



JNANADEEPA

PJRS ISSN P-0972-33315

22/1 Jan-June 2018: 32-60

Cite as: Pandikattu, Kuruvilla. (2018). "Guided by Prayer and Humility:" A Case Study on the Comments on a Provocative Article on Pope Francis. Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, Jan 2018(22/1), 32–60. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4067447>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4067447

Stable URL:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4067447>

Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies

“Guided by Prayer and Humility:” A Case Study on the Comments on a Provocative Article on Pope Francis

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Abstract: This article is a critical analysis of provocative OpEd article, “Pope Francis’ Next Act” published in *The New York Times*, paying special attention to the comments of the readers.

The newspaper is a secular, liberal paper and the writer is a conservative catholic. The readers, especially the commenters, are educated. Then we catalogue the different comments and opinions of the readers into two broad categories: those unfavourable to the Pope and those favourable to him. The final conclusion from the analysis is that The Pope cannot be judged as liberal or conservative. He is a moderate, with conservative and liberal tendencies. On the whole, roughly 85% of the comments are appreciative of the Pope, some even going to defend his position. They believe that the Pope is truly “guided by prayer and humility.”

Keywords: Pope Francis, humility, prayer, compassion, forgiveness, openness to the Spirit.

Introduction

How does Pope appear to the general public? What are the impressions ordinary people have of Pope Francis? In order to gauge the mood of the people on the Pope, I selected one provocative OpEd article, “Pope Francis’ Next Act” published

in *The New York Times* and tried to analyse both the article and the comments to it.¹

The newspaper is a secular, liberal paper and the writer is a conservative catholic. The readers, especially the commenters, are educated. In the article, the writer criticises the liberal allies of Pope first and then insinuates that the Pope himself is a liberal, a position I do not agree with.

Then we catalogue the different comments and opinions of the readers into two broad categories: those unfavourable to the Pope and those favourable to him. I realise that obviously such a classification implies oversimplification.

Since it is a general newspaper, we cannot expect theological positions. Nor can we expect the reverential attitude that is normally assumed for a religious leader of Pope's stature. The informal views and impersonal nature of the comments are to be respected.

The aim of this article is to indicate where Pope Francis stands in the minds of ordinary educated people, not only limited to USA.

1. Pope Francis' Next Act?

Before analysing the article it will be good to introduce its author and the Newspaper in which it appeared.

a. The Author: "Ross Douthat's Fantasy World"

According to the journalist Oppenheimer we know that Ross Douthat (November 28, 1979) is "the devoutly Catholic, anti-porn, pro-abstinence, pro-life prodigy of punditry."

His path from agnosticism to Pentecostalism to Catholicism was rather an intellectual journey. "I was 17, a socially awkward teenager, and I was relieved to join a church where

no one asked you to pray spontaneously,” he told me. His reading had prepared him well: “You start reading C.S. Lewis, then you’re reading G.K. Chesterton, then you’re a Catholic. I knew a lot of people who did that in their 20s—I just did it earlier, and with a different incentive structure.”

A certain kind of “cerebral Christian” will recognize the young Douthat’s reading list, especially the prominence of English apologetic writers like Lewis, the mid-20th-century Anglican who penned *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Chesterton, an English Catholic who, prior to his death in 1936, promoted an agrarian, anti-modern agenda and is now beloved by fantasy writers like Neil Gaiman. Douthat was also a huge fan of J.R.R. Tolkien, another anti-modern conservative Catholic.

He graduated from Harvard College in 2002 and spent some time as a researcher, editor, and blogger for *The Atlantic*, he joined The New York Times in 2009 at the young age of 30. He became the *youngest* regular op-ed *writer* in the history of the New York Times and writes on “politics, religion, moral values and higher education.” Mother Jones calls him The New York Times’ wunderkind columnist “on a quest to save intellectual conservatism,”² who lives in his “fantasy world.” Thus, Douthat comes across as a committed, convinced, conservative Catholic.

The New York Times (NYT), in which this article appears, is a liberal and secular American daily newspaper, it is founded and continuously published in New York City since September 18, 1851, by The New York Times Company. The New York Times has won 122 Pulitzer Prizes, more than any other newspaper. Nicknamed “The Gray Lady”, *The New York Times* has long been regarded within the industry as a national “newspaper of record”.³ The paper’s motto, “All the News That’s Fit to Print”, is instructive. People who read *BuzzFeed*,

Politico, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* all tend to be liberal.

b. *The Article: The Ambition of the Pope and Anxiety of Allies*

The article begins by asserting that “By the standards of the Francis papacy, things were rather quiet in Rome for much of 2017.” Some of the controversy of the previous years, including the debate over communion for the divorced and remarried, had entered a kind of stalemate, “with bishops the world over disagreeing and the pope himself keeping a deliberate silence.”⁴ The article assumes that one long era of the pontificate seemed finished. So the question raised by the author is natural: how much drama there is still to come? As part of the unfolding drama, the month of June 2017 brought in fresh incidents in rapid succession. He mentions the removal of four powerful cardinals.

The first, George Pell, was both in charge of the pope’s financial reforms and a leading opponent of communion for the remarried. He had to return to Australia to face charges of sexual abuse — charges that either represent a culminating revelation in the church’s grim stance on the issue, or else a “sign that the abuse scandal has become a license for prosecutorial witch hunts.”

The second cardinal, Gerhard Mueller, was the head of the powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the office charged with safeguarding Catholic doctrine. Often sidelined by Francis, he had performed a careful walk on the pope’s marriage document, *Amoris Laetitia*,⁵ when he emphasizes that it did not alter church’s teaching on remarriage and the sacraments while “downplaying the signals that the pope himself thought otherwise.” After his first term was expired, he

was shown the door “in a manner so brusque that the usually circumspect German publicly complained.”

The third cardinal, Joachim Mein was a retired archbishop of Cologne and a longtime friend of Pope Benedict XVI. He was one of the signatories of the dubia — the public questions four cardinals posed last year to Francis about *Amoris Laetitia*, effectively questioning its orthodoxy.⁶ He died in his sleep at 83 — shortly after Mueller, his fellow countryman, had called him to report the news that he himself has been removed from his office.

The fourth, Angelo Scola, was another confidant of Benedict XVI and a leading contender for the papacy at the last conclave. He retired as archbishop of Milan retired five days after Mueller’s departure.

These four departures come from different backgrounds. But they have a combined effect, according to Douthat: “They weaken resistance to Francis in the highest reaches of the hierarchy.” So the question facing the remainder of his pontificate: So the title of the article: “The Next Act of Pope!”

With the opposition thinned out and the vision of Pope John Paul II and Benedict in eclipse, how far does the pope intend to push?

It is clear enough that Francis has friends and allies “who want him to go forward in a hurry.” They regard the ambiguous shift on divorce and remarriage as a proof-of-concept for how the church can change on a wider range of issues, where they have lately made forays and appeals: intercommunion Protestants, married priests, same-sex relationships, euthanasia, female deacons, artificial birth control, and more.

The author argues that in politics too the friends of Pope are making sweeping critique of all Catholic engagement with the political right in America, and especially the American Catholic alliance with evangelical Protestants.

In the liturgical issues also the Pope's friends are pushing forward. The interesting and convoluted argument runs thus: Pope has reached out to the Society of Saint Pius X, "the semi-schismatic group that celebrates the Latin Mass." This could first to this group's reintegration. The Pope will use this traditional group to quarantine all traditionalism and then the suppression of the pre-Vatican II liturgy for everyone else. A difficult argument to understand!

The author admits that the pope himself remains both more cautious than his friends. The new people he has appointed to succeed Mueller and Scola are moderate, not radical and "also perhaps more unpredictable."

His more liberal appointees can get ahead of him, as in the case of Charlie Gard, the dying English baby whose doctors and government won't let his parents pay for an unlikely-to-succeed treatment.⁷ The pope's refashioned Pontifical Academy for Life, "which now accepts pro-choice and euthanasia-friendly members, issued a statement that seemed to support the government over the parents." The author notes that Pope Francis intervened personally supporting the parents' rights, "creating a somewhat defensive scramble by his allies."

Then the author makes a larger and somehow confusing remark: "We know that Francis is a liberal pope, but apart from the remarriage debate we don't know what priority he places on any given liberal-Catholic goal."

The author goes on criticize the friends of the Pope, who are liberals: "Among many liberals there is a palpable ambition, a sense that a sweeping opportunity to rout conservative Catholicism might finally be at hand. But there is also a palpable anxiety, since the church's long-term future is not obviously progressive — not with a growing African church and a shrinking European one, priesthood those younger ranks are

often quite conservative, and little evidence that the Francis era has brought any sudden renewal.”

So the article ends with another provoking question: “How much does Francis himself share either sentiment — the ambition, the anxiety? The next act of this papacy still tell.”

I find it extremely sad that the article concludes using the catchwords ambition and anxiety. The ambition of the Pope? The anxiety of his allies? To caricature the three years of the Pope in these terms may be journalistically clever, but definitely not historically or theologically sound.

2. The Trends in General

Within eight hours of its publication, the article has received 229 comments. Of these 180 are recommended by other readers (reader’s picks) and nine NYT’s picks. Now the comments are closed. We highlight first the Newspaper’s own picks and reproduce the first five verbatim, so that we gain an overall view of the responses from the readers.⁸

a. NYT Picks

Dan Welch from East Lyme writes:

Ross, your evaluation of Francis is misguided. You are bringing the secularized viewpoint of a political pundit (I guess you cannot help (yourself) on his papacy.

He is not president, he is a pastor. He is not simply the head of a government, he is someone seeking to bring consolation and hope to people. He is not preserving protecting and defending a constitution, he is seeking to live out a religiously motivated message.

PG Sydney is of the opinion:

Ross I agree with all of that but we can't ignore Frances' first shot across the conservative bow when he sacked Cardinal Raymond Burke from the Prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, in 2014. Elevated from the Archdiocese of St. Louis by Ratzinger, Burke was the Vatican's leading conservative whose special hate was reserved for homosexuality. Not just marriage, its physical and emotional state. Given his distaste for rabid conservatives It was surprising that he elevated George Pell but his motive quickly became clear. Practicality. Pell was a Vatican outsider who had the management skills to detect and remove the financial corruption that was rife at the Vatican.

Greg from Savannah.ga comments:

Mr. Douthat's column is highly instructive but I think not in the way intended. This is a discussion of the politics of the Roman Church and what it will mean for the future of the Church. The loud take away from this column is that the politics matter more than the faith. This frightening trend seems ascendant in all of the major religions and points toward theocracy and zealotry

Nancy Fleming from Shaker Heights Ohio was pointed and precise:

What would Jesus Change? Signed an agnostic!

WMK York City perceives the empathy of Pope Francis for the poor and destitute. His comments:

Pope Francis has not made any sweeping changes to the Catholic Church and Will probably refrain from

doing so. His views on traditional marriage and pro life will remain within the frame of Catholic teaching. They are still quite conservative and he feels a strong amity bond is important to the Church and society. He does not want to weaken the family structure which is often at odds with our liberal culture. The one area where Pope Francis has been very vocal is in helping the poor and destitute. Most Catholics are in full support of his views and feel we need to assist those who are living in poverty. Much is expected of those who have been given great wealth. There are areas of the world where people are starving and we need to assist them in alleviating their suffering and pain. This is what the Church has preached for centuries. This will never change nor should it. He shows great empathy for those less fortunate and is a wonderful role model for the world. We must all do our part and help those less fortunate than us. This is what Catholicism is all about.

b. Reader's Picks

Here we follow up the picks or recommendations of the comments by other readers. It may be noted that some of the comments may be sarcastic.

We can perceive sarcasm in Gemli's comments:

Heaven forbid! Mingling with Protestants, married priests, same-sex relationships, euthanasia, females breaking into the Church's male hierarchy and contraception! Man the lifeboats! The Church is sinking into the 21st century!

Pope Francis was put in power not by God, but by a Church that kicked out the complicit Ratzinger. The church was hemorrhaging believers in the wake of a

scandal of pedophilia, which would have destroyed any other institution, and sent its participants and their apologists to jail. Ratzinger was a reminder of the abuse that had flourished under his hob' oversight, and for very earthly reasons that involved gold more than God, He was replaced by the kindly and forgiving Francis.

The self-flagellating crowd who are drawn to religion because of insecurity and a sense of unworthiness are furious. How can they enjoy the restrictions and the punishments that the Church once reliably doled out, keeping couples in loveless or abusive marriages, making unwanted children a consequence of sexual pleasure or ensuring that only men who had no interest in adult women were welcomed into the priesthood?

The connection between conservatism and religion is no coincidence. They revere hierarchy above human freedom. Pleasure is suspect, and must be controlled. There is no one so vulnerable that they will not be sacrificed on the altar of false piety.

Francis is popular because he's less religious. Catholic scolds are furious.

Meh, it's about time

KJ, Tennessee is highly impressed by Pope Francis.

I'm not a Catholic but I admire Pope Francis for his goodness, kindness, and willingness to accept and forgive normal human failings. The world is full of preachers, but his man leads by example.

Robert Steward from Chantilly, VA writes:

Douhthat, "We know that Francis is a liberal pope...."

Although you continue to portray Pope Francis as "liberal," I would argue that Francis is no more a liberal

than Jesus, who took on the religious authorities of his time by asserting such “heresies” as “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

Francis, I would say, is in good company, i.e., in solidarity with the “founder of the firm,” who taught that the purpose of rules and laws is something more than unquestioning observance of such. In this case, observance of the Sabbath was not abrogated, but properly interpreted in terms of how a law was intended to serve the human person—the human person is primary.

You obviously see “communion for the divorced and remarried” as a closed issue because there is a church rule that prohibits those in that group from ever having a “place at the table.” Francis obviously is not in agreement with your understanding of religious legislation just as Jesus was in disagreement with his adversaries. The focus of Jesus, as is that of Francis, is on how does a religious rule serve the human person.

Because Francis understands the church in terms of a “field hospital” that is present to heal and care for wounded humanity, he does not, as you do, see “communion” simply as a “reward” for those not wounded.

Robert Stewart Chantilly further elaborates:

In his opening address at Vatican Council II on October 11, 1962, Pope (Saint) John XXIII said: “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another... Frequently she (the church) has condemned them (errors) With the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity.” Like John XXIII, Pope Francis prefers the “medicine

of mercy rather than that of severity,” which is evident from his use of the image of the church as that of a “field hospital” and his insistence that the clergy need to be pastors with the ‘smell of the sheep’ on them.

Douthat, in this column and in prior ones, faults Pope Francis for his pastoral approach, an approach that applies the “medicine of mercy for addressing and healing the wounds and suffering of humanity. Ross apparently prefers the law enforcement (policeman) model of church leadership, a model of leadership intent on that enforcing rules and laws, rather than the model of the healer or the good shepherd.

Which model reflects a continuation of the ministry of the man who said he had been “anointed to bring good news to the poor.. .to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go.

Christine McM from Massachusetts sees Pope Francis as a “groundbreaker:”

I’m not sure where you’re going, Ross. Are you relieved the Pope really hasn’t done that much (we know you’re a conservative and a traditionalist) or are you’re disappointed he hasn’t done more to trigger an even bigger revolt from the chastened conservative wing?

And, why would the long-term future of progressive Catholicism be stymied by a growing African church? In Africa, there are clergy in high places given waivers from chastity if they already were found to have families, or needed to condone specific cultural and historical mores of their congregations, including, I believe, polygamy in remote areas.

I personally believe the impact of Francis has been far greater on issues that don't concern western obsessions such as communion for the divorced. This pontiff has raised grave concerns about the future of the planet, the rise of oligarchies, and lack of adherence to Jesus's admonitions to care for the vulnerable (feed the hungry, etc.)

I see Francis less as groundbreaker than as a most welcome "back to basics" Pope, focused more on how well people treat each other and the environment than on political smoke signals—who's in, who's out. Just as his creator taught him.

3. Taking an Unfavourable Stand

a. *Against Ross Douthat*

Expectedly, some of the comments are critical of the author. We start on a positive note. Hugo Furst comments:

Ross, thanks for your insightful article. You are a uniquely thoughtful and well-informed writer.

The other comments are not so favorable. For example from Windsor expresses his feelings thus:

So the Pope removed a prelate who rightly, or wrongly is accused of heinous behavior in a democratic society with a fair legal system.

He then didn't re-appoint a man who publicly disputed his position as stated in an encyclical, after which a man won agreed with the opposition died in his sleep at 83 years of age.

And finally another man retired for the Archbishopric at an age you 'forgot' to share.

My response....and then the sun rose in the east.

Aha you say but no it is all an evil plot to move on from the blind (but oh so satisfying) intolerance you seem to revel in, and embrace the lepers, love the sinner, emulate the good Samaritan, or move on to what Pat Robinson seems to think is the Tao of Jesus.

Tony Zito from Poughkeepsie. NY relates Pope to President Trump:

Of the many revolting aspects of Ross Douthat's writings here, the most revolting to me is his selective reverence for a Pope with conservative politics.

Pope Francis does not meet the test in that regard, and thus we have musings that a Cardinal may have been removed by the Pope as part of a "prosecutorial witch hunt" and rumblings about thinning of the political opposition. I would suggest that Douthat is engaged in the standard acts of right wing projection onto their antagonists - projection of the conservative proclivity to see everything in terms of winning and losing and nothing in terms of the actual progress of civilization. Indeed, any expression of faith in the latter is evidence in the eyes of cynics like Douthat that one is hiding his real agenda, which can only be to win something or other at all costs

That is, you can be devious like them or devious like yourself, but you can only be devious. There is something faithless about his treatment of issues of faith that only adds to the despair of Trumpian nihilism. Dare I say Heaven help.

NI Westchester is against Douthat and is favourable to the Pope:

Ross, ever since his inception as the Pope, you have never been a fan of pragmatic Papacy. I remember in your earlier op-eds you even denounced him because he was more human than dogmatic. You even had the temerity to understand catechism more than your Pope himself. George Pell - a felon, Gerhard Muller sitting on the wall, Joachim Meisner - died, Angelo Scola - old who was to retire anyway, who happened to be Pope Benedict XVI confidante.

Are you telling us that Pope Francis is playing dirty to get his agenda through? And Joachim Meisner died in his sleep! What are you implying here? I am no Catholic but I have great Faith in Pope Francis. He is what the Catholic Church needs - more humanity and compassion for the less fortunate.

Here it is not surprising that one of the comments goes against NYT itself.

Martin Daly writes:

Surprise that such articles occur NY Times. I suppose this means that many of us had taken for granted not only the mainly secular identity of most readers but also that liberal Protestantism's victory had been so complete that the mere publication. In "the newspaper of record" of a regular op-ed writer's views on Catholic doctrine seemed oddly quaint: This realization - frankly of slight embarrassment - may resonate with more than one reader as more than an echo, like a sermon that doesn't begin with, "In today's Gospel we see...."

b. *Against Pope*

One knowledgeable reader called “MP” compares Pope Francis to President Trump and is particularly harsh on the Pope.

The pontificate of PF is not unlike the Presidency of Donald Trump. Unpredictable and often incoherent PE’s early program to reform the Curia and update its operations and finances has stalled. He shows no inclination to press preferring, apparently, to advance progressive doctrinal and pastoral initiatives. These too have met with surprising--and notably Vatican II-- push back by orthodox bishops and lay leaders. PF demonstrates s personal harshness that was manifested in his treatment of Cardinal Burke and others, the ‘hostile takeover’ of the Order of Malta, and his rude walking out on Cardinal Mueller following PE’s abrupt notice that his term would not extended. Progressives appear to adore him. despite his decidedly pre-Vatican II and Argentinian autocratic leadership style. demonstrating that “it’s about the agenda”. PF conceded that he may cause a schism. It may already be happening as orthodox Catholics build intra-Church and para-church networks and linkages, amounting to a ‘shadow Church’ that will live in parallel with the institutional Vatican-sponsored Church, collaborating when possible with the official Church end silently attending to the preservation Of the Catholic orthodoxy through prayer, fellowship, catechesis and liturgy. And yes, PF’s eagerness to mend ties with the SSPX is s very obvious effort to blunt the continuing growth of the TLM, the Anglican Ordinariate, and other forms of traditional and liturgical orthodoxy.

c. *Against the Church: Hopeless Situation for Church*

Some others lament the situation of the Church. One reader “John” comments thus:

As a long term liberal Catholic in my 60s I still hope that Francis will accept divorced and remarried Catholics, married male and female priests, gay people, and birth control, and stronger laity control, but he does not seem to be doing much.

My three adult children are not Catholics nor my 7 grandchildren, and my children raised in the Catholic faith have turned to other faiths or no faith.,

Same is true with many of my parish friends adult children--something that means Catholicism will shrink greatly no matter what. I hold onto my faith but am realistic that the American church will shrink greatly and become more irrelevant even if Francis does the reforms mentioned above. The U.S. like most of the developed world has become a nation of non-church members.

ILL writes in a similar vein, (quoting the author John):

“Catholicism will shrink greatly, no matter what”.

Yes, in the United States, but the world is bigger than the United States (something I think we In the United States forget, especially Trump). Catholicism is alive and growing in many parts of the world and it’s growing more conservative.

And it’s the conservative led faiths in the United States that are growing, not the mainstream liberal churches.

And that conservatism is what has allowed us, sadly to have a president named Trump.

4. Taking a Favorable Stand

a. *Beyond Labeling the Pope*

Many of the readers do not appreciate Pope Francis being labelled a liberal.

One “Teresa” comments:

The continual, often inaccurate “labeling” being applied in today’s world is reflective of the divisiveness and only continues to fuel division. Furthermore, pigeonholing human beings into liberal vs. conservative, republican vs. democrat is futile. To me, Francis continues to send a powerful message.

Follow Christ’s teachings and be like Christ. Jesus didn’t label people, but included everyone. He didn’t mention the “rules” of communion, which were man-made by the Catholic Church. He didn’t mention abortion, homosexuality, marriage among priests (which was certainly allowed in the early Church), euthanasia, birth control, mass in Latin vs. native language, etc. I am a proud Catholic but I am far more about Jesus Christ than about the man-made rules of the Church. We are given free will by God. Follow Christ and that is all need to make good choices. Pope Francis exemplifies this but Ross and other doctrinal Catholics just don’t seem to get it.

Another reader “Alex” from Atlanta adds on to this discussion.

Ross Douthat’s discussions of “conservative “ and “liberal” Catholicism will remain murky until he recognizes that the divisions within the Church are marked not only by differences on matters of the degree of sexual/procreational regulation but also by dif-

ferences regarding the salience of Biblical literalism and Christian charity.

“Dominic from Minneapolis” emphatically claims Pope Francis is not a liberal Pope:

If we consider the actual teachings of Jesus at all seriously, our current Pope is the true conservative— he is trying his best to keep those teachings alive in the tumultuous present. You, Mr. Douthat, make clear in your writing that you are a liberal, or even more, a radical Christian. The Core teachings mean very little to you, it IS the organizational gloss on those teachings you seek to defend, beginning with those of St. Paul. As Will Durant so tersely put it, “Protestantism is the victory of Paul over Peter. Fundamentalism is the victory of Paul over Christ”. You, sir, are no conservative when it comes to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

“Patricia from CO” agrees that the Pope is not liberal for different reasons.

What I recall from my 8 years of Catholic grade school is that God speaks through the pope. And I believe that is what God is doing - expressing his desire to get back to the basics- for the Church to bring all his children in, show compassion, mercy, forgiveness, charity. As said below by Hla3542, getting closer to God and loving God and each other are more important than doctrine. Let’s stop our bickering about whether or not divorced people can receive communion and let’s listen to God and welcome people back.

And as others have said, Pope Francis is not that liberal; he seems pretty middle of the road to me. still waiting for women priests.

Another reader “Douglas” notes the radicality of the Gospel.

You label Pope Francis a “Liberal.” The only people who can say that are those who have completely forgotten how radical the Gospel can be.

The bishops of Vatican II were not “liberals.” But they listened and acted.

Archbishop Romero was profoundly conservative – but he was martyred for his defence of the poor. Francis has a history of conservatism

Maybe, Ross, you’ll be liberal too, if you took your faith and founder seriously.

“Dan Styer” has clear and logical argument to show that Pope Francis is not liberal.

We know that Francis is a liberal pope” writes Douthat. Does Francis support the ordination of women? No. Does Francis support local control of church property? No. Does Francis support the marriage of priests? No.

And even if Francis did answer “yes” to any of these questions, that wouldn’t make him liberal: Many conservative faiths have been able to answer “yes” to ALL THREE of these questions for centuries.

My conclusions: (1) Francis is not a liberal pope. (2) Douthat is not a trustworthy columnist.

The last comment on “liberal Pope” by Cheryl perceives the humility of Pope Francis. So four old men, resistant to change of any kind and deeply protective of their own, are gone.

Pope Francis, I always remind myself as a former Catholic, does believe in the basic tenets of Catholi-

cism. “Liberal” applied to him has come to mean love for all of humanity, and an understanding of the difference between good and the impossible adherence to strictures set down by an isolated - not quite celibate - bunch of powerful men which set up large numbers of humanity as unacceptable in the eyes of God as they framed him.

The official Church has done so much damage over time - in the obvious ways - the unending sexual abuse in every corner of the world - and not quite so obvious - rejection of people for divorce and remarriage (oh, yes, but acceptance thru annulment for those with reality big bucks) or for who they are, in terms of sexual identity. He does seem more Christ-like in his humility and that is as radical as he can get.

b. *Personal Charisma*

Many of the readers admire the personal charism of Pope Francis, as are evident from the following comments. “After-virtue” writes:

Reinhold Niebuhr chose not to force integration on his Detroit congregation, not because he was a segregationist, but rather because he recognized integration at the time would cause a schism from which the church was not likely to recover. Francis likewise treads thoughtfully and like Niebuhr recognizes that seismic changes sometimes do more harm than good. The time may perhaps be right to ease away from certain orthodoxies which have lost relevance and not quite right to throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak. I’m not even a little religious, but given the choice between Bill Maher’s self-assured progressive fanaticism and the Pope’s center left version of

the Church, I'd eagerly choose the latter as the less scary.⁹

EEE, another reader has a simple message:

Francis' impact for most of us is motivated by His public persona, and that is a clear message; Love Your Neighbor. Ah.... the power of positive leadership. So refreshing . We need not see how sausage is made though,

Ross, I appreciate your insights and efforts.

But from our God it's enough to see the finished products.... the Stars, The Fishes, the Heavens.... without seeing the gore and the cataclysms of the 7 days.

“Frustrated Elite and Stupid,” reader elaborates on the Jesuit mold of Pope Francis.

As s gay catholic in my 50s I have been attending a parish that recently was handed over by the Archbishop to the Jesuits. Before we had a very old Irishman pastor who was hardliner in the mold of B16. I personally didn't mind the old man's railing about abortion or his passing references to evil lifestyles, presumably mine as that is how he interpreted catholic doctrine.

Admittedly living in Georgia the old man had quite s financial following with the older parishioners. Now the Jesuits have filled the parish with numerous young people, young families and the sacramental life of the church is enriching our worship. Of course, the Jesuits, being in the mold of Francis, transformed the parish by actually instituting reforms of Vatican II, among other changes. We have lost our financial health because apparently the old folks who were big givers couldn't handle the Jesuits' changes. While we have many more people, young people understandably are

not as generous. I am not sure why we have to politicize every aspect of our lives, Ross.

Furthermore, Francis as Vicar rightly should concerned shut the future of who will do the work of the Gospel. Western Catholicism been reeling and desperately needs a future flock. Somehow that future under JP2 and B16 was hardly bright nor robust and the clergy it was refashioned by Ratzinger was not healthy either. I think Francis is making needed reforms. It's not simple as the petty politics we practice in the USA.

A Jesuit priest, Joseph A. Brown SJ, holds that Pope Francis provokes only because he consistently tries to witness to “servant leadership.” His comments:

Having been a Jesuit for just a few years short of Pope Francis, I must ask a very simple question, “Just what constitutes a ‘liberal Pope’”? Some might the risk of confounding themselves in trying to apply a label that has never been all that adhesive to singular, prophetic witnesses to “servant leadership.”

Some days he is; some days he isn't. And then on other days he is and isn't, all within hours. I marvel at the how consistent Pope Francis is, and how provocative that consistency seems to be for those who study him.

98 Recommend

c. Compassion and Forgiveness

Bill perceives the “compassion and forgiveness” that Pope Francis personifies:

The Pope seems to be a kindly man who speaks of compassion and forgiveness for mankind. However, he has not been constructive in changing the most egregious of the failings of the Church in current times.

Married priest, both male and female, would be a boon to a modern Catholic Church. I would allow an infusion of persons of intellect and compassion into a priesthood that is lacking in those qualities. Further, it would help prevent the situation that has come to light in the past 20 years that has caused such embarrassment and loss of many faithful. Recognize divorce as a common necessity. People make mistakes and people change. And end the complete and embarrassing sham of Annulment.

Most importantly, sanction the reality of artificial birth control. The vast majority of Catholics believe in it as do the majority of philosophers and theologians within the church. It would be the single most important step in helping rid the world of hunger and poverty and making abortion a rare event.

Finally, recognize that sexual orientation is not a choice. It is a human condition.

The Church needs to prove its relevance to the humans of the 21st century.

Another admirer of Pope Francis, Joseph C Bickford, comments succinctly:

As a non-Catholic I find it easy to admire Pope Francis. He has energy and good will and seems to believe in many of the things I believe in and hope for in a church I respect and admire. The church is the longest living complex organization on earth and its strength serves many human and social needs. Nonetheless for me the key is to make permanent changes to improve the church: more power to the laity, ordination of women, a more realistic attitude towards divorce, homosexuality, and abortion. So far it seems there is

good feeling, good personnel moves, but not much which will last

“Hia3452 from Tulsa” relates Pope Francis’ healthy connection to politics in bringing “fresh air and clean water” to the people of the word.

Francis is not about politics, although he has a voice and opinion about them.

I believe he is about spirituality and faith, not about religious doctrine. I think he is trying to see what separates us from God and what brings us closer. If men or religion or politics separate us from the love of God and one another, then there is the evil, call it the devil or darkness or whatever. And he wants to bring light and fresh air, clean water and food and shelter to eliminate the shadows.

Many readers, including John McDonald from Vancouver, Washington perceives the humility of Pope Francis and are captivated by the mercy of God. His comments are perceptive:

Ross Douthat mistakenly routes Pope Francis’ attempts to bring his Church closer to its people as a political effort rather than what it really is, the work of a person who believes that humility and mercy should characterize this institution of vast wealth, influence, and more than a billion congregants worldwide.

Attempts to create a liberal or progressive, or conservative political profile for Francis confuses his motives by attaching a political ideology to it and trivializes both his closeness to the needs of ordinary people and his desire to lift them up. It minimizes his single-minded effort to bring back to Catholic worship former congregants who frankly have been humiliated by the Church, or even Church sanctions, because they are divorced, or made a personal choice that does not

comport with what some describe as arbitrary and capricious doctrine.

I agree as some have commented that he is today a genuinely kind and forgiving person whose foremost desire is to cast this institution in the ways and lessons of the founder, and his actions carry meaning. His motives may include the restoration of the Church's influence in making secular governments more attentive to the needs of the people they govern. Is this a bad thing? I think not. I would not allow myself to be fooled by the subtleties of his actions, either. Starting with changes made at the Vatican Bank, he has support from his caucus of cardinals, and more importantly, from the membership.

Finally, another reader "Tom J" puts it succinctly:

It seems not to occur to you that the Pope's actions are guided by prayer and humility rather than political maneuvering. Your belief is an example of the problem.

It may be noted that when "Tom j" speaks of "guided by prayer and humility," he is referring to discernment of the spirit, which Pope Francis has ardently been advocating.

5. The Analysis: "Guided by Prayer and Humility"

From the above select comments, it is obvious that the reaction to the article has been mixed. As indicated in the outline, there are some negative criticism against the author and even against the Newspaper for having published this piece. Furthermore, there are couple of comments hostile to the Pope and the Church.

But the general sense of the comments, as evident especially from the Reader's Picks and the Newspaper's picks, is positive. To highlight some of the comments:

- The Pope cannot be judged as liberal or conservative. He is a moderate, with conservative and liberal tendencies.
- There is praise for the Pope for his effort to bring in compassion in a spirit of humility and openness. "More humanity and compassion for the less fortunate."
- There is high regard for going beyond the confines of the institutional Church and addressing the larger issues facing the world: poverty, nuclear disarmament and ecological concerns.
- On the whole, roughly 85% of the comments are appreciative of the Pope, some even going to defend his position. They believe that the Pope is truly "guided by prayer and humility."

It may be noted most of the respondents are secular people who may not be Christians. As far as the designation of the commentators are concerned, there is only one comment by a Jesuit priest. What is interesting is that this motley group of people, who can criticise or correct the Pope, and who are not bound by Catholic loyalty, is on the whole highly appreciative of the Pope's words and actions.

Conclusion

In spite of some reservations and unfavourable views, the study on the article and on its comments find that the readers have a highly favourable opinion on the Pope. It is remarkable that more than 80% of 229 comments reflect a remarkably good impression of the Pope.

“Guided by prayer and humility” could be the catchword to describe Pope Francis’s years as a Pope, which necessarily demands continuous discernment.

Notes

- 1 Douthat, Ross. 2017. “Pope Francis’ Next Act.” *The New York Times*. July 15. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/opinion/sunday/pope-francis-next-act.html>. It may also be noted that I have not strictly followed the qualitative research methodology of social sciences, but have drawn valuable insights from this research methodology. I want to thank Dr Dinesh Braganza for his helpful suggestions.
- 2 Oppenheimer, Mark. 2010. “Ross Douthat’s Fantasy World – Mother Jones.” February. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/01/ross-douthat-new-york-times-conservatism/>.
- 3 *The New York Times*. (2017, July 29). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 23:26, July 29, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_New_York_Times&oldid=792969085
- 4 Douthat, Ross. 2017. “Pope Francis’ Next Act.” *The New York Times*. July 15. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/opinion/sunday/pope-francis-next-act.html>.
- 5 Catholic Church and Francis, Pope. *Amoris laetitia = The joy of love: on love in the family* - Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation. Vatican City: Vatican Press. 2016. Dated 19 March 2016, and released on 8 April 2016. See also Pentin, Edward. 2017. “Pope Francis Thanks Maltese Bishops for ‘Amoris Laetitia’ Guidelines | Ncregister.Com.” April 6. <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/pope-francis-thanks-maltese-bishops-for-amoris-laetitia-guidelines>.
- 6 For understanding the issues related to the dubia, please see Alt, Scott Eric. 2017. “The Incoherence of ‘Just Clarify Amoris! Answer the Dubia!’” *Patheos*. April 24. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scottericalt/incoherence-just-clarify-amoris-answer-dubia/>.
- 7 For the tragic story of the child Charlie Gard, who is supported by both Pope Francis and President Trump, see Rawlinson, Kevin. 2017. “Charlie Gard: Pope and Trump Biggest Help in Keeping Him Alive, Says Mother | UK News | The Guardian.” July 10.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/10/charlie-gard-pope-and-trump-biggest-help-in-keeping-him-alive-says-mother>.

- 8 It may be noted that as far as possible, I have not corrected the spelling mistakes or capitalisation, to respect the informal nature of the comments.
- 9 William (Bill) Maher is an American comedian, political commentator, and television host. For some of the controversies connected with this liberal political activist, see Itzkoff, Dave. 2017. "Bill Maher Apologizes for Use of Racial Slur on 'Real Time' - The New York Times." *The New York Times*. June 3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/03/arts/television/bill-maher-n-word.html>.

Article received: Aug 17, 2017

Article approved: Sept 23, 2017

No of words: 7320