



What in God's Name Is the Pope Saying?

Has Pope Francis said the Catholic Church has become “obsessed” with the issues of abortion, contraception, and same-sex “marriage”? Has the church been placing too much emphasis on these issues by talking about them “all the time”?

Since the appearance on Thursday of a lengthy [interview](#) with the pope in several Jesuit publications around the world, a number of Catholic spokesmen, both lay and clerical, have come forward to say the pope's statements were distorted in many news reports by being taken “out of context.”

But a reading of the entire interview suggests that, while there was much else that the pontiff said, he did appear to be calling for less emphasis on those high profile — and highly volatile — moral, social, and political issues, while putting greater emphasis on the love and mercy of God and the preaching of the good news (the Gospel) to the poor and the socially outcast.

“We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods,” the pope said during an interview conducted in Italian in three sessions by the editor-in-chief of the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. “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.”

As it appears in the text of the interview, translated from Italian for the English-language Jesuit publication *America*, the very next sentence it is: “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.”

While it is not certain that with the word “obsessed,” the pope was referring specifically to abortion, contraception, and gay marriage among the “disjointed multitude of doctrines,” but that does appear to be what he was saying. It was not biased or careless journalism, then, for the media to report, as the *New York Times* did in the lead paragraph of its [story](#) that:

Six months into his papacy, Pope Francis sent shock waves through the Roman Catholic church on Thursday with the publication of his remarks that the church had grown “obsessed” with abortion, gay marriage and contraception, and that he had chosen not to talk about those issues despite recriminations from critics.



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 23, 2013

That is a little misleading, since the pope did not say he had chosen not to talk about it, but rather that that he has “not spoken much about these things.” And the “shock waves” may be hard to verify since some within the church say they welcome a shift in emphasis away from the controversial issues, and some in the forefront of the battles against legalized abortion and same-sex “marriage” have said the pope was merely attempting to put the church’s stand on those issues within the context of a broader understanding of God’s love and mercy on the humanity that is, however sinful, the human race He created and redeemed. Father Antonio Spadaro, S.J. (Society of Jesus), who conducted the interview for the Jesuit publications, [explained](#): “There is a big vision, not a big shift. His big vision is to see the church in the middle of the persons who need to be healed. It is in the middle of the world.”

“Nobody should try to use the words of the pope to minimize the urgent need to preach and teach about abortion,” said the Rev. Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life. Indeed the pope on the very next day issued a strongly worded condemnation of the willful destruction of pre-born human life. Speaking in Rome to the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, Pope Francis said:

Every unborn child, though unjustly condemned to be aborted, has the face of the Lord, who even before his birth, and then as soon as he was born, experienced the rejection of the world.... Your being Catholic entails greater responsibility: first of all to yourself, in the effort to be consistent with the Christian vocation, and then to contemporary culture, to help recognize the transcendent dimension in human life, the imprint of the creative work of God, from the very first moment of conception. This is a commitment to the new evangelization that often requires going against the tide, paying a personal price. The Lord counts on you to spread the “Gospel of life.”

After quoting those unequivocal statements, [lifesitenews.com](#) suggested the thanks to the pope that the abortion advocacy group NARAL Pro-Choice America posted on its Facebook and Twitter pages “may have been premature, in light of today’s remarks.”

Yet the pope did appear to be suggesting in the published interview that the church should give the troublesome issues less emphasis. He acknowledged that he has been criticized for not saying more about “abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods,” before saying that “it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.” Did the pope mean it is not necessary for him to talk about those issues “all the time,” or was he suggesting that the whole church has given them too much emphasis?

Surely, previous pontiffs have preached a great deal on what John Paul II called, as the title of a book-length encyclical on the subject, [The Gospel of Life](#), but their preaching and teaching on the subject was not to the neglect of other dimensions of the Gospel. Indeed, John Paul II, in that encyclical and elsewhere, emphatically and repeatedly placed the defense of innocent life squarely in the context of Christ’s mission to bring salvation to the human race and to show God’s love and mercy to those rejected by the world. And who are the ones who have been more poor, marginalized, and rejected by the world than the more than 50 million infants aborted in the United States alone in the 40 years since the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision declared access to abortion a constitutional right?

Who, one might wonder, are the ones who have been talking about abortion “all the time”? Those in pro-life organizations such as Father Pavone’s Priests for Life? Catholics who, along with other pro-lifers, have worked through Birthright and CareNet and similar organizations to render material assistance as well as spiritual aid and comfort to women in crisis pregnancies? Have Catholic bishops been too “obsessed” with efforts to get legislation passed to offer some protections for the unborn? Have priests been “obsessed” with the issue in their weekly homilies? In most parishes, faithful



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Catholics, attending Mass every Sunday, are likely to hear a sermon on the subject once, maybe twice a year, on Respect Life Sunday and perhaps again when the January 22 anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision rolls around. Some obsession.

Perhaps the pope had in mind the general public's perception of what the church has been saying, in a world where perceptions are shaped to a large degree by our 'round the clock news media. When a bishop rebukes a Catholic politician for supporting the pro-abortion "culture of death," he is apt to make headlines. When he proclaims God's love for the poor and for all of sinful humanity, he is preaching to a vastly smaller audience.

Perhaps that's why Pope Francis spoke as he did in the interview. His headline-making remarks about abortion, contraception, and gay marriage drew widespread interest and attention to the rest of his message as well. And it put the issue of abortion and the unjust destruction of innocent human life more in the news these past few days than it has been in a long time. Newspapers around the world and the pundits of TV journalism have been writing and talking about it all the more since the pope's remarks hit the newswires. His words have shined the light of faith on the "culture of death."



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