

# Pope rebukes narcissistic Pharisees in our midst

**I**t drives his critics mad, but instead of technical theological or philosophical language, Pope Francis prefers to think and speak in literary images. He thus presents the Gospel so that it directly addresses the heart.

The Pope even shows a fondness for wordplay, as in his January 11 homily. Francis said that when priests, who are “anointed” by God for His people, lose their close relationship with Jesus, they lose their “anointing” (*unzione*) and instead become “annoying” (*untuoso*).

My English alliteration (“anointing”) / “annoying”, tries to capture the Pope’s Italian wordplay. But there is a better English word to translate how the Pope describes priests who lapse into idolatrous narcissism: “unctuous” (*untuoso*).

“Unctuous” is a splendid word with rich overtones: “smarmy”; “oily”; “luxurious”; “characterized by affected, exaggerated, or insincere earnestness”; “affecting an oily charm”; “someone is trying to butter you up; being nice, hoping you’ll give them what they want”; “seeming to be interested, friendly, or full of praise, but in a way that is unpleasant because it is not sincere”; “revealing or marked by a smug, ingrati-



Global Theatre  
C.S. Morrissey

ating, and false earnestness or spirituality”.

Pope Francis warns that a relationship with Jesus can become “a somewhat artificial relationship” when it “does not come from the heart”.

In a particularly powerful section of his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis explains how hearts become like hearts of Pharisees. Such hearts are characterized by “spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church,” and “consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being.” (EG 93)

The lives of such people are “based on carefully cultivated appearances,” so that “from without, everything appears as it should be.” What goes on inside their minds? Inside, their spiritual worldliness is “fuelled in two deeply interrelated ways.” (EG 93)

The first way consists of “gnosticism, a purely subjective faith” that keeps this sort of person “imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings.” The second

way is a “self-absorbed promethean neoplagianism,” an attitude that makes them “feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past.” (EG 94)

Just as Jesus condemned the Pharisees of his time, the Pope holds nothing back from his critique of such people. Their “supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline” on the outside masks the “narcissistic and authoritarian elitism” barely concealed within. The Gospel cannot take root in one’s heart if “instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others.” (EG 94)

Ironically, such a person thinks the Church belongs to them. The Pope gives many examples of how pretentious people are preoccupied with “taking over the space of the Church” from others. His first example condemns the most falsely spiritual type of spiritual worldliness: “In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but

without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time. In this way, the life of the Church turns into a museum piece or something which is the property of a select few.” (EG 95)

But there are also extremely worldly types of spiritual worldliness. In such people, their “spiritual worldliness lurks behind a fascination with social and political gain, or pride in their ability to manage practical affairs, or an obsession with programmes of self-help and self-realization. It can also translate into a concern to be seen, into a social life full of appearances, meetings, dinners and receptions.” (EG 95)

Thus, a crowd of careerists tends to congregate at official events. They are the self-appointed ruling elite, recognizable by their “business mentality, caught up with management, statistics, plans and evaluations whose principal beneficiary

is not God’s people but the Church as an institution.” Thus, “closed and elite groups are formed, and no effort is made to go forth and seek out those who are distant or the immense multitudes who thirst for Christ. Evangelical fervour is replaced by the empty pleasure of complacency and self-indulgence.” (EG 95)

The Pope mocks the grandiose pretensions of such people. Characterized by the sin of “vainglory,” they think they know better than everyone else, but their grand schemes stand in ludicrous contrast to the “modicum of power” they have arrogated to themselves within the Church. They “would rather be the general of a defeated army than a mere private in a unit which continues to fight.” They love to “dream up vast apostolic projects, meticulously planned,” to “waste time talking about ‘what needs to be done,’” and to “indulge in endless fantasies.” (EG 96)

With the “modicum

of power” they have self-importantly arrogated to themselves, these souls corrupted by “spiritual worldliness” shut themselves off from the healing power of the Gospel. The Pope paints a terrifying picture that the humble of heart will find familiar from their encounters with the hard-hearted “spiritual worldliness” of those who habitually abuse power:

“Those who have fallen into this worldliness look on from above and afar, they reject the prophecy of their brothers and sisters, they discredit those who raise questions, they constantly point out the mistakes of others and they are obsessed by appearances. Their hearts are open only to the limited horizon of their own immanence and interests, and as a consequence they neither learn from their sins nor are they genuinely open to forgiveness.” (EG 97)

C.S. Morrissey is an associate professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. □