The Future Church: Explaining Our Beliefs

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Michael Coren, *The Future of Catholicism*, (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2013)

“The future Church must explain why it thinks what it thinks.”

In that one sentence Michael Coren encapsulates, in my view, both the essence and the great challenge for the Church and for all Catholics in our mission to teach and evangelize the faith.

Coren, a convert to the faith, is a prolific Catholic author whose *Why Catholics Are Right* was a national best seller, and who was recently named columnist of the year by the Catholic Press Association. Coren’s latest work, *The Future of Catholicism*, seems most appropriately timed, as the Church, led by Pope Francis, ventures onto what many regard as uncharted territory following the quarter-century papacy of John Paul the Great and the eight years of Pope Benedict XVI.

Now we have a new kind of pope, not from Europe but from the western hemisphere; not from the established “first world” but from the developing “third world.” And so, from the time of Pope Francis’ election last April, his background, his style, and carefully chosen selections from his speeches, writings and interviews have all stoked an anticipation of major changes in virtually every aspect of the Church’s life—its internal governance, its worship practices, its moral and social teachings. This anticipation has occasioned hope and excitement in some circles, fear and dread in others—all depending, of course, on what kinds of changes are anticipated and on who is doing the anticipating.

“The phrase ‘We are expecting great things,'” Coren observes, “has varying definitions according to who says it and who hears it. That the secular and non-Catholic world expected great things from Pope Francis means something rather different from the Catholic world expecting the same.” To which must be added, of course, that even *within* each of those two different worlds, there will be different definitions of what is meant by “great things,” depending on one’s perspective and priorities, and what one believes the Church’s perspective and priorities ought to be.

Coren illustrates this by describing how Francis, on his first Holy Thursday as pope, rather than simply washing the feet of the faithful in church, ventured out into the community, as he had done in Argentina, to wash the feet of the poor and marginalized—and how, in doing so at a juvenile detention center in Rome, he had broken with the tradition of only washing the feet of men by washing and kissing the feet of two females in detention, one of them a Serbian Muslim woman. This was misunderstood, Coren writes—with presumably quite different reactions—both by mainstream media and “perhaps” by those he terms “ultra conservatives” within the Church.

“This was not novelty, not trendiness, not fashion, not changing with the times, not trying to appear ‘relevant,'” he writes. Rather, it was simply “a new way of demonstrating the oldest virtue—the divine paradox of the leader of more than a billion Catholics reminding the world that he was here to serve.”

“The underlying tradition was continued and even extended and magnified,” Coren concludes, “but the cosmetics were slightly changed.”

Noting how Pope Francis’ election occasioned the usual secular media clamor about the possibility of the Church “chang(ing) with the times and alter(ing) its teaching on same sex marriage, abortion, contraception, female ordination, celibate

clergy, divorce, and so on," Coren counters correctly that the Church *cannot* "change in its fundamentals"; and shows, with a number of citations from his writings and teachings, Cardinal Bergoglio/Pope Francis' full and firm commitment to those fundamentals.

Yet Michael Coren also argues that the Church can and must adapt its *methods* of communicating its teachings—something that Blessed John Paul espoused constantly, and Pope Benedict modeled in his embrace of the Church's use of social media—because "the world around it, and the context in which it exists, is changing all the time." Coren cites in this context "the post-Reformation Church in the sixteenth century.

"There were some Catholics who looked to the restoration of medievalism" at that time, he writes, "something that could never come." But there were also "younger, reformed and educated Catholics who worked for an intensely faithful but refreshed Catholicism. We know many of them now as saints," he writes, "but they were the new orthodox of their time."

Today, Michael Coren contends, Catholics "have to explain where the Church is rooted in permanent truth and why it cannot change," but they must "just as boldly" explain "where the Church is indeed in need of reform, why this is the case, and how it can be achieved."

Essential to all these endeavors —proclaiming and defending the timeless truths of the Gospel, adapting the presentation of those truths to make them more accessible in changing times, and identifying and carrying forward needed internal Church reforms—Catholics must, as Michael Coren exhorts, explain *why* the Church thinks as it does.

To do so, however, we must first be certain that we as Catholics know what the Church teaches and why.

It is understandable that Catholics who dissent from certain Church teachings portray those teachings as nothing more than

arbitrary, capricious, man-made rules that can be done away with. But we also encounter orthodox Catholics who likewise seem disinterested in probing the depth of Catholic teachings that underlie the "rules." "Just say it's a sin," one such person told me after, as director of my diocesan Office of Family Ministry some years ago, I had undertaken to explain the Church's very positive teachings on love and human sexuality as the basis of its teaching against artificial birth control.

As Pope Benedict taught us, every "no" contained in Catholic teaching is a natural response to a larger, broader, "yes"—our "no" to abortion or euthanasia, for instance, part of a universal "yes" to God's gift of life. Even positive requirements—such as attendance at Sunday Mass, for example—is part of our glorious "yes" to accepting the love of Jesus Christ and His gift to us of His body and blood for our salvation.

As Coren notes, we cannot force anyone to accept what the Church teaches. But we have an obligation as Church to do all we can to assure that everyone—especially those who profess to be Catholic—has the opportunity to clearly understand what it is they are accepting or rejecting. As Coren explains, decades of inadequate catechesis have left many Catholics adrift, coming to conclusions about virtually every aspect of the life of the Church—its history and governance, its worship and sacraments, its teachings on faith and morals, its role in the public square—with virtually no grounding in the depth of Church teaching that informs Catholic belief and practice in all these areas.

This is well-illustrated by reflecting on Coren's observation that—in contrast to the abortion issue, where polls show increasing numbers of young people to be pro-life— "the Church's opposition to same-sex marriage is particularly difficult for younger Catholics to defend and accept."

Why the difference on these two issues? The observation of a former colleague of mine at *The Long Island Catholic*, that America is a "why not?" culture, may be instructive. If some heretofore verboten behavior is now proposed as acceptable, the common American response is, "Why not?" And if no clear, immediate answer comes to their mind, they assume there is no good reason for continuing the social, or legal, sanction against it.

With abortion, the "why not?" is immediate and obvious—and, as Michael Coren points out, powerfully fortified by modern scientific evidence: every abortion kills a living human baby, brutally and often painfully.

The "why not?" on same sex "marriage" becomes obvious only with an understanding of the natural law—that just as God set in motion natural laws to govern the physical world, He ordained natural *moral* laws, imprinted on every human heart and discernable through the gift of reason, to guide human behavior.

When one applies the natural law—moral *and* physical—to marriage, the natural complementarity between male and female physiology make self-evident God's plan for marriage: that a man and a woman together complete one another, and provide their children with the natural completeness of family. But without a grounding in Catholic teaching and natural law, the answer to the "Why not?" question does not come easily on the same sex "marriage" issue—even when, instinctively, we sense that there is something not right about it.

Coren offers an easily readable work here that will help readers develop or strengthen our grounding in Catholic teachings, and how they apply to some of the critical issues that challenge the Church now and into the future. He buttresses the strength of his own insights with those of an impressive range of great thinkers past and present, from G.K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh and Anne Roche Muggeridge to George

Weigel, Robert George, and Mary Eberstadt; from Popes Francis, John Paul II and Benedict XVI to Archbishop Charles Chaput, Father John McCloskey and Rabbi David Dalin; and many, many others.

With their help, he addresses issues of life, marriage and human sexuality; takes on the questions of female ordination and the celibate priesthood; examines challenges to be faced by the papacy in its divinely appointed role as the foundation of the Church; looks specifically at what the leadership of Pope Francis portends for the Church's future; discusses ecumenical relations with other faith communities; and looks at issues of church and state and the recurring question of the Church's response to Catholics in politics and government who publicly defy the Church's moral teachings.

The future Church, Coren explains, will have to "get used to" and "learn to ignore … being accused of arrogance and judgmentalism" for "proclaiming truth." For as he and his sources remind us, the role of the Church is not to "adapt" its teachings "to society." Rather, as Chesterton wrote, "each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most."

Michael Coren gives us great cause for hope as he reports that "respect and awe for the Eucharist is increasing exponentially, miraculously."

"As long as Catholics hold" to that reverence for the body and blood of Christ, he concludes, "there will be no defeats that last longer than passing moments."

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