

Pope Francis: Sexism With a Human Face?

Sunday 29 September 2013, by [POLLITT Katha](#) (Date first published: 25 September 2013).

He seems like a lovely, modest man, but there's no sign he will change the church's stance on issues that matter to women.

Pope Francis seems a lovely man. He washes the feet of prisoners, drives a Ford Focus and lives in the Vatican guesthouse instead of the isolated papal apartments. He even calls people who write him with their troubles. In July, he made headlines when he said of gay priests, "Who am I to judge?" Most recently, he astonished the world with a long interview in *America*, the Jesuit magazine, in which he said the church is too "obsessed" with abortion, gay rights and birth control and risked becoming a "house of cards."

Liberals are ecstatic. The theologian Daniel Maguire, who has championed reproductive rights for decades, heralded the pope's words in a piece titled "The End of the Catholic Church's Pelvic Zone Orthodoxy." New York Times columnist Frank Bruni was happy about the "olive branch" extended to gays, rhapsodized over the pope's "modesty" and "humility," and advised President Obama to emulate him. (Modesty and humility being definitely not part of a columnist's brief, why not urge a total stranger, the president, to remodel his character?) Even Catholics for Choice was warily hopeful. As for non-Catholics, one friend of mine summed up the feelings of many: if he really means this, she announced, I'm converting.

Not so fast. Of course it's refreshing to see a change from the all-abortion-all-the-time programming of the last two popes, who did not seem to mind how many faithful drifted away as long as the ones who remained held fast to official teachings. "Fewer but better" cadres, as Lenin succinctly put it. Liberals are so fed up with American prelates fulminating against homosexuality, comparing abortion to the Holocaust and allying themselves with the Republican Party that they have seized on the pope's words as signaling a change in the church's teachings, the way they did when Pope Benedict XVI seemed to say condoms were permissible to prevent AIDS. (Actually, he didn't quite say that.) There has been no doctrinal change, nor is there likely to be one anytime soon. Rather, the pope was calling for a change of tone and emphasis: forbid with love. "Like Jesus, he's saying, hate the sin, love the sinner," said New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who as president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops has helped lead the church's war against gay marriage, abortion and the Affordable Care Act. As the Catholic conservative George Weigel put it in *National Review*, "Francis underscored that 'the teaching of the Church is clear' on issues like abortion, euthanasia, the nature of marriage, and chastity and that he is 'a son of the Church' who accepts those teachings as true."

Sure enough, the day after the publication of the interview—and to much less notice—Pope Francis gave a firmly anti-abortion speech to a gathering of Catholic gynecologists. He quoted Pope Benedict on the connection between "openness to life" and social justice ("openness to life" is code for banning not just abortion but contraception), castigated abortion as part of a "throw-away culture" and urged Catholic doctors to refuse to perform them. At best, this suggests an opening for the "seamless garment" Catholicism promoted by the late Cardinal Bernardin, in which opposition to birth control and abortion was connected with opposition to war, capital punishment and poverty.

Women really get the short sleeve of the seamless garment, I must say. Realistically, ending war or poverty is way beyond the church's power, but it has been rather effective around the world at promoting unwanted pregnancy and forced childbirth. I honor the way Catholic activists have fought the death penalty in the United States, but it is a fact that exponentially more women die because of lack of access to birth control and abortion globally than do prisoners in the execution chamber. In numerous countries where the Catholic Church is powerful—Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, the Philippines—the death penalty does not exist, and abortion is banned even to preserve the woman's life: a serial killer is at less risk of death from the state than a pregnant woman.

Pope Francis's record on women so far is a continuation of his conservative predecessors'. "On the ordination of women," he has said, "that door is closed." Church watchers can debate whether he was agreeing with John Paul II's "definitive" (but not quite infallible) statement on the matter or simply acknowledging a current political reality. Either way, governance of the church will continue to present a Saudi-like front of solid, if not necessarily heterosexual, masculinity, and its all-important sacraments will continue to be dispensed by men alone.

Pope Francis is continuing the investigation, begun last year by Pope Benedict, of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the progressive nuns' organization charged with espousing "radical feminist themes" and being insufficiently zealous against abortion and gay rights. It's hard to imagine winning many hearts and minds among American Catholic women—who use birth control and have abortions and even same-sex weddings like other American women—by putting these immensely learned, dedicated and, of course, devout women under the supervision of male authorities, as though they were children.

Pope Francis has called for a "theology of the woman," whatever that means—as if over half the people in the world could be gathered under a single umbrella. (Does anyone talk about a "theology of the man"?) In the America interview, when asked about the role of women in the church, Francis first warned against "'female machismo,' because a woman has a different make-up than a man." Then he went on to the Virgin Mary, who is best known for having a different makeup from any other woman who ever lived, and made some vague references to "the woman" as "essential for the church." Woman as Other, Woman as Mother. That this humane, cultivated and, yes, modest man has so little sense of real women is the best argument yet against priestly celibacy.

From this week's editorials, Frances Kissling has a more hopeful position on Pope Francis and the direction of the Catholic Church.

Katha Pollitt

P.S.

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<http://www.thenation.com/article/176345/pope-francis-sexism-human-face#sthash.5K6izycE.dpuf>

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* Katha Pollitt is well known for her wit and her keen sense of both the ridiculous and the sublime. Her "Subject to Debate" column, which debuted in 1995 and which the Washington Post called "the

best place to go for original thinking on the left," appears every other week in *The Nation*; it is frequently reprinted in newspapers across the country. In 2003, "Subject to Debate" won the National Magazine Award for Columns and Commentary. She is also a Puffin Foundation Writing Fellow at The Nation Institute.

Pollitt has been contributing to *The Nation* since 1980. Her 1992 essay on the culture wars, "Why We Read: Canon to the Right of Me..." won the National Magazine Award for essays and criticism, and she won a Whiting Foundation Writing Award the same year. In 1993 her essay "Why Do We Romanticize the Fetus?" won the Maggie Award from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Many of Pollitt's contributions to *The Nation* are compiled in three books: *Reasonable Creatures: Essays on Women and Feminism* (Knopf); *Subject to Debate: Sense and Dissents on Women, Politics, and Culture* (Modern Library); and *Virginity or Death! And Other Social and Political Issues of Our Time* (Random House). In 2007 Random House published her collection of personal essays, *Learning to Drive and Other Life Stories*. Two pieces from this book, "Learning to Drive" and its followup, "Webstalker," originally appeared in *The New Yorker*. "Learning to Drive" is anthologized in *Best American Essays 2003*.

Pollitt has also written essays and book reviews for *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *Harper's*, *Ms.*, *Glamour*, *Mother Jones*, *the New York Times*, and *the London Review of Books*. She has appeared on NPR's *Fresh Air* and *All Things Considered*, *Charlie Rose*, *The McLaughlin Group*, *CNN*, *Dateline NBC* and the *BBC*. Her work has been republished in many anthologies and is taught in many university classes.

For her poetry, Pollitt has received a National Endowment for the Arts grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her 1982 book *Antarctic Traveller* won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her poems have been published in many magazines and are reprinted in many anthologies, most recently *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (2006). Her second collection, *The Mind-Body Problem*, came out from Random House in 2009.

Born in New York City, she was educated at Harvard and the Columbia School of the Arts. She has lectured at dozens of colleges and universities, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brooklyn College, UCLA, the University of Mississippi and Cornell. She has taught poetry at Princeton, Barnard and the 92nd Street Y, and women's studies at the New School University.