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 * Knights of Malta *

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Chancellor's Update

Another View

The following article appeared in a recent issue of *Crisis* magazine entitled **Francis vs The Deep Church**. We are reprinting it in its entirety so our readers can see how other people view the world. We will comment on it at the end.

Does the Vatican have a General Directorate for Personnel? This is, perhaps, the most boring question ever posed by a writer in *Crisis Magazine*. And yet, as we fumble for an answer, we also come a little closer to understanding one of the most confounding papacies in 2,000 years of Christian history. Last Friday, the Vatican's daily news bulletin announced the creation of this new "Directorate," which would be nestled under the Secretariat of State. It was to be charged with "internal ecclesiastical governance," and was called "a step of great importance in the path of reform initiated by Pope Francis." The next day, Rome took it all back. "It's a proposal advanced to the Holy Father by Cardinal Reinhard Marx, President of the Council for the Economy, and Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga, President of the Council of Cardinals, to institute such a structure," the Vatican explained. Apparently, the proposal had not (yet) secured the Holy Father's approval.

But even that's speculating. In truth, we really have no idea what's going on. Is someone in the Secretariat of State now openly taking orders from Cardinals Marx and Maradiaga? Both progressive prelates were burned by Pope Francis's crackdown on the German bishops' "synodal journey" and his lack of support for married priests in *Querida Amazonia*. At present, the Holy Father is laid low with a bad cold. Are these diehards fomenting some sort of revolt in his absence, aided by ecclesiastical bureaucrats within the Eternal City?

Now here's the larger point: Pope Francis's critics generally fall into one of two categories. The more strident tend to view him as a master manipulator—a Modernist agent working to undermine the traditions and dogma of Holy Mother Church. The milder ones see him as well-intentioned but naïve, ill-suited to the power games that prevail in Rome's upper echelons.

When I was an Anglican working for (conservative) political magazines, I fell in the former camp. But since converting and joining the religion beat, I've slowly drifted into the latter camp. And this little incident—please, let's not call it *Directorategate*—perfectly illustrates why.

Francis is a man of profound contradictions. He abhorred liberation theology as a young Jesuit provincial, back when the Society of Jesus in Argentina was first overrun with Marxists. And yet, as pope, he notoriously accepted the gift of a crucifix wrought of a hammer and sickle from Bolivian president Evo Morales.

He made his first splash as Supreme Pontiff by saying, "Who am I to judge?" when asked a question about the hypothetical confession of a gay man. And yet, as Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò recalled in his testimony, Francis once told him that bishops "must not be left-wing"—"and when I say left-wing," he clarified, "I mean homosexual."

Father James Martin, SJ, has invoked papal approval in his mission to "build bridges" between the Church and the "LGBT community"—which, as we all know by now, means normalizing homosexual and transgender activity. And yet, in 2015, Francis said that teaching transgender acceptance in schools is

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comparable to “the educational policies of Hitler.” “Gender ideology is demonic,” he continued, insisting that it contradicts “the order of creation.”

Francis has been criticized for being too soft on pro-choice politicians. And yet, in 2018, he compared the practice of abortion to Nazi efforts to “purify the race.” “Today, we do the same thing but with white gloves,” he observed. Later that year, he said that abortion “is like hiring a hit man to solve a problem.” He has criticized traditionalist Catholics for our “rigidity” and traditional young priests for wearing “hats in the shape of the planet Saturn on their heads.” And yet he has also done more than any of his predecessors to reconcile the Society of St. Pius X to Rome.

And the list goes on and on.

How do we reconcile these two portraits of Francis—one, a worldly progressive, and the other, a serial offender of politically-correct sensibilities?

I’ve heard some suggest that he’s actually an arch-Peronist, a master of the sleight of hand. When he seems to say something even vaguely conservative, he’s just creating a smokescreen for some ingenious stratagem to bring down the Church from within. I take issue with that reading for two reasons.

Firstly, it’s uncharitable. Secondly, Francis would have to be the single most brilliant political strategist in world history to be secretly orchestrating all of the chaos which prevails in the Vatican these days—some combination of Heath Ledger’s Joker and Cancer Man from *the X-Files*.

Filial love and Occam’s Razor both lead me to conclude that Francis is, indeed, just out of his depth. His isn’t the anger of a tyrant, but that of a pawn. His ostentatious humility isn’t a guise to hide his ambition: it’s a genuine (if futile) effort to protect his own innocence. His unpredictable and erratic utterances arise not from any genius for deception but from a mind plagued with self-doubt. I suspect that nobody’s more displeased with the Francis papacy than Francis himself.

Here’s how I imagine Pope Francis found himself in his current, unhappy position.

By all accounts, the young Father Jorge Bergoglio was possessed of a conservative cast of mind, but also a genuine love for the poor of Argentina. He was, in the modern parlance, the quintessentially “pastoral” pastor. Through his good works in the slums of Buenos Aires, he was eventually appointed superior of the Jesuits in his country, a role in which he flourished. Then he was made primate of the Church in Argentina, which seems to have been one rung higher than he was wont to climb.

Then he was appointed to the Sacred College, and the progressives saw a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. There was this shy yet holy man renowned for his love of poverty, yet who was for all purposes ignorant of Church politics. The Modernists of the St. Gallen Mafia took Cardinal Bergoglio under their wing and told him, “You don’t want to get mixed in with the conservatives. It’s not like in Argentina. In Europe and in America, conservatives don’t care about the poor. They only care about their fancy vestments and their theology journals. If you want to give the Church true servant-leadership, stick with us.”

When Benedict XVI stepped down, the Sacred College knew that an unprecedented scandal was brewing. The sex-abuse crisis ran far deeper than the public had yet realized. It was time to put aside ideological wars and focus on institutional reform. The very survival of the Church depended on it. And, so, the progressives presented Cardinal Bergoglio to the 2013 papal conclave as a compromise candidate. Here was a man who would stand above the old disputes over dogma and cleanse the Church of its rot. They would have him become the 266th successor to St. Peter.

Cardinal Bergoglio wanted nothing more than to go back to Argentina and be with his people. But, when his brother cardinals called on him, he answered. So it was that the first pope named Francis made his way to the balcony overlooking St. Peter’s Square, dressed only in a plain white cassock and his old pectoral cross. There he greeted his new flock: The Universal Church. He waved sheepishly, looking almost embarrassed, his little round glasses shining in the light of a thousand flashing cameras.

From the beginning, he can’t quite seem to wrap his head around the fact that he’s no longer just a diocesan bishop. He simply introduces himself as the “Bishop of Rome” and thanks the “diocesan community of Rome” for their warm welcome. The first thing he does is pray for his predecessor, the “bishop emeritus” Benedict XVI. Only about halfway through does he address the fact that he’s now, in fact, the Supreme Pontiff of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Before giving his blessing, he asks a favor: “Before the bishop blesses the people, I ask that you would pray to the Lord to bless me—the prayer of the people for their bishop.” They do. He blesses them. And then he says goodbye. “We will see one another soon,” he promises. “Tomorrow I want to go to pray to the Madonna, that she may protect Rome,” he adds, almost as an aside. “Good night, and sleep well!” Immediately after his election, Vatican-watcher George Weigel said that Francis “understands that scandal, corruption, and incompetence are impediments to the gospel-centered mission.” He praised him as a man of both “profound humility” and “keen, realistic intelligence.”

Much like his predecessor, however, I think the post quickly overwhelmed him. Benedict only wanted to be a scholar; Francis, a pastor. Neither had any love for the endless traveling, the speeches, the crowds, and the press. But where Benedict oscillated between stoicism and melancholy, Francis became frustrated and angry. Unlike Benedict, he had never served at the Vatican. Now, as pope, he had many sycophants, a few allies, and hundreds of functionaries, but no friends.

This is precisely what the progressives wanted. Their comrades in the Vatican bureaucracy tightened their grip on the Holy Father. Francis, remember, doesn’t use a computer: everything he knows, and everything he does, is organized and presented by a worldly-wise staffer—a professional bureaucrat. They curate his news and his letters, arrange his meetings, and guide his appointments to bishoprics and Vatican congregations.

Francis is often compared to President Trump in the least flattering terms, but I think one parallel is just: he was a novice, an outsider, inexperienced and overwhelmed. And so, just as the “Deep State” swooped in on President Trump, the “Deep Church” moved quickly to establish itself as the power behind St. Peter’s throne.

This is my grand theory of the Francis papacy. It may be wrong, but I think it goes some way towards explaining why the Holy Father is so difficult to pin down. And the good news is that I think he’s getting wise.

We mentioned already that Francis angered his erstwhile progressive allies by trying to shut down the German bishops’ “synodal journey.” Cardinal Marx, it seems, stepped down as head of the German bishops’ conference in order to spend more time in the Vatican, whipping his Deep Church henchmen into shape.

Likewise, Cardinal Maradiaga is obviously reeling from *Querida Amazonia*. An early draft, which was leaked to the press, is said to have endorsed married priests and female deacons—both of which Francis has, in the past, disagreed with. It looked as though the bureaucrats responsible with drafting those statements were trying to put words into Francis’s mouth. They were trying to commit him publicly to their position, hoping he would keep their language in *Querida* out of sheer embarrassment. Before its final publication, of course, the text was altered to remove any reference to the two issues, no doubt on Francis’s behest. Yet the Deep Church remains unperturbed: as Elise Ann Allen of *Crux* rather ominously reported, top papal aides are saying “the door is not definitively closed” on either matter.

Let’s be clear: this is not what Francis wants. In his closing address to the Amazon Synod, a visibly irritated pontiff urged Catholics not to get bogged down in “intraecclesiastical matters—meaning, say this side won or that side won.” Yet surely nobody was playing politics more baldly than Claudio Cardinal Hummes, the Brazilian radical he appointed to lead the synod. That, I think, was the moment Francis realized that his friends weren’t really his friends, that they didn’t share his desire for reform, and that they were only pretending to love the poor and downtrodden as an excuse to ram through their own heterodox agenda.

At this juncture, I’m deeply grateful to men like Robert Cardinal Sarah and Gerhard Cardinal Müller, true champions of orthodoxy who have, nevertheless, always addressed the Holy Father with the utmost reverence and charity. Both men have avoided contradicting Francis publicly so far as they were able, while also being frank with him in their private conversations. These men are true priests, not politicians. And I’m certain that, if Francis manages to break free from the grips of the Deep Church, it will only be through the friendship of such holy and faithful priests as these. He’ll recognize that, whatever their disagreements, they have always had his best interests at heart.

What the Holy Father needs right now is not allies or yes-men but friends. For too long, Francis has been encircled by ferrets in clerical garb who see Rome as a vast chessboard. Francis was their king, vulnerable and useless. But, as in any game of chess, the king is only another piece. No more. Now Francis needs to surround himself with brother bishops who share his love for Holy Mother Church—competent men and Vatican veterans who are nevertheless moved by a desire to defend the Bride of Christ, not destroy her. And, yes, I hope this may soften some readers' view of Pope Francis. I don't excuse any error or slight. I've stated my disagreements clearly (though, I hope, reverently) over the years, and will continue to do so. But Francis is not evil; he's besieged, unsure, and misled. The most we can do for him—and the Church—is to love him, respect him, and pray for him every day.

The very *worst* thing we can do, meanwhile, is give the Deep Church fodder for their dossiers saying that conservative Catholics are spiteful, disloyal, and uncharitable. Remember what Our Lord told His followers after He washed their feet: "Love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." This is the language Francis knows best.

We will present commentaries from those who like pope Francis to those who don't. A number paraphrased said: "There is nothing worse than a 'do gooder' who doesn't know what he is doing". Another group says he is nothing but a liar and the author is deceived. Another group says he appears undecided but is really launching trial balloons to see how far he can go or let his associates go. Still another group says he is not sincere because he never answered the five cardinals and bishops in reference to the "Dubia". Another group points out that he has seriously destroyed or damaged the Church in China. If he is so humble and transparent, then he would have released the agreement between the Vatican and China. In reference to the sexual scandal there is no progress in cleaning up the situation. Worse there is constant cover ups and stalling on the part of his office.

He has his feet in both camps. After presenting Church teaching, he becomes charitable to someone who opposes Church teaching, and leaves his lambs and sheep alone and as victims amongst the wolves. If he is plagued with self-doubt, maybe he needs to see a psychologist. Anyone who is elected Pope has the option to say NO due to fear, weakness, self-doubt or humility. Just as couples marrying do not know what awaits them, they trust in God, Who will give them the graces to overcome their fears. Does his political understanding of Peron's philosophy influence his thinking? He presents Church teaching but allows input from liberals to show his openness. Then reality hits, and he restates his position based on theology or on practicality. Pray that Pope Francis listens to God and is not influenced by Jesuit pride. Finally, the groups all agreed that the Church will survive this papacy as the Church survived the Borgia papacy. Thanks to the promise of Christ: "I will be with you all days even to the consummation of the world and the gates of hell shall not prevail".

We hope our presentation does fairness to all parties involved. You decide.

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