

You are Loved.

By Clare Short, September 19, 2014

I had a thoroughly good time this morning. A nice young man from BBC Radio 4 came round to interview me *for like 2 hours* on how people view Pope Francis. He was very interested to hear that i identify as a totally orthodox catholic but i am also totally pro Francis. I will post the interview here when it airs at the beginning of October (please pray that they edit it fairly!).

I have had many discussions online recently regarding Pope Francis where the tone has been rather negative to say the least. It seems that my orthodox buddies just don't *get* Francis. At best people think he is sloppy at his job and at worst they think he is single handedly going to destroy the catholic church!

There are several reasons for this:

1. He is not Benedict.

Benedict was just the most wonderful pope for the orthodox catholic community. He sorted out the liturgy, he loved and embraced the 'traditional' parts of Catholicism in a very visible way, he was a master theologian. He was old skool and rock steady. Orthodox catholic's were extremely comfortable under Benedict.

Francis on the other hand has shunned many 'traditional' things ie. the red shoes, the papal apartment, the pomp and the highly bejewelled vestments ect... He has a completely different, simplistic style. He breaks with tradition in a big way.

I think there is a temptation to misunderstand Francis here. He is only breaking with tradition on *superficial* matters. If you take the time to really listen to his homilies and read *Evangelii Gaudium* (or a summary of it – it is 51,000 words long!) you immediately see that he is a completely orthodox pope. The man knows he is not God. He is not trying to change doctrine or re-write the 10 commandments or 'loosen the rules'. What colour the man's shoes are makes no difference to his capability to lead the people of God for goodness sake!

2. He uses ambiguous language.

Many orthodox catholic's i have spoken to have described Francis' 'conversational' style to be wishy-washy at best, and open to wrong interpretation at worst. Personally I think this style of speaking to be extremely clever. I believe he uses ambiguous language *on purpose*. It is difficult for the fringe catholic to immediately reject something that he/she might agree with in part... Francis understands modern western culture. He understands modern man's lack of respect and suspicion of authority. He understands the moral relativist media style we have all become so accustomed to hearing. In fact the style Francis uses is

actually very biblical in nature. Jesus spoke in parables which people could easily understand and interpret in different ways – the core element of the teaching is still the same, but the interpretation of how it actually effects your life is individually relevant to each listener on a personal level. Francis' style actually encourages the reader to look within themselves and apply what is being said to their own lives.

The ugly side to this of course is that people on both sides of the fence can take 'some' of the information and misunderstand what has really been said ie the "who am i to judge" comment.

3. He challenges the Orthodox catholic to evangelise.

Something i have certainly been guilty of in the past has been to sit up nice and tall on my theological and moral high horse. Even though i still am in no doubt that I AM RIGHT, high-horsing is never going to work in terms of evangelisation.

Francis is a man of great humility. Just as Christ did, Francis meets people *where they are* on their journey of conversion. He doesn't point the finger or condemn, but instead *sees the person* behind the sin and encourages them into a deeper relationship with Christ. This requires sensitivity, kindness, compassion and patience.

By his example, Francis challenges us to evangelise in the same way. Essentially the Gospel is a message of mercy and forgiveness. Christ died for every single human being who has ever lived out of total pure love including all members of ISIS and Adolf Hitler and paedophiles. He loves and values every human being the same as he loves you. This is the radical message of Christianity. Introducing people to this love, to this person – Jesus Christ – is the first step.

We are called not only to preach love, but to *be* love to others. For those of us who are secure and solid in our faith the weight of responsibility is much, much heavier regarding evangelisation. If we don't get out there and start proclaiming the truth, other will (and their version of the truth is well, not true!) But it is how we approach our brothers and sisters that is key. Calling someone 'a homosexual' or 'a muslim' or a this or that in a negative tone, dilutes their humanity. This makes the person defensive. This is not bringing Christ to them. Im not saying sweep all the other stuff under the carpet – not at all, what i am saying is that they will **never understand and accept the doctrine without first having a relationship with Christ**. You have to BE Christ to them as you build bridges of trust, and respect where they are on their journey of conversion.

Pope Francis understands this. He is out there doing it. And you might, just might, have totally misunderstood what he is doing.

