

# A Bien Pensant Pope

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The Pope's recent address to a joint session of Congress was greeted ecstatically, though (or perhaps *because*) it was notable mainly for its secular rather than for its religious pieties. It was the speech of a politician seeking re-election rather than that of the spiritual leader of a considerable part of mankind; as such, it seemed like the work not of a man intent upon telling the truth, however painful or unpopular, but that of a committee of speech-writers who sifted every word for its likely effect upon a constituency or audience, appealing to some without being too alienating of others. If ex-President Clinton had been elected Pope, he might have made the same speech, so perfect was its triangulation, so empty were its high-sounding phrases.

Pope Francis is not a subtle thinker, let alone a theologian of distinction. When interviewed on his aircraft after the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, he let it be known that if someone insulted his mother he could expect a retaliatory punch or slap, making a physical gesture to illustrate his point. This is not exactly the doctrine (if I have understood it aright) enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount; and one could not imagine John Paul II or Benedict XVI making so foolish or crude a mistake under the complacent impression that he was charming the world thereby.

Francis' propensity to run after false gods, most of them fashionable in the constituency to which he evidently wants to appeal, no doubt accounts for his popularity. He is not so much prophetic as *bien pensant*; and where he does not yet feel able to alter doctrine in a liberal direction he is evasive and even cowardly, afraid to court real distaste or opposition by clear expression of what he means. To whom and at what, exactly, were the following weasel words directed?

*It is my wish throughout my visit the family should be a recurrent theme. How essential the family has been to the building of this country! And how worthy it remains of our support and encouragement! Yet I cannot hide my concern for the family, which is threatened as never before, from within and without. Fundamental relationships are being called into question, as is the very basis of marriage and the family. I can only reiterate the importance and, above all, the richness and beauty of family life.*

Who and what are calling fundamental relationships into question? After all, fundamental relationships do not call themselves into question: someone must do it in the name of some doctrine, some belief, or other. The Pope's resort to the passive mood is indicative of his moral cowardice in confronting the opponents of what the Church believes in. Those opponents he knows to be militant and aggressive, and to confront them openly, in so many words, would lead to his fall in the popularity polls. Therefore he evades the issue with vague and oily declamation. It is one thing to be peace-loving and conciliatory, it is another to surrender by means of avoidance of the issue.

Such cowardly avoidance was evident also in the way in which he dealt with the problem of religious fanaticism. 'We know,' he said, 'that no religion is immune from forms of individual delusion or ideological extremism.' This may be true in the abstract; Christian fanatics in the United States may on rare occasions shoot a practising abortionist, for example. There are Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist fanatics; but the wholesale persecution of religious minorities, and the perpetration of violent acts in a host of locations around the world, is confined to Islamic extremism. It would have been better for the Pope not to have broached the subject at all than to have dealt with it in so pusillanimous a fashion.

The Pope's fundamentally secularist outlook was evident in the way he dealt with the question of the death penalty. The abolitionism to which he adhered is a perfectly respectable position (in my opinion), but the arguments he used had little that was religious about them, and no complete secularist would have had any metaphysical difficulty with them.

*I am convinced that this way is best, since every life is sacred, every human person is endowed with an inalienable dignity, and society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes.... I also offer encouragement to all those who are convinced that a just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation.*

There is nothing here about mercy, forgiveness, repentance, redemption or salvation. Rehabilitation, by contrast, is a purely secular concept, suggesting that the wickedness of crime is a form of illness, to be treated by the psychological equivalent of physiotherapy; sin, or even vice, doesn't come into it. The Pope's words are indistinguishable from those of the European Court of Human Rights, when it ruled that it was a breach of fundamental rights that brutal repeat murderers should be sentenced to whole-life terms because such sentences exclude the possibility of their rehabilitation (even if, in practice, they would never be released). But while God may forgive Himmler – under certain conditions – surely Man cannot. The irreparable exists in the sublunary world.

At every point, the Pope evaded specifics and resorted to unctuous generalities. No one ever courted unpopularity by denouncing injustice, but many risked much by being specific about what they considered, rightly or wrongly, unjust.

The Pope was against poverty in the way the preacher in the famous Coolidge anecdote was against sin. But while no secularist will speak up for poverty, the religious attitude has traditionally been more nuanced. Moreover, when the Pope spoke of 'the unjust structures' that exist 'even in the developed world,' he was presumably referring to the arrangements that lead to economic inequality. By doing so he was first making a fetish of wealth (for why else would inequality in itself be bad?) and second he was exciting one of the seven deadly sins, envy (the concentration on what others have irrespective of whether one has enough oneself). Of course, inequality *may* be unjust, but is not itself evidence of injustice. Evidence that it is so must be adduced independently, and this the Pope failed to do, preferring to court popularity while rocking no boats.

In short, the Pope was playing to a gallery and to a constituency, while wanting to be liked by everybody. There was nothing of timelessness in what he said but only of the temporal, the contingent, the fashionably platitudinous. He is not a shepherd, but one of the sheep.