

Pope Francis and ‘the Great Division’: the Catholic civil war draws closer

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In the magazine a couple of weeks ago I asked **if we were in the early stages of a Catholic civil war** fueled by confusion over Pope Francis's apparent willingness to soften the Church's pastoral approach to divorcees and gay people. Hostilities began during the disastrous Synod of the Family, at which liberal officials gave a press conference implying that the Church was about to admit remarried divorcees to Holy Communion and celebrate the positive aspects of gay unions.

The synod fathers, furious at this hijacking of the proceedings, voted down every liberal proposal – leaving the Pope looking foolish. He has since sacked Cardinal Raymond Burke, the most truculent of the conservatives, from his post as prefect of the Vatican’s supreme court. To say that Burke’s allies are offended is an understatement.

Among the more extreme traditionalists (the label for conservatives attached to the old Latin liturgy) Francis has now become ‘*the enemy*’. They recognise that he is *technically* Pope, **but their true allegiance is to Benedict XVI**. The Pope Emeritus is frail but mentally alert – and worried. He doesn’t regard his successor as any sort of enemy, but he’s not happy. Recently he mounted a defence of the Tridentine Mass that was more outspoken than anything he said as Pope. It appeared to contain a coded tribute to Burke.

Now the ultra-traditionalist blog Rorate Caeli has published a translation of **an interview with Sandro Magister**, a veteran Vaticanologist. In it, he talks about Francis with condescension verging on contempt.

Some of Magister’s comments can be ignored. They misrepresent the Pope’s statements and accuse him of sidelining Christianity – a ludicrous charge, given Francis’s daily invocation of the words of Jesus to attack corrupt and lazy Christians who pay lip service to the Gospel.

Yet we can’t dismiss the interview as a traditionalist rant. Magister is a genuine specialist. He is Vatican correspondent of *L’Espresso* magazine and has racked up countless exclusives over 40 years. High-ranking prelates use **his website Chiesa** to leak details of forthcoming appointments and demotions. And I think we should take seriously his theory that Catholicism is dividing into two broad camps: those Catholics who trust Francis to preserve the teaching of the Church and those (including moderate conservatives) who don’t.

Magister is careful to stress there is no hatred of the Pope in the Catholic hierarchy (i.e., the Vatican Curia and worldwide bishops' conferences) but rather '**bewilderment**'. Also, he dismisses the claim in a new book, *Non è Francesco* ('It's not Francis') by the journalist Antonio Socci, that Francis's election was invalid because the cardinals violated the voting rules, and that Benedict is therefore still Pope.

Non è Francesco is a runaway bestseller in Italy. Why? The obvious answer is that the public loves a Vatican conspiracy theory, however bogus. But Magister ascribes its success to Italian Catholics aghast at Pope Francis's stance on controversial issues – above all, his 'silence on the Muslim world', which he likens to Pius XII's reluctance to condemn Hitler because it would endanger the lives of Jews. I won't waste time on this ingenious but wrong-headed analogy. Francis can do nothing right in Magister's eyes. But, to repeat, we can't dismiss his analysis of the crisis in the Church, even if it is biased.

For example, in one part of the interview he claims that the American hierarchy, which is neither liberal nor hardline conservative, is unsettled by the Pope's gestures in the direction of unspecified change. 'The Cardinals and Archbishops, like Timothy Dolan from New York, [Sean] Patrick O'Malley from Boston, José Gomez from Los Angeles or Charles Chaput from Philadelphia, are all uneasy,' he says.

It's true that some American cardinals were uneasy with the style of Benedict XVI's pontificate, especially after he championed the Tridentine Mass. But Benedict (surprisingly, given his reputation) ruled the Church with a light touch. More importantly, unlike Francis, he did not hint at pastoral development on the hot-button issues of sexual morality over which the US hierarchy has clashed with Obama.

Magister's reports of unease among US cardinals have the ring of truth. They don't amount to a 'Great Division', the term used by Rorate Caeli. But, at the risk of sounding like one of Rorate's doom-mongers, I can see signs that the Church is polarising into pro- and anti-Francis camps.

The media think in terms of Francis the reformer opposed by reactionaries. There's some truth in this, but the reality is more complicated. Yes, Francis is pushing through much-needed reform – above all, to the Vatican finances, now being overhauled by Cardinal George Pell. But his nods in the direction of the 'reform' of Catholic attitudes to divorce and homosexuality ('who am I to judge?') are hard to interpret. So is his handling of the synod. Why did he give a platform to 1960s liberals such as Cardinal Walter Kasper whose '*if it feels good, do it*' philosophy appeals to the secular world but not to practicing Catholics?

Moderate liberals talk about a 'pastoral' via media, but all that amounts to is bishops and priests turning a blind eye to Catholics who ignore biblical and Vatican teaching on the sinfulness of sex outside marriage. That already happens – but, increasingly, those sorts of Catholics have stopped going to Mass and their children leave the Church altogether. This is a pattern that, *mutatis mutandis*, we can observe in most religions: those who stick around are the orthodox.

Finally, we need to take into account the conservatism of the younger clergy. Every time I visit Rome there are more seminarians crossing St Peter's square wearing traditional soutanes, sporting military haircuts with side partings. They are ostensibly loyal to Pope Francis but, especially after the past few months, not wildly keen on him.

The same is true of innumerable recently ordained priests, especially in America. They want *zero* change to Church teaching on sexuality. Their deepest fear is that Francis will be succeeded by a youngish liberal pope. That will happen only if Francis reigns long enough to pack the college of cardinals with progressives just as John Paul II and Benedict XVI packed it with conservatives. So prayers are being said for an end to this pontificate within five years, max.

This isn't a pretty state of affairs. If Pope Francis wishes to ward off a 'Great Division', he will have to display exemplary managerial and diplomatic skills. Unfortunately he doesn't seem to possess them.