to be our attitude toward every Roman Pontiff. Yes, it is a fine line we are asked to walk, but let us not forget that Jesus had already asked us to walk it.

In Christ,
Rev. Joseph