

**James J. Bacik**

## **Introduction**

1. The Easter Season of joy deserves as much attention as the Lenten Season of penance.
2. Polarization in the Church Today: diverse reactions to the 5-year pontificate of Francis.
3. The Jerusalem Church as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. Luke's 2<sup>nd</sup> Volume sequel to his Gospel.
4. Finding unity in essential Christian beliefs and practices: accepting differences in non-essential matters; charity in all things.
5. Some reading: *Introduction to the New Testament* by Raymond Brown; *To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism* by Ross Douthat.

### **I. Division and Polarization in the Church Today: Attitudes toward Pope Francis**

#### **A. Pew Study released early in 2018 just before the 5-year mark of pontificate of Francis**

1. Currently 84% of American Catholics have a favorable view of Francis, the same as after his 1<sup>st</sup> year.
2. Some 90% see him as humble and compassionate.
3. Nearly 60% see him representing major change for the better.
4. Those who think Francis is too liberal jumped 15 percentage points between 2015 and today from 19% to 34%.
5. There is a partisan difference: popularity of Francis – Democrats: 89%, Republicans 76%; too liberal – D 19%, R 55%; positive change D 71% R 33%. About 54% of white Catholic voters identify with or lean toward GOP.
6. About 60% of Americans including Catholics have favorable view of Francis.
7. Around 78% of Catholics think their parish priest supports Francis and just 2% think they do not.

#### **B. Issues (the negative responses are in most cases minority position)**

1. Communion for divorced and remarried: most applaud the pastoral sensitivity; New York Times columnist Ross Douthat in his new book, *To Change the Church* claims it brings the Church to the point of schism. Francis was elected by liberal cardinals who thought he would push reforms and conservatives who thought he would not undo the policies of John Paul and Benedict. He was doing well after one year winning wide popularity. Then he called two Synods (2014 and 2015) on the Family, slanted them in a liberal direction but failed to get them to a consensus on communion for the remarried. He then wrote the apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)* which was deliberately ambiguous but opened the possibility of communion for remarried (footnote 351). He has refused to answer questions posed by Cardinal Raymond Burke (*Dubia*) and he praised the Argentine bishops for their openness to communion. Douthat sees no way to reconcile the liberals who favor communion and the conservatives who think Francis has tried to change a clear doctrine taught by Jesus and maintained by the Church for 2000 years even at great price (losing Church of England over King Henry VIII divorce and other marriages). If Catholics follow the path of Francis we will end up split like the Anglicans (Douthat).

2. Support for Paris Agreement: most appreciate *Laudato Si* while some Americans including President Trump do not.

3. Reform of the Curia: some see progress, while others think it is actually worse.
4. Liturgy: most support his affirmation of Vatican II reform but a small group led by Cardinal Sarah continue to support Pope Benedict's "reform the reform" movement and favor the Tridentine Mass.
5. Role of women: many are disappointed that he is closed to ordination, holds a complementarity theory that hurts women, and has not done more to find leadership roles for women: others point to his study of women deacons.
6. Sex abuse: most are critical that he has not done more and supported Chilean bishop accused of cover-up.

## II. Guidance from the Acts of the Apostles

### A. Background

1. Acts is second volume of two part work that includes the Gospel of Luke.
2. Written around 85.
3. The author; traditionally Luke a physician who traveled with Paul; Ray Brown says this claim is "not impossible" and has more to recommend it than other theories. In Acts the "we passages" 16: 10-17 – missionary journey from Troas to Philippi; 20: 5-15 and 21: 1-18 – end of 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey from Philippi to Jerusalem; 27: 1-28:16 – Paul sent as a prisoner from Caesarea to Rome). These situations are 6 years apart from 52-58 when the companion is not with Paul. It is possible that the "we passages" are a literary device and not historical. It is possible Luke had a diary of another companion of Paul. Reasons for thinking Luke is not the companion: he did not know details of Paul's early life, was not acquainted with his letters, did not appreciate Paul's controversial role. It is possible that he rewrote what he did know and rethought some of Paul's teaching as no longer relevant some 20 years after the Apostle's death around 67. A Catholic scripture scholar Richard Dillon thinks that what Luke did not know about Paul indicates he was not the companion (Jerome Biblical Commentary). What we do know about Luke from his writings: an educated Greek-speaker, skilled writer who knew the Jewish scriptures in Greek; not an eyewitness of Jesus, not a Palestinian; drew on Mark and Q; possibly a convert to Judaism or at least knew about it before becoming Christian; probably addressed to a largely Gentile audience in the general area touched by Paul's missionary effort; purpose to give assurance to Christians that their faith was well-placed in Christ.
4. In the Gospel the ascension ends the activity of Jesus on earth and in Acts it begins the story of the spread of the Church to the ends of the earth.

### B. Acts: The division between Hellenistic Christians and Hebrew Christians (Acts 6: 1-6)

1. Hellenistic Christians: spoke Greek, culturally Greco-Roman; played down the importance of the Jerusalem Temple; a minority among Jerusalem Christians; leader was Stephen who was first martyr; gave important speech before his death; like Jesus he is cast out of the city, asks forgiveness for his executioners, and commends his spirit heavenward, his death spawns a new outpouring of the Spirit; his persecutor Saul (Paul); the dispersed Hellenists evangelized Samaritans who also did not respect Jerusalem Temple; Philip took over leadership and preached in Africa South of Egypt perhaps Sudan.
2. Hebrew Christians: majority; still worshipped in the Temple; culturally Jewish: more acceptable to the Jewish leaders: led by James the brother of the Lord martyred in 62 A.D.; some tried to force the Hellenists to conform by cutting off funds for Hellenist widows.
3. The Twelve called a meeting around 36 A.D. to deal with the division. They did not demand the Hellenists conform or leave nor did they take control over the common fund. They did

allow the Hellenists to choose own leaders and administrators of common funds by the Seven.

4. The role of the Twelve: preserved the unity of the early Church they affirmed pluralism based on a “hierarchy of truths” (belief in Christ more important than difference on Temple worship); because Jesus did not leave a blueprint for church structure, the leaders guided by the Holy Spirit developed a workable structure; the Twelve now are associated with the actions of the Hellenists.

### III. Application – seeking a fruitful pluralism

- A. Francis promotes Synodal Church
  - B. Specifics
    1. Appointing Council of Cardinals from around the world to help govern Church.
    2. Called two synods with extensive consultation as preparation for *The Joy of Love*.
    3. Quoting national hierarchies (bishop’s conferences).
    4. Giving translation authority to regional bishops and not the Congregation for Divine Worship.
  - C. On communion for divorced and remarried
    1. Francis responds as a pastor.
    2. Emphasis on discernment of unique call of God
    3. He does not envision a development of doctrine.
    4. Some theologians have suggested that consummation is not accomplished by one act of intercourse but is a developing reality.
    5. Critique of Douthat.
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