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The positive outlook of Pope Francis on Christian discipleship comes into sharper focus when contrasted with the somber approach of the Catholic culture warriors in the United States, who emphasize the current warfare between faithful Christians and secular society. Recently, Robert George, a professor of law at Princeton, who is widely considered to have great influence on prominent American bishops, gave a talk at the annual National Catholic Prayer Breakfast, portraying the battle lines in the culture wars. According to Professor George, mainstream American culture finds acceptable only “tame Catholics,” who do not embrace the totality of Church teaching and are “ashamed of the Gospel.” The American “love affair with Jesus and his Church is over,” making our culture more hostile to religion. The Church in the United States is now in a “Good Friday” situation, which means: “The days of socially acceptable Christianity are over. The days of comfortable Catholicism are past.” Today Christians who are faithful witnesses to the Gospel risk “the scorn and reproach” of “polite society.” Faithful Christians place in jeopardy important personal values, including opportunities for employment and professional advancement, recognition and honors, even treasured friendships and family harmony.

The two major battles in the culture war are over abortion and gay marriage. A Catholic who opposes gay marriage is seen by the secular culture as “a homophobe, a bigot, someone who doesn’t believe in equality.” While tamed Catholics who are “ashamed of the Gospel” are socially acceptable in the United States, faithful Catholics who oppose abortion and gay marriage pay a “heavy price” for taking up the cross. We get a sense of this dire outlook in the comment of Cardinal Francis George of Chicago to the effect that he expected to die in bed, but his immediate successor will die in prison and the next in line will die a martyr in the public arena.

Robert George attracts attention because, as Archbishop John Myers of Newark has noted, many bishops rely on him as “a touchstone” and “the pre-eminent Catholic intellectual.” George has advised the bishops to concentrate their authority on “the moral social” issues, such as abortion and same-sex marriage, and to curtail their lobbying for specific economic policies, such as the minimum wage and progressive tax rates. While the bishops have continued to lobby Congress on specific legislation, they have indeed invested a great deal of their moral capital opposing policies that threaten human life and the institution of marriage.

In his ministerial style as well as his interviews and writings, Pope Francis presents a much more integrated and joyful account of Christian discipleship in the contemporary world. Since becoming the Bishop of Rome, March 13, 2013, Francis has created an appealing public image of an authentic human being comfortably at peace with himself; a smiling Pope energized by his heavy responsibilities; a dedicated pastor delighting in his interaction with children; a respected spiritual leader joyfully proclaiming the pervasive power of divine love. In his significantly titled Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, the Pope encourages the Christian faithful “to embark on a new chapter of evangelization” marked by “the joy of the Gospel.” A Christian dedicated to spreading the Gospel message “must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!” (10). There are, unfortunately, “Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.” Francis makes his own the famous warning of Pope John XXIII at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council against “the prophets of doom,” who see in this modern age “nothing but prevarication and ruin” (84). He also warns against “the disillusioned pessimists,” who have lost trust in God and stifle the bold proclamation of the Gospel (85).

The joyful character of Christian discipleship flows from Christ himself, the ultimate source of our joy. As Francis phrases it: “Our Christian joy drinks of the wellspring of his brimming heart” (5). Jesus, who himself rejoiced in the Holy Spirit (Lk 10:21), promised to turn our sorrow into joy (Jn 16:20). The joy Christ gives us is a “missionary joy” which overcomes fear of the world and moves us “to go forth from our comfort zone” to reach those on the periphery in need of “the light of the Gospel” (20).

Pope Francis not only provides a more positive and joyful outlook on Christian discipleship, he also challenges the assumption of the culture warriors that the essential mark of faithful Christians is vigorous opposition to abortion and gay marriage. For Francis, the core of the Gospel is the saving love and mercy of God manifested in Jesus Christ. In well-publicized comments on the issue, the pope states clearly: “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods.” “It is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time,” but, when we do, it should be in the context of “the saving love of God.” “The church’s pastoral ministry cannot be “obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently.” Moral teachings must follow from a proclamation of the Gospel that “focuses on the essentials,” otherwise “the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards.”

*The Joy of the Gospel* repeats these themes in the context of “pastoral ministry in a missionary style” (34-39). In “today’s world of instant communication,” an overemphasis on moral issues presented out of context distorts “the heart of Christ’s message” and deprives the proclamation of the Gospel of “what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary,” the “basic core” that stresses “the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead” (34-36). “Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others, and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others” (39). If this emphasis

“does not radiate forcefully and effectively, the edifice of the Church’s moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk” (39). As these selected statements from his Apostolic Exhortation make clear, the Pope’s interview warning against obsessing over abortion, gay marriage and contraception was not just an off-the-cuff rhetorical flourish, but does represent his well-considered judgment that effective pastoral practice must present moral teachings in the context of the core Gospel teachings on God’s love. As such it functions as an unmistakable challenge to the culture-war strategy.

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis challenges not only the culture-war strategy but also its fundamental sense of the way the church relates to the world. Instead of the stark vision of a persecuted church engaged in a clear-cut struggle between a culture of life and a culture of death, the pope reads the signs of the times and sees an ambivalent mix of sin and grace. He speaks of the delight and joy in proclaiming the living Gospel in the contemporary world. Historically, wherever the good news of Christ has been preached and received, “the Holy Spirit enriches its culture with the transforming power of the Gospel” (116). He finds it beautiful to see how many young people “are making common cause before the problems of our world and are taking up various forms of activism and volunteer work” (106). Francis sees “the evils of our world” as “challenges which can help us grow” (84). He takes a positive view of the new means of social communication, which, paradoxically, can produce “greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone” (87). For him, contemporary culture, admittedly threatened by isolation, consumerism, and individualism, provides an opportunity for the Church to offer healing, liberation and fraternal communion for those with a “thirst for God.”

Finally, Pope Francis offers an implied challenge to the sharp distinction between “tame Catholics,” who do not fight vigorously enough against abortion and same-sex marriage, and “faithful Catholics,” who are strong and consistent in opposition to those evils. In his Apostolic Exhortation, Francis takes up the issue of warfare among Christians (98-101). He notes possible causes of this divisive mentality, including “a spirit of exclusivity” that creates an “inner circle” of believers who think of themselves as “different or special.” In a world “torn apart by wars and violence, and wounded by a widespread individualism, which divides human beings,” Francis implores “Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion.” Recalling the heartfelt prayer of Jesus to the Father: “That they may all be one...in us...so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21), the Pope urges Christians to “encourage and accompany one another,” and “to rejoice in the gifts of each, which belong to all” (100).

Francis goes on to deplore Christians who “desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts” (100). The Pope concludes this section with an exhortation that Christian communities understand and follow the law of love, so that we do not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!” (101). Although Pope Francis speaks in general terms to the universal church, his vision of unity and harmony in the church can serve as a challenge to the culture warriors, who create divisions within the faith community by distinguishing tame and faithful Catholics, language that implicitly brands a large segment of the Catholic community as inferior.

In summary, Pope Francis, by word and deed, provides an attractive and compelling approach to Christian discipleship that challenges the style, strategy and substance of the culture-war viewpoint.