

Why I Admire Pope Francis

By Father John Catoir JCD – 2-27-18

Pope Francis has my admiration because I hear the voice of love speaking through him. He always stresses God's mercy and has the courage to take on canonical legalists who find the mystery of divine mercy too difficult to fit into their mentality. "For God did not send His Son to the world to condemn it, but to save it." -(John 3: 17). Mercy seems like laxity to the conservative prelates who became alarmed when Pope Francis urged Catholics to rely more on their conscience in resolving personal moral issues.

Having been the Judicial Vicar of my Diocese for many years, I experienced how imperfect the Tribunal system was. As the Chief Judge of the Marital Tribunal I came across many cases where annulments were denied unjustly because of poorly run courts, and because of an overly rigid application of the rules of evidence. Very few annulments were granted in the 60's and 70's.

They sent me off to get my doctorate in canon law, but when I came home to run the Diocesan Tribunal, I often had to tell the aggrieved parties that following their inner sense of the truth as they stand before God was often more reliable than being sent away with a questionable verdict. When Pope Francis was elected, it wasn't long before he began urging Catholics to rely more on their conscience, and that was music to my ears. Reliance on conscience is an established principle of Moral Theology.

Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson at the time, reported that Pope Francis was saying that in grave situations a well-formed conscience can be relied upon. The gravity of the situation was to be determined by the parties themselves.

Pope Francis, born in Argentina on Dec. 17, 1936, was elected Pope on March 13, 2013. He was the first Latin American Pope, the first Jesuit Pope and the first non-European Pope in 1000 years.

On July 29, 2013, he said, "If someone is gay, and sincerely searches for the Lord, and has good will, who am I to judge?" He immediately got into trouble for that quote, but the Catholic parents of gay children felt genuine solace. While he did not endorse same sex marriage, he did say there could be some sort of civil union to protect their civil rights.

Conservative Catholics become fearful that any relaxation of the laws pertaining to marriage and divorce or contraception would threaten the Church's broader stance on medical ethics and sexual issues. This is an understandable concern, but not an insurmountable one. Freedom of conscience is a human right.

Pope Paul VI affirmed the immoral nature of artificial contraception in his Encyclical, "Humanae Vitae." Pope Francis has remained firm in his opposition to those who refuse to have children because it interferes with their lifestyle, but he respects the consciences of those who are struggling to raise children in today's world.

Pope Francis agree with the various National Hierarchies who have instructed their laity that the use of private conscience in these matters was permissible. He also highlighted Paul VI's instruction to priests, urging them to show compassion in the confessional in these matters.

What I admire about Pope Francis is his willingness to bring all this into public debate. Affirming freedom of conscience is an act of intellectual honesty and a way of being both merciful and understanding. These are God-like quality.

God bless Pope Francis.