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REV. JIM BACIK  
POPE FRANCIS AND HIS CRITICS  
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## Pope Francis and His Critics

I appreciate the kind words. Everybody knows when Tom Gumbleton asks you to give a talk, you come and give a talk. *(laughter)* You don't say "No" to him, for sure. I did talk to this group once before, I recall, and your reputation is pretty wide.

I was also thinking, that on this day, the anniversary of 9-11, and Tom's work on peace and justice, and the saying of Hans Kung that no peace among the nations without peace among the religions; no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions; no dialogue without self-criticism of one's own traditions. So, remember the importance among the whole inter-faith effort, to work for peace and justice in the world.

I did send a book to the Paulist Press on Pope Francis and His Critics, so it's sort of on my mind. *(laughter)* I thought that as long as I just wrote the book, I might as well talk about it. Let me talk about the critics and the pope. It's good to remember, there is about an 85% approval rating among Catholics in the United States. So, a lot of the time, the critics are creating an impasse on the news, and so on, but the pope is extremely popular. I often think we are lucky to have lived through two charismatic popes that touched our hearts in many ways: Pope John XXIII, who called the Council, and now, Pope Francis. There aren't too many people in the world who have had two popes like that in our own lifetime.

So, what I intend to do is to mention some of the critics, and to take on what I think is a response to them. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on the sex abuse issue.

## Rev, Jim Bacik<sup>1/</sup>



I made that decision because, I think, people have been reading the papers, people like Vigano, and I don't know any more than what's in the papers; but I thought the question and answer period would be a good time to answer all that. I'm happy to talk about it, but just decided the journalistic themes that we've heard is not the best use of our time. We'll see how that works out.



So, he does have a lot of critics.

Some of the critics are the conservative economists of the United States here; like there's a whole book out collecting the views of conservatives and the free market economists claiming fundamentally that the Pope Francis doesn't understand how the free market works, that he's influenced by the phony capitalism of the United Kingdom, and is overly critical of free markets.

There are a lot of feminists who are not happy with the pope. They want to see him do more in terms of women's ordination. They'd like to see the question of women's diaconate moving faster than it is now. It turns out it may be only a study or a history, and not too much of a program for

getting women ordained now.

On liturgical questions, there's a high ranking official, Cardinal Robert Sirah, who publicly goes against Francis on liturgical questions; for instance: Francis said national hierarchies are supposed to have control over translations; and Cardinal Sirah said divine worship dicasteries in Rome at the highest position Francis appointed him is now publicly advocating that priests turn their back to the people. So, we've got a reform of the reform movement, which doesn't like what Francis does on liturgy.

We've got a lot of the people who are upset on the various directions the pope is going. We have a traditionalist people in the United States, who, I think—we've got one not far from here: Church Militant—the traditionalists, I think, claim that Francis really isn't the pope, that Benedict before him, and that he is a heretic, and so on. And the movement is well financed, and has organization behind it, promoting what Cardinal Vigano has been saying about the pope, harsh, strong criticisms.

And one of the criticisms that I want to spend a little more time on is the pope's position on communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. *Amoris Laetitia*, Joy of Life, Chapter 8, he talks about opening up in many ways, about the possibility of divorced and remarried people receiving communion. There's one author in particular, Ross Douthat, New York Times, wrote a book, *To Change the Church*. How many people have read the book? (*no hands*) I guessed right! Any rate, the reason Douthat is important is, he writes for the New York Times; and his book, *To Change the Church* is extremely critical of Francis. It's been reviewed everywhere from Boston to Paris, *etc.*, the New York Times, the Washington Post. The world that shapes the perceptions in the secular culture is very important!



And so, I feel the need to provide in my book an answer to Douthat, who is very bright, and a convert to Catholicism, if you read his column, a very astute commentator. People who read him in the paper say he's somewhat of a hothead.

I want to spend a little time on what Douthat talks about. So, Douthat thinks of the struggle an evil, secular culture, and the traditional Catholic Church, which is trying to hold the line against the tendency to intercept the culture, to visualism, to sexual license, to post-modern culture, there's no absolute truth, and so on. So, he views this struggle in the world between conservatives and liberals within the Catholic Church; and he views that like at Vatican II. In Vatican II it was all about the business of trying to bring the Church up to date; for John XXIII, opening windows, bringing fresh air into the Church, the ship of Peter, and so on. Later, in the Council, it was about people against that tendency.

One of the chief ones was Cardinal Ottaviani. Some people remember that. I always liked the story about Ottaviani. He wanted to go backwards, his *moto semper*. So, one day he was late for the Council; he went out and hailed a cab. And he said to the cab driver, "Take me to the Council." The cab driver drove him to Trent. (*laughter*)



So, I remember one of the conservative parties on the first publications of the Council, when they said that we're not going to accept all the background things that have occurred or given to us; we're going to start over fresh. So, what happened after the Council is liberal people wanted to run with it. This is it! This is the spirit of the Council! And they wanted to do all those wonderful things. Then came *Humanae Vitae*, the birth control

encyclical, created new discussions; and then we added 35 years of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict, who wanted to reform the reform, to hold back the spirit of Vatican II.

And then, Francis comes along and wants to reinvigorate the spirit of the Council. So, the first chapter in my book goes to make the Church alive again, more energized, more witness, more engaged in the world, failed because of the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict. And then, the effort, which is due to conservative efforts, that effort also failed; *i.e.*, those two popes, John Paul II and Benedict, could not really get the Church together to unify it around the vision of what the Church should be, and how it related to the world; and so, that project ran out of energy also. So, that's where we end up today.

So, when Francis became pope, he moved into the guest room, a simpler life style; it was an iconic moment. When he came out onto the balcony as the newly elected pope, he said, "Pray for me." I have a priest friend and a lady friend started to cry at that moment when he said, "Would you pray for me?" And so, he set a tone of simplicity and gospel; and so, he got off to a great start. But then, he called on family and starts to open up questions on communion for divorced and remarried. So, the portrait of Francis changes.

So, what we face in the United States, we've got a narrative that's sort of flawed, I think. That's how people in the secular world think along those lines.

Now here's my full evaluation of the critique of Douthat. I'm very close to Jesuit Rahner, who is in my bones and blood. I did a favor for him once.

I received a dissertation for him once, and I asked for his opinion. He asked me to review it for him, as a writer and publisher, which I did. Years later, a guy called me up; I'm not sure his name, a theologian in the United States. He said, "I want to come and talk to you. I got this letter from Karl Rahner, and I'd like to talk to you about it." So, Rahner's theology of grace suggests to us that the Holy Spirit is at work in all the world, in all of history, and all of the evolutionary process, in the whole history of the human race, God's Spirit at work, the Holy Spirit, the Divine Spirit. And the core of the message is that, in the Christian world, we think it's on target.

So, the secular world is not just a horrible place, as Douthat thinks. So, a lot of world integrated before the Catholic Church did. And so, if we go to the other side of his equation, the Church; the church itself is not the Kingdom. The Church is a sign of the existence of the Kingdom, as Vatican II told us. The church is a sinful organization. We know that because people belong to it. We, who are a sinful people, are part of it; so, we know that. So, it's not a truly pure Church fighting a totally false falsehood.

So, as theologian David Tracy likes to say, we need to set up a critical dialogue in which the Church and the world learn from each other. So, we say the Church can learn from things that go on in the secular world. So, reaching a critical dialogue is very different; and it doesn't look like \_\_\_\_\_.

So, there's another narrative of what the Second Vatican Council is about, rather than what is going on now. I'd like to play that out in some ways. Let me try it this way. What Francis says to many people is the revival of Vatican II. From 1962-1965 thousands of bishops hammered out a marvelous achievement; so that what Francis has said, over and over again, is to get back to the spirit of the Council and resurrect the themes of the Council, and bring them back into the life of the Church. And part of his dialogue results in a slant toward the marginalized and the poor, to work for justice and immigrants, and so on.

And so, I know one priest was telling me, he said, "When I see Francis, I realize that through my whole priesthood life I have felt constrained." Well, for example, our bishops of the United States wanted to have First Confession after First Communion; they thought that was a good idea. When the Catechism came out, I don't know for what reason, he decided that we shouldn't have sexist language in the Catechism. He fights for this, he goes to Rome, and he loses. Some nuns have said they're not going to teach that Catechism because of the sexist language.

Another prime example is the famous translation we have at the Mass. So, we have some eleven English speaking countries, all worked together, ICEL, a wonderful English translation of the liturgy. They worked for almost 20 years, presented it to the Vatican; and it wasn't accepted! They said there were new rules for translation. And so, we end up with what we've got!

So, I've got this collect prayer. And looking at it, I can't figure out what it means. *(laughter)* It's got 3-5 clauses—is there something up here *(pointing to his head)* that knows what it means? This is an example of the centralization that occurred in these two papacies.

Rahner said – the great German Jesuit – said that the papacy of John Paul II could be seen in the light of history as anachronistic, i.e., out of touch with the times, *i.e.*, of holding back of things it can't eventually hold back, i.e., Vatican II. So, I'll say more about that in a little bit.

So, many people I know feel like they're swimming upstream. At a conference I had in Washington with college presidents, one priest got up and said, "Isn't it great to have the leader on our side now?" *(laughter)* referring to Francis. He spoke for many, like it's liberating; like, wow! You don't have to go swimming upstream all the time.

So, with Francis, he comes back to those fundamental themes of the Council that invigorated many of us: the whole Church as the People of God, all of us who are baptized; the great theology of Baptism, the whole idea of the universal call to holiness, all of us are not second-class citizens, *i.e.*, no division between laity and clergy, all these baptized people called to holiness, these baptized people who are co-responsible for the Church, and for the its mission in the world, that we collaborate and work together on all that, this idea of the priest as servant-leader. According to Pope John Paul II, “Grace is the spiritual father.” That’s how young priests should think of themselves: as spiritual fathers. Of course, some people don’t like the priest treating them as children – spiritual fathers deal with children.

So, Pope Francis raised up the idea of servant-leader of the community. He reminded us again of the great importance of the liturgy in Vatican II, made the famous statement, “The reform of the Vatican II liturgy is inevitable; that’s where we’re going; it’s not up for grabs.” So, Pope Benedict spoke constantly of the reform of the reform. That’s why Benedict told Francis to appoint Robert Sirah as head of divine worship. And so, the pope called for “full, active, conscious participation in the liturgy.” And that’s from the Vatican II document on the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*); and Rome should not dictate the translation. So, Vatican II said the decision on the translation of the Missal -the Sacramentary, all these liturgical things - belongs in the hands of national hierarchies, not in Rome.

So, this opened the possibility of finding a better translation of what we do at Mass. So, we’ve got all these themes for grammatical improvement to dissipate the faith dialogue, the whole idea of the Church as servant-leader reaches out to the poor, the whole positive notion that God is a loving and merciful Father, the whole notion of Christ as our model for compassionate and loving of others. So, in other words, all these themes of Vatican II that have been neglected through two papacies have been resurrected by Pope Francis.

So, again, getting back to Douthat, he doesn’t understand the development of doctrine, how new things happened at Vatican II—you realize that—new things happened. It wasn’t just a repeat.

I remember when I was in the seminary, and I wrote a definitive article saying that nothing would happen at Vatican II because all the bishops think the same. (*laughter*) I tried a response after my article, but nobody else read it. That happened back in 1959 when the pope called the Council. New things happen—you realize that.

I mean, the Church condemned religious freedom — religious liberty — for so many years. Then, John Courtney Murray, our great American theologian, couldn't write about that any more. And he accepted it, great Jesuit, finest American theologian; and he took out all his books and volumes in his library on religious freedom. And then, the Council, working on the document, finally called him in as an expert, that led to the great document on religious liberty, which goes against what was taught in the Church for centuries. So, what Douthat doesn't see is the development of doctrine: slavery, religious freedom, freedom for all people, and so on; and which Francis is so intuned.

So, my first big point in defense of Francis is: he is not trying to overturn the conservative consensus on the settled teachings of the Church; that isn't what he is about. What he's been about is resurrecting or revivifying the spirit of Vatican II. Now, the next major point in trying to respond to Douthart: in the late 60s, Karl Rahner came to the United States to give a talk, one of the most influential talks he ever gave occurred here in the United States. Few people in the world knew that Rahner spoke English. That's because he thought my German was so bad that he began speaking English. *(laughter)* He had many good friends who will tell you he couldn't speak English; but, I'm here to tell you he did. And he preferred his English to my German. *(laughter)*

Anyway, he came to the United States to give a talk; he came to Chicago in 1974 for the sept centennial of Thomas Aquinas. He got up and started to talk on it. Throughout the church — it was filled, on the campus in Chicago, I was there — and he began his first paragraph in German. *(laughter)* People sitting next to each other said, "We came all the way from San Francisco, and we can't understand him." So, after one paragraph, he sat down. A little guy, his translator, got up and read the rest of the paper. He took out his rosary, started to say his rosary, and he fell asleep. *(laughter)*

So, what I heard in his talk on how to interpret Vatican II, what he essentially said was, that the usual interpretation of the Council is that there were in the 1920s these movements, like liturgical movements; ecumenical movements, where they're going to talk to Protestants; and there were faith movements, where they were going to talk to Muslims and Jews. There was a great theological revival. And what happened at the Council was, John XXIII, brilliant as he was, brought together all those movements. So, the Second Vatican Council was a culmination of these movements.



They brought them together, gave us documents that solidified those teachings. So, that's what we got!

Rahner said, "Wrong! That's not the way to interpret the Second Vatican Council. It wasn't the culmination of anything. It was the tiny, tiny beginning of the Church becoming for the first time in history a truly world Church. "Rahner and the World Church," that's the tag for his story.

So, to play that out, Rahner said, "The first great change in the history of the Church occurred in the first century, highlighted at the Council of Jerusalem. At that time, the question was, 'Do Christians and followers of Jesus have to become Jews? Do males have to become circumcised, or not?' And, of course, Paul sided with Peter, and decided, 'No! They don't. We have to be open. You don't have to become a Jew to become a Christian.' " So, that was clear. It was important that it be added to our understanding of church.

Rahner said, "We are now beginning the time of the second great adventure in the history of the Church. Up to now, we've been primarily a European-Roman centered Church. We view the mission that all is orchestrated missionary effort to explore that Roman-Latin-Western notion of Christianity in the whole world, with the bishops functioning as branch managers of the great organization, led by the pope.

Rahner says, "Wrong! That this isn't the Church the way it's supposed to be. We're not tied to that norm, that the Jesus movement has an energy of its own, that it has a movement, a power, a style and spirit of its own; and it can be enculturated in any nation, in any society, in any culture. You can find its cultural forms for the first time in Africa and in Asia. You see the vernacular in the liturgy adapted to the Masai tribe in Africa in the Masai language, the indigenous Chinese, Christianity. We saw in the documents that opened up ecumenical dialogue. We saw it in the fact of trying to give power to the national hierarchies.

So, if you paid attention to the culmination of the liturgical movement, ecumenical movement, liturgical movement, and so on, it's a tiny beginning of a version of a world Church. He said that in that world Church, national hierarchies will play a more important role than in the past. Then, that world Church would not have one canon law, dictated from Rome, telling everyone in the world what they're supposed to do, what laws they have to follow.

And looking back, as I have said earlier, the papacy of John Paul II would be seen as totally anachronous, *i.e.*, an attempt to centralize things from Rome, to dictate things from Rome, would be seen as out of touch with what Vatican II was all about, which is inevitable about the direction of the Church, inevitable direction in becoming a world Church. So, that's fundamentally Rahner on a world Church, a new interpretation of the Second Vatican Council.

Now, this is a way of seeing Pope Francis. I'm seeing Francis actually implementing what Rahner talked about theoretically. Yeah! They're both Jesuits, you know, that might be part of it. So, how does he do it? Well, for the first time, he appoints cardinals, a group of nine, as they're called, the House of Cardinals, from all over the world to come to advise him.

I can't imagine Pope John Paul II doing anything like that—he didn't need advice. As Rahner once told me personally about JP II, "I hope the next pope isn't quite so smart." (*laughter*) John Paul II was so brilliant; he knew so much about so many things—his languages, his cultures. Rahner, well he didn't get his wish, because Benedict turned out to be possibly the best theologian we've had as pope. So, he didn't get his wish in that regard.

The other thing you will notice is when he writes encyclicals, he always quotes national hierarchies. Now, when John Paul II wrote all his encyclicals, marvelous things, the person he quotes, almost exclusively, is himself. (*laughter*) All of his documents reference something he wrote before. When Francis writes, he says that the Japanese bishops say this, the Brazilian bishops say that; and so, he draws the wisdom from all the people around him, literally, and from the national hierarchies.

His whole way of finding and dealing with the Chilean situation; I mean, he did a terrible job starting out with that, such as abuse of children, saw the error of his ways; but finally, he fired the five bishops altogether; then he hasn't done anything since. What I believe is he challenged the Chilean Church to decide what to do, not him telling them what to do. And that's what they've done. The Chilean bishops have set up a commission to study this, with lay people on it. They're making progress on healing sex abuse on children. But, that's his way, I believe, of doing it.

The same way with divorce and remarriage; he isn't going to tell us: "Well, here are four rules to follow if you've been divorced and remarried. Do these four things; and then, you can go to communion." No! What he wants is people to think through it themselves, to discern what to do.

And what he wants the priests to do is accompany them, to listen to them, to have an open mind, to see how he can help them, to help them follows a whole array of living out the whole idea of a Christian marriage.

He has refused to intervene and enter into conversation with the German Church leadership in allowing inter-communion with Protestants and Catholics, like married couples. A Catholic girl marries a Lutheran guy; can they receive communion together? So, there's this debate among the Germans; Francis would not say. "You have to figure this out!" This is world Church; this is what Rahner is talking about. And there are different answers in different cultures; that the brilliance of this. So, Francis is asking to put in the black list the theory of Rahner toward a world Church; and you can't control everything from Rome. You can't dictate how a person's life can be lived out in every culture, in different places.

Let me go back to Douthat. Douthat wants a clear answer in his mind set that dictates, "I have a clear answer to this thing, whether someone can go to communion, or not; this idea that the Church being this safeguard, this deposit of truth, that knows the truth, is going to insist on it, against encroachments of the modern world."

What I would say is that Pope Francis' whole approach to discernment is a brilliant pastoral strategy, not bringing us to schism, but leading us to what we all should do, *i.e.*, we all need to listen to the Spirit guiding us. What Rahner has said, "Being a good Christian isn't a matter of following all the rules, it's a matter of discerning what the God, who lives within me, is telling made to do in this particular situation." So, discernment is part of the Jesuit tradition. Rahner wrote a book on spiritual exercise and how to go about that. And that's what Francis wants us to do.

So, I say that Douthat's circulating confusion; now, in all this, none of the bishops around the world will know what to do. But they do know what to do: accompany the faithful, listen to the people, be with them as they try to work this out, bring Gospel values to their attention, call them to the ideal, remind them that Christ is with them, forgiving and merciful. That's how you approach it at best. And then we are set for any situation, when we are discerning, so that we end up with situations where, I think, where handling sexual abuse—I'm not defending the whole bunch of it—but the marriage thing—divorced and remarried communion—I think he is giving us a methodology to guide us in our spiritual life.

I mean, what do you do with your granddaughter who doesn't go to church anymore? Well, some priest, somewhere, has the answer, "Well, you do this," or "You tell your granddaughter, this and that." It doesn't work. You can't do that. You've got to discern. Discern means to be prayerful; you meditate; you think; you try to think of what Jesus said. You get quiet, listen in your heart; you're discerning. There's a million situations where discernment is what you need, based on the theology of the Spirit at work throughout all this.

Well, to get back to my hope, which is we can come up with a more positive narrative of Francis, not this negative thing. The full length books written over a five year period, from March 2013, a five year period, all kinds of articles and books, most of the full length books I know of on Francis are negative, i.e.: he didn't handle sexual abuse right; he messed up on the divorced-Communion thing; he was off base on the faithful, and so on. I don't think you can let that narrative stand. I don't want that narrative to stand. I want an interview that says he was faithful to the Council; he's kept intact fundamental Gospel teachings; he's shown us the way of discernment to guide us in our lives; he's opened up the possibility of us becoming a world Church; he's moved up forward ecumenically; he's shown us a way to critique the market, to work for equity, and so on.

That's what I sense is the high approval rating is because people are in tune with what he is trying to do, to embrace him as a breath of fresh air. You recall what John XXIII said, "Let's open the windows and let us let in fresh air." Let us listen to the Spirit; and let us have good news. (*applause*)

Transcribed by

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1/ Father James J. Bacik is a widely-regarded pastor, theologian, writer and lecturer who served as a priest for the Diocese of Toledo for over fifty years. He has lectured in Latin America, China, Japan, Russia, and Australia. According to Richard P. McBrien, Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, he is "one of America's finest, most insightful theologians, with a remarkable capacity for clear writing and effective teaching."

He has been a columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter* and *The Catholic Chronicle* as well as a writer for the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Campus Ministry, "Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future." Fr. Jim Bacik is the recipient of the Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan Award, the

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