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Don't Believe the Media Hype Pro Lifers: Pope Francis Has Your Back!

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The interview with Pope Francis published in the Italian Jesuit Journal *La Civiltà Cattolica* caused a firestorm of reaction. Media and entertainment outlets cranked up their spin machines to proclaim a fundamental shift in the Church's emphasis concerning the hot button issues of contraception, abortion, and same sex marriage. Some of the faithful, after battling for years in the pro-life/pro-family trenches felt confused and discouraged by some of the Pope's quotes as highlighted in the media.

But the media has a very short attention span and quickly moved on to the next big story. So now we can take a deep breath, and take a closer prayerful reading of this interview. Perhaps you will find as I did that there is much that affirms the evolution of pro life ministry over the last 40yrs and the movement as a whole.

First let's look at some key excerpts.

Ongoing Repentance and Conversion in Christ

Pope Francis reminds us that our ministry to build a culture of life and heal a culture of death, always begins with a deep awareness of our own spiritual poverty and the generous gift of salvation.

Pope Francis reflects on the painting of *The Calling of St. Matthew*, by Caravaggio:

That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That's me. I feel like him. Like Matthew." Here the pope becomes determined, as if he had finally found the image he was looking for: "It is the gesture of Matthew that strikes me: he holds on to his money as if to say, 'No, not me! No, this money is mine.' Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze.

The Lord understands well Matthew's struggle to let go of his worldly concerns, while calling him to embrace a treasure that *moth and rust cannot destroy* (Matthew 6, 19-21.)

Worldly concerns are not always bad things, like Matthews attachment to money. We can be tempted to see the necessary business of our apostolate as more important than sacraments, prayer, contemplation, and devotions such as daily rosary, Eucharistic adoration and study of God's Word.

Ongoing repentance, conversion and communion with Christ are the foundations of our pro life vocation.

Closer to the Heart

There is a strong emphasis from this Pope, in this interview and in other sources that sees the mission of the Church, not as an imposition of truth from above, but initially an intimate respectful encounter with each unique human person, especially those wounded by poverty, violence and neglect.

"I see clearly," the pope continues, "that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity."

When asked about those who struggle with same-sex-attraction, the Pope did not contradict in any way the fundamental teaching of the Church when he expressed that our *initial* encounter with those who struggle with this burden and other complex human problems, is not the righteousness and truth of our cause, but an intimate relationship of mercy:

We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. It is necessary to accompany them with mercy.

The Church as Field Hospital – Pro Life Good Samaritans

I see the church as a field hospital after battle. "How are we treating the people of God? I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church's ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the Good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor.

The pro-abortion forces and their allies like to portray pro lifers as mean spirited, narrow minded, and obsessed with saving the unborn at the expense of other victims of social injustice. Sadly this prejudice has crept inside the Church at times in the unnecessary division between social justice and respect life ministries.

Pro Life and abortion healing ministries work daily with people ravaged by the consequences of *sexual freedom* and the promotion of "reproductive rights." Unplanned pregnancy, single parenthood, abortion while impacting all of us, have in a special way attacked the most vulnerable in our society, the poor and minorities. (Six out of 10 African American children conceived in New York City are aborted.)

I have been involved as a social worker in pro life and abortion healing efforts in the Church now for 25 years. I have travelled across the United States and around the world. The overwhelming majority of pro life people I encounter are clearly *Good Samaritans* that the pope speaks of. They embody in their outreach the personal humility and a merciful love for each person they serve...unborn and born. They are moved by decency and justice, a love for the unborn, love for the mothers and fathers of those threatened with abortion and those who suffer after abortion. I have had a similar experience in my relationships with those working in the arena of law or politics to try and end this evil.

Many of these *pro-life good Samaritans* can be found at the local Pregnancy Resource Centers where women in crisis find not judgment and condemnation, but love and practical assistance. Leading the annual March for Life in Washington you will find women and men from the Silent No More Awareness Campaign, who intimately understand the cost of “reproductive choice.” They carry signs that publicly acknowledge regret of their abortions, and later before the Supreme Court they share riveting stories of suffering and redemption from the Paschal mystery of their lives. Where did they find the courage and strength for this very public witness? It is the love, compassion and *accompaniment* of pro life people and after abortion healing programs where they found freedom from shame, and confidence to proclaim their truth in Christ.

When Pope Francis speaks of accompanying the poor, marginalized and so many that have lost their way in our modern world with love and mercy, **he is affirming the pro life movement** in the United States and around the world.

Who’s Really Obsessed Here?

This provides a good opportunity to turn our gaze to the one excerpt from this interview that has received the greatest attention and media spin:

“We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time. The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently.

The obsession with the issues of abortion, same sex marriage and contraception are pervasive in media and entertainment promoting an agenda that is clearly at odds with Church teaching. This *obsession* flows from a distorted understanding of the human person and like other well intentioned social movements, is capable of tremendous evil and destruction in the name of corrupted concepts of freedom, rights and personal liberty.

Perhaps the Pope is saying to us, we cannot let the secular agenda, which is truly “obsessed” with the issues of same sex marriage, abortion and contraception to dictate the Church’s overall message and compromise our primary mission to present the Gospel in all its beauty and splendor. It is not necessary as the Pope said, to “talk about these issues all the time.”

This in no way contradicts the prophetic call of his predecessor, Blessed John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae*. It is very necessary, especially in a nation with over 50 million abortions since 1973 to proclaim the Gospel of Life to a *culture of death*.

Again the Pope offers an important caveat:

The proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives.

Our pro life/pro-family efforts, the *moral and religious imperatives*, are rooted in the mystery of the incarnation of God in the womb of a humble virgin facing an unplanned pregnancy. With God’s help, Mary was able reach beyond her natural anxiety and fear to embrace the call of the Father to become the Mother of His Son, who embraced our sin and death and transformed it into the power of resurrection.

With that said, the Pope's use of the word *imperative* (*moral and religious imperatives*) is instructive concerning the urgency of our cause:

Imperative: *something that demands attention or action; an unavoidable obligation or requirement; necessity*

The primacy of the Gospel proclamation in no way diminishes the urgency of our cause. In fact, as *Evangelium Vitae* reveals, they are intimately connected.

Pope Francis in this interview is reminding us that our work for social justice flows not from a myopic focus or obsession on the particular evil we fight at the expense of a loving encounter with those we serve. Our marching orders are not from any political party or ideology. We proclaim the Good News of the salvation of God, and his saving love for each person, no matter what their history, sin struggles and wounds. This foundation will bring us to an encounter with individuals that respects the unique dignity of each person, and is willing to accompany them in their sorrows and struggle.

Pope Francis is very clear in other preaching and speaking concerning the evil of abortion and the need for healing for all who have participated in the death of the unborn. You can read an excellent presentation on this important topic by Fr Frank Pavone in the *National Catholic Register*. Fr Frank touches on the special affirmation by the Pope on the ministry of healing for those that have experienced abortion loss:

The Pope is not criticizing the Church's focus on abortion. He is actually protecting it. He is protecting it from being seen just as a "rule" or a "directive," detached from the fundamental teachings of the faith that make us Christian in the first place and detached from the compassion and mercy that Christ extends to those who have had abortions.

Regarding that latter point, the Pope made a special point to encourage me in my work as pastoral director of Rachel's Vineyard Ministries throughout the world. The Pope, who came to know of the ministry in Argentina, said to me, "Rachel's Vineyard is very good; it is an excellent work! Go forward with that!"

The reason he is particularly affirmative of Rachel's Vineyard, and of the Church's overall work of healing after abortion, comes out in the recent interview that made headlines. He made it clear that, in dealing with abortion, we have to extend mercy to those who have committed this sin. We who reject abortion do not reject those who have had abortions. Rather, we embrace them with forgiveness and peace.

Healing the Troops in the Trenches

Finally, in our reflection on the Pope's interview we have focused much on the wounds of those we serve in our pro life and abortion healing outreach. But it is important to remember that the leaders and troops serving on the front lines are intimately connected by virtue of their ministry, to the death of the innocent unborn...and over time this can take its toll.

Think of those praying at abortion centers, reaching out in love to the mothers and father...yet many still choose death. Consider the ultrasound technician who reveals an image to a mother of her unborn child in all its wonder and beauty...yet the mother still chooses abortion. Think of the scars and wounds of those that battle in secular politics and in the legal arena to defend the unborn and those injured by abortion and face continual attacks from pro abortion forces. We know that many who have experienced abortion loss and come to regret that decision, become involved in Pregnancy Resource

Center outreach to help other mothers avoid that tragic decision. Pro life leaders and those serving in this ministry also need healing and restoration in Christ.

That is why we can receive the Pope's words with consolation and as a gentle reminder...not as the media would present as a scolding to back off from our efforts.

Many pro life veterans are well aware of the need to step back from the battle so we are not consumed or *obsessed* by the very evil we are fighting. One who is *obsessed* is not filled with peace and joy...and cannot share the compassion, mercy and love of Christ with one who is wounded and in crisis. Perhaps there is more we can do as a movement to minister to the leaders and troops on the front lines and provide opportunities for healing, restoration and refreshment so we emerge renewed.

Don't believe the media hype pro lifers. The Pope's message in this interview and elsewhere is clearly one of affirmation and support with some always welcome spiritual direction. The primacy of our cause remains as an *imperative* flowing from the Annunciation and incarnation of Christ our savior in the womb of our Blessed Mother Mary.

The Pope and the Church *have your back*.



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