

DON'T BE SHOCKED BY POPE FRANCIS

The following article by Bill Donohue was published as an op-ed on the website of CNN on September 20:

Not in my lifetime have I witnessed a pope who has so quickly succeeded in making more Catholics, and non-Catholics, hyperventilate than Pope Francis. Indeed, some are ready to jump off the bleachers. They all need to calm down.

Pope Francis is delightfully frank, and that is what makes him positively engaging. He is also provocative, in the best sense of that word: he seeks to challenge us, shaking us out of our comfort zone. But he is not about to turn the Catholic Church upside down and inside out. Such talk is pure lunacy.

In a three-part meeting in Rome with Catholic journalists last month, Pope Francis offered his thoughts on a wide range of subjects; they were published today by *America* magazine, the Jesuit weekly. Everyone should read it for themselves.

There is nothing new about ripping what a famous person said out of context, and that is exactly what is going on now with Pope Francis. The "Breaking News Alert" by the *New York Times* is titled, "Pope Bluntly Faults Church's Focus on Gays and Abortion."

In the *Times* alert, it says the pope discusses how "the Roman Catholic Church has grown 'obsessed' with preaching about abortion, gay marriage and contraception," and that he has been criticized for doing so. It also quotes him saying the Church should be "home for all" and not a "small chapel" that is "*focused on doctrine, orthodoxy and a limited agenda of moral teachings.*" (My italics is provided to show that this is the paper's interpretation of what the pope said about "home for all" and "small chapel".)

Regarding the pope's statements on abortion and gay marriage, here is what he said: "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible." He also said, "when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context."

What the pope said makes eminently good sense. For example, when I became president of the Catholic League twenty years ago, I visited the chapters around the nation and found that many were single-issue entities. Some focused exclusively on abortion; others were obsessed with homosexuality; still others demanded we just concentrate on medical ethics. I shared many of their concerns, but I also told them we are an anti-defamation organization, and should not become preoccupied with other matters, no matter how noble.

The pope is right that single-issue Catholics need to rise above their immediate concerns. He did not say we should not address abortion or homosexuality; he simply said we cannot be absorbed by these issues. Or any others!

Laurie Goodstein's article in the *New York Times* on the pope's comments says U.S. bishops will feel the pinch of these remarks as they often appear "to make combating abortion, gay marriage and contraception their top public policy priorities." This is inaccurate. It is not the bishops who have made these issues front and center—it is the Obama administration. It would be more accurate to say the pope would find fault with the bishops *if they did not resist these state encroachments on the religious-liberty rights of Catholics*.

The *Times* alert was wrong to characterize the pope's "small chapel" remark as a criticism of focusing on "doctrine, orthodoxy and a limited agenda of moral teachings." In the previous paragraph, he speaks about "the sanctity of the militant church." In the following sentence, the pope says, "[W]e must not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a

nest protecting our mediocrity.” Excellent. Then, in the same paragraph, he cites the “negative behavior” of priests and nuns, saying their conduct is that of an “unfruitful bachelor” and a “spinster.” He most emphatically did not say what the *Times* attributed to him.

Pope Francis unequivocally rejects both abortion and gay marriage. Elsewhere, he has said, “[T]he moral problem with abortion is of a pre-religious nature because the genetic code of the person is present at the moment of conception. There is already a human being.” Similarly, he says, his opposition to gay marriage “is not based on religion, but rather on anthropology.”

Pope Francis wants us to oppose abortion. He also wants us to reach out to women who are contemplating one, and to help women who have had one to find peace with God (that’s why the Catholic Church has Project Rachel). He wants us to oppose gay marriage. He also wants us not to reject gays because they are gay. This is sound Catholic teaching. Kudos to Pope Francis.

Some critics erroneously implied that the pope is soft on abortion. He is not. Here are his thoughts as recorded in the book, On Heaven and Earth:

“The moral problem with abortion is of a pre-religious nature because the genetic code of the person is present at the moment of conception. There is already a human being. I separate the issue of abortion from any religious concept. It is a scientific problem. To not allow further progress in the development of a human being that already has the entire genetic code of a human being is not ethical. The right to life is the first human right. Abortion is killing someone that cannot defend himself.”