

Pope Francis—Striking Out or Hitting a Home Run?

Cardinal Timothy Dolan is certainly right when he says that Pope Francis “wants to shake us [Catholics] up.” But is he doing more harm than good?

Among his most quoted recent statements are:

“I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars. You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else.”

And, “The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the Church must be ministers of mercy above all.”

And, explaining how someone once asked him if he “approved” of homosexuality, Pope Francis noted, “I replied with another question. ‘Tell me, when God looks at a gay person, does He endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?’ We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being.”

What are we to make of this? Here’s my assessment (as a non-Catholic) of the positive versus the negative.

Positive. Jesus often said controversial things that were easily misunderstood, and Pope Francis is following in His footsteps. There is nothing wrong with that, and it actually stimulates thoughtful discussion.¹

Negative. Moral ambiguity helps no one, and as Paul taught, “If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Cor. 14:8, ESV).

Positive. The Pope is putting first things first, making clear

that the mission of the church is not to oppose abortion and homosexuality but rather to bring the gospel to those in need.

Negative. If the church doesn't stand for the sanctity of life—defending the rights of the most defenseless of all—and if it doesn't uphold marriage and sexuality as God intended it, who will?

Positive. The pope is opening the door wide to atheists and gays and lesbians, not condemning them but offering them grace.

Negative. It is one thing to open the door; it is another thing to say, "Once you walk through our non-condemning door, if you really want to follow Jesus, you will radically change." This is similar to Jesus telling the woman caught in adultery that He didn't condemn her before telling her, "Go and sin no more." (See John 8:1-11.)

Positive. The pope is right in saying, "The church has sometimes locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules."

Negative. Many people believe that he is placing opposition to abortion and homosexual practice in the category of "small things" and "small-minded rules."

Positive. The pope is putting a much-needed new face on the church, which many Americans currently view as hypocritical, judgmental, mean-spirited and homophobic.

Negative. Jesus said to His disciples, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own" (John 15:19). It's a dangerous sign when MSNBC, CNN and *The New York Times* think you're great and speak well of you.

Positive. The pope has said plainly, "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner." This means that we can say to

all the pope's new fans, "Well, if he is a sinner, where does that leave you? It looks like you need a Savior too."

Negative. The idea that the leader of the Catholic Church is just a sinner like the rest of us makes it easy for us to justify sinful behavior in our own lives. After all, we're just a bunch of sinners!

All this being said, I find it interesting that the same media that was shouting the pope's controversial comments from the rooftops took very little note of his more recent comments, dating to Sept. 20, when he told Catholic gynecologists, "Every unborn child, though unjustly condemned to be aborted, has the face of the Lord, who even before His birth, and then as soon as He was born, experienced the rejection of the world."

He also "strongly condemned abortion as a manifestation of a 'throwaway culture'" and reaffirmed that life begins at conception. Why hasn't the media reported on this?

And how long will the media's love affair with the pope continue if the reports prove true that the pope "defrocked and excommunicated" an Australian priest in May "because of his radical views on women clergy and gay marriage"?

As noted by Tim Stanley in the U.K. *Telegraph*, "From all of last week's headlines saying that the pope wants to forget this nonsense about abortion and gays, you'd imagine that Germaine Greer had been elected to run the Catholic Church. Actually what the pope was saying was that he wants the Church to talk more about what it's *for* than what it's *against*. But that doesn't mean it won't still be against those things that contradict its teachings and traditions." Exactly.

From my perspective, it's too soon to come to conclusions about Pope Francis, but if he proves to be a radical reformer who holds to core biblical values while challenging the religious system, I say bring it on. If he proves to be more

in tune with the spirit of the age than with the Scriptures (and the church's Scripture-affirming traditions), that would be a disaster.

What's your take?

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