

Idolatry at the Vatican?

It is so very sad that the sectarianism which afflicts American culture has infiltrated the Church as it has. It is astonishing to encounter so much animus toward Pope Francis from, what I would term, “the right fringe.” The tactics are similar to the political “McCarthyism” of the 1950’s: Any whiff of anything remotely related to Socialism or Communism got one put on a blacklist. And, while these were deadly serious issues at the height of the Cold War, Senator Eugene McCarthy brought a massive ego to bear on the issue as a self-styled warrior who would save the nation. It ceased to matter what was true; he was out for a body count of outed Commies.

I realize the example of McCarthy is, like Hitler, overused to the point of cliché. But I do see similarities in the treatment of Pope Francis. Granted, it must be admitted, that Pope Francis has said off-the-cuff things which leave good and orthodox people scratching their heads. He clearly does not have the discipline or the precision of a John Paul II or Benedict XVI; so he bears some responsibility for the matter. But, underlying the opposition to him is his temerity to take on a faction of dogmatists in the Church whose messaging had long been dominant, [This is my read of the situation from news reports and articles.]

I think that the Pope cannot be understood by any one-particular-statement but only with an appreciation for his underlying zeal to reach people with the Good News. And, while the “dogmatists” may have been articulating doctrine and morals quite precisely and accurately, Francis’ concern was with the tone. As a seasoned pastor, he is concerned with approaches which facilitate the reception of these truths. If the tone of pronouncements is lacking a sense of compassion or understanding of the human predicament on a spectrum of cultures, they may not be received. [Again. This how I perceive the Pope’s approach.]

One way he seems to have approached this matter is to emphasize that the Church’s message is about more than just the hot-button moral issues which are, sometimes, wielded like a club to beat people over the head. The horror of Abortion is extremely important and must be abolished from the face of the earth. But, if I were to preach on this moral issue every Sunday of the year, with little reference

to the Gospel and the other dimensions of Faith, it would be an impoverished Gospel that you were receiving from me. The Pope widened the focus to the broader range of human and Christian concerns. It is not that the other Pope’s didn’t address these matters but, I think, this Pope is doing so in such a way as he thinks hearts may be softened and ears opened. Time will tell.

In the process, “feathers have been ruffled” and “apple-carts” have been “upset.” Some leaders have been removed from their posts and/or reassigned because they cannot accept his approach. And some of these, along with those who reside on the right fringe of the Church have cultivated an atmosphere of suspicion. During the recent Amazonian Synod, a prayer ceremony was held in the setting of Andean folk art, in the midst of which was the wooden image of a pregnant woman. Admittedly, there was some ambiguity as to the meaning of the object: Was it just an image of a natural human reality? Was it the Blessed Virgin Mary? Was it some sort of metaphor for “mother earth?” Or was it a pagan goddess? The latter possibility was seized upon by the Pope-haters as, yet, more evidence that he is some sort of agent of darkness undermining the Faith.



This gross accusation misunderstands a long history of missionaries coopting pagan symbols and “baptizing them” as a means of conveying the true Faith to pagans. Just this morning I noticed St. Paul using the language of the, formerly pagan, Ephesians to speak of the “*ruler of the power of the air,*” (Ephesians 2:2). This is the language of the folk astrology to which the Ephesians formerly adhered. In order to communicate to the Ephesians, Paul transfers the astrological language to refer to the work of the Devil. Shall we accuse St. Paul of courting paganism? Of course not. The Andean image is of a pregnant, human woman: Can we not see how this could be taken up to proclaim the joyful mystery of the Incarnation? I propose the benefit of any doubt is in order here.