

Fr. Perozich comments —

In accord with canon 273, I respect the holy father and the bishops. My mind cannot wrap itself around everything that is said and published from recent proclamations by them. I will not make public criticisms about them; rather I do hold to the Magisterium of the Church in Scripture and Tradition, not the magisterium ascribed to a particular prelate or pope.

Not a few people have expressed shock and disbelief at the political and moral teachings of certain bishops and of the Holy Father these days regarding capital punishment, climate change, criticism of capitalist leaning economies, lack of criticism for dictators, misplaced praise for communism as a way to live out Christianity, giving away the rights of the church to governments, failing to call all to chastity and to respect life from conception to natural death, attacks on faith filled traditional beliefs and believers among other novelties these days.

For those with bishops who are supporting novelties that upset your soul, author Daniel Mahoney gives a summary of the current papacy which promotes many novelties and has appointed bishops who herald the new teachings with full vigor.

Respect the office of the papacy and of the bishop. Hold to the one magisterium of the Catholic faith. Pray, go to confession (as Fr. Zuhlsdorf frequently admonishes in his posts on his blog), find a faith community that holds to the classic teaching of the church in its teaching, guiding, and sanctifying. Live your faith in Jesus.

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Pope Francis, Wayward Shepherd

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The pontiff's erroneous path

In the first year or two of Pope Francis's pontificate, conservative-minded Catholics made heroic efforts to place the perplexing ways of the new pope in continuity with the thought and deeds of his immediate predecessors. It was said that he had been a forceful critic of liberation theology, at least in its Marxist expressions, that he was a man of traditional piety, that he spoke about the machinations of the Evil One with surprising regularity, and that his style — brash, critical of established ways, anxious for dialogue with the modern world — was a refreshing way of bringing Christian orthodoxy to bear on the modern world. But there were early signs that challenged this reassuring consensus. **Francis seemed suspicious of the most faithful Catholics — they were, in his estimation, rigid, obsessed with the evils of abortion and sexual sins, closed to the need for a Church open to humanitarian activism and a de-emphasis on dogma and even truth.**

If Pope John Paul II stood up to Communist savagery and mendacity with a courage and integrity that helped ignite the revolutions of 1989, and if the immensely learned Pope Benedict XVI gave soft nihilism a remarkably descriptive and accurate name, “the dictatorship of relativism,” Pope Francis stood for nothing less than accommodating the world in the name of “change” and deference to the alleged “signs of the times.” As Cardinal Zen of Hong Kong once noted, Francis could see Communists as merely the victims of Latin American military dictatorship and lovers of the poor and thus more Christian than Christians in decisive respects. The gulags, and massive religious persecution, did not fit into this vision of relatively benign Communists.

As the estimable Father Raymond J. de Souza pointed out in the November 28, 2019, issue of the *Catholic Herald*, Pope Francis has a soft spot for leftist leaders who oppress civil society in the name of social justice and solidarity with the poor. The recently deposed Bolivian leader Evo Morales was, de Souza writes, “the Holy Father’s favorite leader in the Americas,” which “was passing strange, as [Morales] was a tyrant.” Francis met with the demagogic Morales six times in six years and considered the man to be his friend. In an act never adequately explained by the Vatican, de Souza notes, when the Argentine pope visited Bolivia in 2015 he accepted from Morales a crucifix adorned with a hammer and sickle.

All of this, alas, fits into a much broader pattern. Francis genuinely esteemed Fidel Castro and told reporters after his visit to Cuba in 2015 that he saw in Castro a strongly committed ecologist. He remained silent publicly and privately about the sufferings and persecution of his coreligionists in Cuba under Communism. Castro’s hideous despotism and draconian restrictions on the Roman Catholic Church did not influence the pope’s judgment of the man or the regime. In Venezuela, the bishops repeatedly pleaded with the Latin American pope to

speaking out against the emerging anti-Christian leftist despotism in Caracas; the best the pope could do was call for “dialogue” between an oppressed and mutilated civil society and a regime whose “socialism” he still seemed to esteem.

Carlos Eire, the great Reformation scholar at Yale University, has described this pattern as **Francis’s “preferential option for dictatorship.”** Brutally honest but not hyperbolic, Eire was himself a “Pedro Pan” baby (a child refugee from Castro’s Cuba). This pattern of favoring dictatorial regimes is not limited to Francis himself but includes many of his closest associates. The head of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, the Argentine bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, a close friend and acolyte of the pope, has surrealistically declared the People’s Republic of China the country that best embodies Catholic social teaching in action. What does Pope Leo XIII, the initiator of Catholic social thought and a passionate critic of socialist collectivism, have to do with the residues of Maoism in China?

Political correctness — and hostility to the West as the West — pervades a good deal of what this papacy says and does. This is a papacy that has been largely silent about the decimation of ancient Christian communities in the Arab and Islamic Middle East. The Koran, Pope Francis insists, is incompatible with “every form of violence.” This is false, and everyone knows it. Where Bishop Sánchez Sorondo sees social justice and Catholic social teaching at work in China, others, as Robert Royal has noted, see intensified persecution of Catholics and other religious believers, environmental damage that is unprecedented in the East or West, a cruel forced-abortion policy, Orwellian surveillance of dissidents and of every expression of independence in civil society, and the rounding up in concentration camps of over 1 million Muslim Uighurs in the northwest. As Royal, president of the Faith & Reason Institute and editor of *The Catholic Thing*, aptly observes, the Vatican’s misjudgments are all too commonplace: **“The Vatican**

currently pursues a steady line of anti-Western criticism, against the alleged xenophobia, rapacious economies, and environmental ‘sins’ of both Europe and North America.”

Royal refers to these juvenile ideological clichés, and predictable policies, as manifestations of “simplistic progressivism.” **This is a Vatican that conflates the truth of Christ with a “religion of humanity” that has become a substitute for a religion that affirms transcendence.** Sober political thinking is not much in evidence, nor even a modicum of realism and moderation in human affairs. Love and charity have been hopelessly politicized, confused with a sentimentality that excuses every excess carried out in the name of a perfected “humanity.” When one sides with an atheistic and totalitarian regime that endangers the children of God, one has entered into morally and theologically troubled territory, indeed.

What is responsible for this steady evacuation of, this open assault on, classical Christian orthodoxy and moral-political good sense? **To begin with, Francis and his cohort are partisans of a “new Christianity” that pays insufficient attention to the horizon that Christians call “eternity.”** The Church is literally becoming secular, obsessed with political and social matters far beyond its competence. As the courageous Kazakh bishop Athanasius Schneider suggests in his new book, *Christus Vincit: Christ’s Triumph over the Darkness of the Age*, Pope Francis mainly attends to secular issues — climate change, the environment (right down to the proper disposal of plastic), immigration — and does so in an “exaggerated manner.” This “frenzied activism,” as Schneider calls it, crowds out concern for the life of the soul and the “supernatural realities” of grace, prayer, and penance.

This pope proclaims mercy without a concomitant emphasis on the need for repentance, or a fundamental reorientation of the soul. Compare this with the first of the

Gospels, that of Mark, in which Jesus repeatedly cries out for repentance. There is no Kingdom of God without the penitential turn of the soul to the grace and goodness of God. Nor does Francis seem to believe in punishment, temporal or eternal, for grave crimes and sins. After unilaterally changing the Catholic catechism to declare capital punishment barbaric and illicit, he now suggests that life imprisonment is also unacceptable from the Church's point of view. He has a seemingly utopian confidence in rehabilitation and no real sense of radical evil. His tendency is to identify the "magisterium of the Church," its settled and unchanging teaching going back to apostolic times, with his own whims and ideological preferences. This may be the most troubling aspect of his papacy.

At the annual meeting of the American bishops in Baltimore this past November, the papal nuncio, **Archbishop Christophe Pierre, chastised the American bishops for not being on board with the "magisterium of Pope Francis."** **But this is not the way faithful Catholics talk. This is evidence of a misplaced ultramontanism, allowing a single pope to alter enduring Church teaching in the name of "change" or accommodation to the zeitgeist and in obvious disregard of what is permanent in the natural moral law.** As Bishop Schneider suggests, there is something unilateral about Pope Francis's thinking on crime and punishment and the allegedly immoral and illicit character of the death penalty. Francis almost carelessly partakes of what C. S. Lewis called a "humanitarian theory of punishment" that, as Schneider says, "in principle implicitly or explicitly absolutize[s] the corporal and temporal life of man." There is a blindness to the power of evil, and to original sin, that informs this humanitarianism from beginning to end. There is little or no talk about the need for penance and expiation for serious sins and crimes, or even a recognition that "monstrous crimes" must be punished by decent political communities that wish to safeguard the common good.

As Bishop Schneider is right to note, temporal punishment has sometimes given rise to repentance and a radical transformation of souls: Witness the “good thief” with Jesus at Golgotha who found expiation — and eternal life — on the verge of his execution. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux did not attend protest rallies demanding that the death penalty be abolished. Rather, she prayed that hardened criminals, on the verge of execution, would respond to the gift of grace and repent before a merciful God who is our father and friend. This understanding of sin, crime, repentance, and responsibility is alien to this papacy and the “progressive” wing of the Catholic Church, which indulges in a humanitarian sentimentality that today too often passes for Christianity.

On matters of war and peace, and immigration and the integrity of borders, Francis has been guided by the same humanitarian moralism that has informed his “frenzied activism” on other fronts. In a 2018 book of interviews with the left-wing French sociologist Dominique Wolton, Francis lightly dismisses the rich Catholic tradition of ethical and prudential reflection on matters of war and peace. In the tone of a person with no political responsibilities, and no sense of what they might be, he declares that there is no such thing as a just war. If he means that no war is simply or absolutely just, he is reiterating age-old Christian wisdom about the impact of original sin even on decent political communities attempting to defend the civilized patrimony of humankind. But this pope, abandoning equitable or balanced judgment, declares that only with peace do you “win everything.” He overlooks the fact that **“peace” can also be a vehicle of mendacity, oppression, injustice, violence, and genocide, as that proffered by totalitarian regimes.** As Vladimir Solovyov argued in his “Short Tale of the Anti-Christ” (1900), there can be such a thing as an “evil peace” and a good or legitimate war (and vice versa, of course). Francis’s conception in no way resembles the “tranquility of order” so richly

articulated in Book 19 of St. Augustine's *City of God*. If only he would display more deference to the rich theological and philosophical wisdom of the past.

Francis seems to believe, like the Leninists of old, that wars are caused only by rapacious capitalists, discounting quests for power, influence, glory, or fame, and never by totalitarian ideologues. Only the most naïve progressive or humanitarian could see “money” — “Satan’s dung,” as Francis rather colorfully calls it in his conversations with Wolton — as “the greatest threat to peace in the world today.” Alas, such musings sound more like the pronouncements of a secular progressive than the considered reflections of a man of a Church “which knows the truth about man,” to cite the great Pascal.

The silence of most of the bishops in the Catholic Church on this embarrassing but destructive mixture of progressivism, reflexive activism, and casual dismissal of the deepest wisdom of the Church is disconcerting. There are exceptions. As Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the former head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has repeatedly pointed out, the Church must recover the clarity of true theology and the natural moral law. “Spiritual and moral renewal in Christ and not the de-Christianization of the Church or her transformation into an NGO” will point the way forward. If the Church is nothing but a humanitarian NGO, she is nothing holy or enduring and will be blown to and fro by various ideological winds. In his pre-Christmas address at the end of 2019, Francis railed against “rigid” traditionalists who will not accept “change.” He also quoted the late Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan, who claimed shortly before his death in 2012 that the Catholic Church was “200 years behind the times.” One must ask: When did the morally and intellectually empty ideological standard of progress and reaction replace the enduring distinctions between truth and falsehood and good and evil? Doesn't the Church aim to see and uphold the “timeless in time,” as T. S. Eliot so eloquently put it?

Legitimate change presupposes a much deeper fidelity to enduring truth. But Catholic progressives and humanitarians have historicized the faith. They succumb to what the French Catholic political philosopher Pierre Manent calls “the authority of the present moment.” Truth itself evolves in this sad emasculation of the faith of our fathers. Love and charity take on a wholly horizontal dimension, and old and enduring verities give way to “the spirit of the age.” The good is historicized, becoming a new thing in every epoch, if not every generation. **Progressive Christians of the type that dominate the Roman Curia have become fixated on an imminent transformation of human nature and the world.** We are faced with an existential choice of the first order: a choice between what Eliot called the “Permanent Things” and a facile, ideological appeal to “what is happening.” One hopes and prays that the Holy Father comes to see just what is at stake when one aims to “change” the Church so quickly and precipitously.

When the head of the Jesuit order, the progressive Arturo Sosa, S.J., tells an interviewer that no one had a tape recorder when Jesus Christ set forth his demanding teachings on divorce and remarriage, we are dealing with open contempt for enduring truth and the divinely revealed Word of God. None of this has anything to do with pastoral discernment, properly understood, or Saint John Henry Newman’s “development of doctrine.” Doctrine develops but it does not decisively change. The Trinitarian character of the Godhead is amply present in the New Testament and was even prefigured in the Old. But the doctrine reached its fullest and most complete articulation at the Council of Nicaea in a.d. 325. The development of doctrine owes nothing to a historicist denial of unchanging truth. That is a distortion of the Catholic faith and the meaning of Newman’s famous concept.

Recently, in response to Pope Francis’s latest call for “change” and admonition against “rigidity,” his ill-

advised urging of the Catholic Church to catch up with the modern world, George Weigel asked the pertinent question: What are we supposed to catch up with? The dictatorship of relativism, the cult of the autonomous imperial self, a culture “that detaches sex from love and responsibility”? This is what Jacques Maritain had already described as “kneeling before the world” in *The Peasant of the Garonne*, his prophetic 1966 lament, in the days after Vatican II, that a great opportunity for spiritual, theological, and cultural renewal was already degenerating into a capitulation to the nihilism that had come to define modernity in its least sober and most extreme forms: wholesale emancipation from tradition, culture, the moral law, and authority in the Church. But Weigel ended his reflection, published in *First Things*, with an excellent observation that is well worth pondering. The old secularism of, to use Weigel’s example, Albert Camus was decent, humane, and struggling to reaffirm moderation against both ideological fanaticism and the not-so-slow drift of Western culture into a debilitating moral nihilism. Weigel rightly added, however, that the new secularism-cum-nihilism, already raising its ugly head in the mid 1960s, had nothing but contempt for transcendent truth: “The new secularism was embittered, aggressive, and narrow-minded,” and “it is now firmly committed to driving the Catholic Church out of public life throughout the Western world.” This is the spirit of the age, a barely concealed nihilism, with which the Franciscan revolution mistakenly thinks it can make its peace. At some level, Pope Francis, a son of the Church, must appreciate this.

During the lamentable Amazon synod, held in October 2019, genuflections before a statue representing an Incan fertility goddess (the so-called Pachamama) took place in the sacred churches of Rome. In this, Cardinal Müller sees idolatry and a satanic desecration. For his part, Pope Francis can see nothing but ecological solidarity and respect for other “cultures.” From time to

time, Francis makes a clarion call for evangelization. But at the same time, he warns against efforts at conversion or proselytization. One suspects the evangelization he has in mind is a largely secular affair at the service of the “humanitarian values” that define the new Christianity. How else does one explain the pope’s call for a “Global Education Alliance” to promote humanitarian values and activism that will culminate in a summit in Rome on May 14, 2020? This has less to do with the Christian proposition and more to do with a modish and unthinking progressivism. I do not doubt the integrity of the Holy Pontiff. But he is a half-humanitarian who confuses the Christian faith with a secular religion of humanity. A faithful Catholic is obliged to point this out for the sake of the truth and the good of the Church.

While the Church remains largely silent about (in the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) “crimes and sins that cry out to Heaven” — the terrible clerical and episcopal sexual abuse and the hideous cover-ups that followed — **Francis puts much of his energies into promoting ecological activism (with an apocalyptic edge) and any number of simplistic progressive causes. One sometimes hears the voice of a politically charged functionary of the United Nations more than that of the Vicar of Christ on earth.** The institutional Church, meaning its assorted bishops and their conferences, responds to this revolution in the Church with silence, passivity, and those time-serving bureaucratic and self-protective habits that led the Church into crisis in the first place. The crisis is just that deep.

The religion of humanity, and the accompanying dictatorship of relativism, are deeply ingrained in the Church of Rome, and at the highest levels of the Church at that. Providence may save the Church from becoming a branch of the religion of humanity at prayer, but only if faithful Catholics allow themselves to become righteous and truth-telling agents of our loving and provident God. Saint Thomas Aquinas

reminds us, in question 91 of *Summa Theologiae*, that human prudence and virtue are crucial means through which divine Providence does its work. Passivity and silence before the excesses of the Franciscan revolution, before the transformation of Catholic Christianity into a new, humanitarian Christianity (already proclaimed and outlined by Saint-Simon in *Nouveau Christianisme* in 1825), will be the end of the Catholic Church as we have known it. When the “present moment” becomes one’s authority, one has effectively repudiated the Lordship of Christ for the “Lord of the World” (the title of a dystopian novel about the Antichrist that Pope Francis, rightly, admires). This is precisely what is at stake in the effort to create a “new” Church that burns bridges with the past and takes its bearings from a groundless notion of moral progress.

Cardinal Robert Sarah, the African-born bishop who heads the Congregation for Divine Worship, shows the way to faithful witness in this time of troubles. He does not attack the pope by name and never ceases to proclaim his (genuine) filial devotion to the Holy Roman Pontiff. But at every step, loyal to the apostolic inheritance, he exposes the fatuousness of the new Christianity. In *The Day Is Now Far Spent*, a collection of his conversations with the French journalist Nicolas Diat that was published by the invaluable Ignatius Press in 2019, Sarah eloquently and faithfully pleads for a Christian witness in which prayer is not eaten away by reckless activism, in which true charity is not confused with humanitarian ideology, in which the liturgy evokes the sacred presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and in which theology is not transformed into politics (I am paraphrasing a crucial passage in the book). Sarah came of age in Sékou Touré’s Guinea, so he experienced Marxist-Leninist fanaticism from the inside. He saw doctrinaire egalitarianism at work, the atheistic persecution of religion, the cruel and sadistic ravages carried out by the government police. He adamantly rejects the “preferential option for [left-wing] dictatorship” that has sadly marked the Franciscan

pontificate, as well as its lamentable indifference to “Islamist fanaticism, which kills to establish a reign of terror.” Sarah loves political liberty rooted in personal responsibility and “joyous self-limitation.” (You will recognize the influence of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whom Sarah quotes in the book as much as he quotes Benedict XVI.)

Instead of kneeling before the world and succumbing to the allure of a late modernity that has no place for elevating conscience and binding truth, Cardinal Sarah calls on the Church to fearlessly witness to the truth about man. It must witness, with evangelical zeal and fidelity to the natural moral law, against the terrible perversions that are gender theory and transhumanism. They are the “pernicious face” of totalitarianism in the 21st century since they, too, “hope to mutilate and control [human] nature.” The Church now should have one paramount mission: to defend human nature, moral responsibility, and a conscience informed by natural and divine truth (not pernicious self-will) as precious gifts that come from the Lord of Hosts. Sarah puts it so well: Men and women of good will would respond with enthusiasm and gratitude to a “splendid act of courage by the Church” to recover the true sources of human liberty, dignity, and responsibility. Without such an act of courage, the progressives will lead the Church of Christ down a path of gradual renunciation of everything that defines the Christian Church as a vehicle of divine truth, of the moral law, and of liturgical fidelity to the worship of the Most High. And as he argues in a new book, *Des profondeurs de nos coeurs (From the Depths of Our Hearts)*, written with a contribution by Benedict XVI, the new Christianity undermines an authentic and faithful understanding of celibate priesthood, of priesthood truly sanctified by God.

By becoming shrill, dogmatic, and moralistic practitioners of a politically correct religion of humanity, the Church follows the path of perdition. The political philosopher Leo Strauss, speaking in 1964 at the

University of Detroit, a Jesuit institution, said that the Roman Catholic Church was the last remaining spiritual body or institution to truly appreciate all the pitfalls of a modern project that openly and self-consciously rejected natural right in the classical and Christian senses of the term. Strauss made that remark at the very moment when important elements within the Church were succumbing to modernity at its least wise, least sober, least admirable. This is what the political philosopher Eric Voegelin so aptly called “modernity without restraint.”

For generations to come, the Catholic Church will bear the shame of its capitulation before a totalitarian regime in Beijing, a regime that demands loyalty to state power and Communist ideology before fidelity to the saving grace of Christ. An atheistic state now essentially controls all episcopal appointments in China. The sacrifices of the underground Church, whose adherents have remained faithful to Rome since 1949, are apparently of no major concern to Vatican secretary of state Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Pope Francis. And one should not underestimate the ideological sympathies for Chinese tyranny that predominate in some circles around the Argentine pope. The same mistakes, but even worse, that drove the Vatican’s policy of barely concealed appeasement of Eastern European Communist regimes (the so-called *Ostpolitik* of the 1960s and 1970s) are being made again, with no evidence of lessons learned. As Bishop Schneider points out, the great Hungarian cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty, who adamantly opposed the Vatican’s policies toward his country’s Communist regime and was summarily dismissed by Pope Paul VI, has now been declared worthy of veneration for his “heroic Christian virtues” in witnessing to the faith and in fighting Communist totalitarianism. Can no one in Rome connect the dots and see that history is repeating itself?

A preference for left-wing dictatorships is not simply evidence of change in a change-obsessed papacy but a sign of foul moral corruption, part Machiavellian and part ideological, in the

upper echelons of the Church. **This moment calls for fidelity to enduring moral and theological truths, faithful adherence to the magisterium understood as the full weight of Catholic wisdom, and a firm rejection of the historicized and politically correct substitution for the magisterium that is evident in some curial circles.** And we must stand up fearlessly for our coreligionists who continue to suffer under Islamist and Communist violence and tyranny. **Let us uphold true Catholicism and not a mawkish substitute that owes more to the religion of humanity than to the faith of the martyrs.** Let us hope that Pope Francis comes to see the need to uphold authentic continuity in the Church — fidelity to her old wisdom — and not a frenzied chasing after change for change's sake. **This is a hope that is fully in accord with the filial respect that faithful Catholics owe the Holy Father.**

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