

### ***For and Against***

In the name of him who blessed the little children, dear friends in Christ: the week before last our nation was visited by Pope Francis, who is the head of the Roman Catholic Church. Since assuming that lofty position a couple of years ago, he's been presenting himself as the kinder, gentler Pope. His concern is that his church as a whole is better known for what it's against than what it's for. He thinks all that perceived negativity turns people off and drives them away. So he's been striving to accent the positive aspects of the church's teachings.

Now, hold on to your seat, because I'm going to say something that may knock you over if you're not prepared. I don't often find myself in agreement with the Pope, but I think he's on to something here. We in the Christian Church can be known more for what we're against than what we're for. And we really should do a better job of highlighting the positive aspects of our faith – all those good things that we're for, for there are plenty of them. Too often we allow the opposing side of a moral issue to frame the argument, and we're left having nothing to say in response to the evils they're advocating except things like “No.” “Don't.” And “Thou shalt not.” And that does make us sound negative, like we're trying to take all the joy out of living.

But neither do we want to overdo it. That's what happens with Pope Francis. In his effort to sound positive all the time, he's often misunderstood. Many who hear his positive pronouncements conclude that the church has changed its teachings. The chief culprits here are members of the press who are notorious for hearing only what they want to hear and then broadcasting their version of what they would like to be true. When, for example, the Pope recently announced a certain upcoming window of time during which catholic women who aborted a child in the past and were subsequently excommunicated from the church may go to a priest and be absolved of that sin, the press trumpeted “the Catholic church now approves of abortion”. Um. No. It doesn't. I sincerely doubt that it ever will. But this is only one example: it happens to him time and again.

And that's why it's never enough for the church to proclaim only what it's for. We also have to state clearly, emphatically, and with loving concern what we're against. And for this we have no better example than the Lord Jesus who in today's Gospel does both.

He's approached by a group of Pharisees who have a question for him. And make no mistake, these guys are no friends of Jesus. They hope to entrap him in his answer and thus discredit him as a religious teacher. Their question concerns the sticky issue of divorce. As we heard, there was a provision for it in the law of Moses. But there was an argument among the Pharisees about the circumstances under which it was proper to pursue a divorce. One side said that there were no impediments or criteria that had to be satisfied. If one morning a man woke up and decided he didn't want to be married to his wife anymore, well, okay then. The law said write her a certificate of divorce and send her packing. The marriage is over. Done. All there is to it. And God is happy because his law has been kept. The other side said not so fast. There had to be legitimate grounds for a divorce – some failing or shortcoming found in a wife that made her an unfit marriage partner. But if it could be established, then divorcing her was the proper thing to do. Of course, there was disagreement among those who held this point of view about exactly what kind of failings in a wife rendered her unfit. And this is what made the Pharisees think their question was so diabolically clever. In their own circles, they had argued endlessly about these issues. And like good lawyers, they could argue either side of it. They figured no matter what Jesus said in response they could shoot his answer full of holes.

What they hadn't counted on, however, is that they were bringing their question to the guy who created man and woman in his own image and designed for them the institution of holy marriage. Jesus answers by turning the question back on them. You ask me about divorce? What does the Law of Moses say? You know. They tell him, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away."

Yes, replies Jesus, that's what the *letter* of the law says. Now let me school you about the spirit behind it. "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment." That is to say, divorce is always the result of ongoing sin. It's never a good thing. It falls into a category of necessary evils for dealing with evil like prisons and wars. It would be better if we didn't have to have them, but in this fallen world – because of our sinfulness – sometimes one evil is preferable to another. But that doesn't make it any less evil.

With respect to divorce, the Lord is always opposed to it. Through the prophet Malachi he said he hates it. It's a very strong word. My concern is that we Christians in today's church don't share his hatred. Like the Pharisees who confronted Jesus, we're always trying to justify it somehow. We do it for ourselves: "You don't understand. I simply can't go on living with that woman. She makes my life unbearable." And we do it for others whom we know and care for. "Why do you keep putting up with that guy? If I were you, I'd ditch him and find someone else – someone who will appreciate you and treat you like the wonderful woman you are."

No. Divorce is a bad thing. It hurts people. It hurts especially children who are often the innocent victims of their parents' selfishness and hardheartedness. Oh, they like to tell themselves "the kids will be all right." Funny, that's not what the kids say.

Now, granted, sometimes a divorce may be necessary. When there is physical danger due to habitual violence and abuse; when there is criminal activity going on, like dad's running a meth lab in the basement; when one or both spouses have undermined the most basic level of trust upon which the marriage is built by having given themselves sexually to another; in these and other such circumstances divorce may be the solution – but only after every effort has been made to correct the problem and reconcile the couple. And even then, if the divorce happens, we should recognize it as the tragedy that it is. The Lord is against divorce. And we should be too.

What Jesus is for (and we should be for also) is marriage: marriage the way God designed it to be – which is why Jesus takes the Pharisees back to Genesis. "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female'. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they shall be one flesh'. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

There's a lot to digest there. First is the issue of gender, the fact that we were created in God's image male and female. The distinction of the two sexes is part of the goodness of creation. So, if you're male, that's a good thing. Act like a male. Dress like a male. Rejoice in your masculinity and perform the duties God has assigned you as a male. Likewise, if you're a female, that's a good thing. Act like a female. Dress like a female. Rejoice in your femininity and perform the duties God has assigned you as a female.

*And let's not confuse the two*, as many in our society are pushing so hard for. Surely you're aware of efforts to minimize the distinction of the two sexes or to do away with them altogether. It's leading to such madness as unisex public restrooms and locker rooms, neutering pronouns like he and she, men who want to pretend they're women and women who want to pretend they're men, some going so far as have themselves surgically mutilated in an

effort to fulfill their fantasies. It doesn't work. There is no amount of surgery and no combination of hormones that can change a person's basic biology. And yes, I'm aware that there are a very small number of people who, due to genetic defects, fall into a certain gray area, having characteristics of both genders. They need our love and compassion as they sort out their difficult circumstances. But for the vast majority of us, there is no ambiguity. There are males and there are females. The clear cut distinction is a good thing. And we in the church ought to be for it.

Second, males and females were created for each other. God said, "It's not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him." He did. And the fact that the two distinct sexes were meant to complement one another is a good thing. The Lord designed their respective strengths and weaknesses to complete what's lacking in the other. The attributes we describe as masculine like physical strength, decisiveness, courage, and assertiveness are meant to dovetail nicely with the attributes we describe as feminine like gentleness, empathy, sensitivity, and nurturance. These differences were designed to strengthen their bond and need for each other – and not just for them, but also for their children who develop best in a home with a father who acts like a man and a mother who acts like a woman. God made the woman for the man and the man for the woman. His intent is that they would become united as one in holy marriage. This is good, and we ought to be for it.

I'm concerned that too often we're not. What do I mean? I'm sure you've heard that the average age for those marrying for the first time has been steadily increasing over the last several decades. People who do intend to marry one day are putting it off for a number of reasons. For some, it's because they have unrealistic fantasies of finding the perfect spouse – as if such a person existed. News flash: they don't. And if they did, they wouldn't want to marry you. Others think they need to sow their wild oats first, or attain a certain level of schooling before they tie the knot. So, instead they're shacking up, living as if they were married without the commitment upon which a marriage is founded. Or they're living in the hook up culture in which there's a different partner every night. And too many of us in the church are okay with this. Instead of standing up for the goodness of marriage, we're content to let people we love settle for a cheap imitation – a cheap imitation that undermines their chances of having a successful marriage. Couples that cohabit before marriage are something like four times more likely to divorce than those who don't. Why? It's because they started with the premise, "Let's see if this works. If it doesn't, I'm out of here." That's the exact opposite of what the promise of marriage is: to have and to hold, and to love, honor, and cherish until death parts us.

That's the kind of marriage the Lord is for: a marriage in which both husband and wife know that they are married to a sinner who will at times disappoint, be difficult, argue, complain, insult, and otherwise hurt them. There are going to be times when it doesn't work. But the promise of marriage is to stick it out no matter what, to work on making it work, to compromise, to come to agreement, and above all to forgive. A good and godly marriage operates on the same principle as the Church of Jesus Christ: it's the forgiveness of sins. He loves us despite and even through all the evil we think, say, and do. And there never comes a day when he says, "That's it. It's over. I've suffered too much on account of you. We're done." No, he forgives freely and without condition. And with the forgiveness we receive from him who suffered so much to save us, we are given the grace and the Spirit's power to forgive each other.

And what a blessing a marriage like that is. To have the supreme confidence of knowing that my spouse will be my unshakable, steady, and constant partner in thick and thin, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health until one of us dies; and I will be that for my spouse, forgiving each other as we have been forgiven in Christ for all faults and offenses – there's

nothing better than that. That's what we should desire for every marriage. And that's why we should be against anything less.

Not everyone marries, of course. Some choose to remain single. There are others who might like to marry, perhaps, but never find a suitable or willing spouse. Their being single can also be a good and God honoring estate, provided they remain chaste and seek to fulfill the Lord's will in their respective vocations. The Apostle Paul preferred his single status because it freed him to spend more of his time and effort in the service of the church. Still, he upheld the goodness of marriage. And so should we whether we're married or single.

And we should also uphold the goodness of what are naturally the fruit of a marriage, namely children. We see this in today's Gospel too. People were bringing their children to Jesus asking him to bless them. When the disciples tried to run them off, thinking that Jesus didn't have time to waste on little kids, Jesus became furious. He loves children. He welcomes them by the armload. I'm concerned that we don't, at least not as much as we should.

Many in our society are openly against children. The abortion mills do a steady business. In our country alone some fifty million infants have been put to death since the Supreme Court made it legal to kill the unborn. But just because it's legal, doesn't make it right. I fear we've lost the outrage. Jesus became furious when the disciples were stopping children from coming to him. Imagine how much more angry he'd be if they were stopping the children from living.

Jesus is for children, and we should be too. But here again, even among Christians, birth rates are steadily declining. People are waiting until later in life to start their families. Some feel they have to have the right job, the house and two cars paid for, and so much money for retirement squirreled away before they even want to think about it. If and when they do think about, they want to put a careful cap on it. They limit themselves to the statistically correct average of 1.4 children and leave it at that. And they look down on anyone who exceeds what they perceive to be the limit. Thus they deprive themselves of the good gifts the Lord wants to give them through the blessings that children bring. Jesus is for children, and we in his church should be too.

All of us were, after all, children at one time. For some it's been longer ago than for others; but still we are *God's* children. To be sure, Jesus uses a child to demonstrate the kind of faith we need to have to enter his kingdom. It's not that a child is more pure, trusting, or innocent. No. They are sinners too. And they cannot believe in Jesus apart from the work of God's Holy Spirit. What little children have, though, is a sense of dependency. They look to someone else to provide for all their needs. As we grow older, we lose that. We think we can do things on our own. But with respect to the things of God and our salvation, we never can. In all this discussion about the goodness of the nuclear family and what we should be for and against, we've seen ample evidence of our own sins and why God should be against us. But in Christ Jesus his Son he is for us. That's the heart of the Gospel. And in his life, death, and resurrection Jesus has done it all to save us that we might be God's children forever. Therefore repenting of our sins – whatever they may be – let us as dependent children receive again the forgiveness Jesus earned for us when everyone, even his Father, were against him. And let us go forth from here to fulfill our roles as males and females who are being reformed once again into the image of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***