

## THE CARLSON CHRONICLE

### Pope Francis and “family”

Many Catholics, both Mass-going and lapsed, were pleased to see *Time Magazine* accord the new Pope, Francis I, its “Person of the Year” award. He not only has been one of the top news-generators this past year, what he is saying, and how he is walking the talk, has spoken volumes to people hungry for some moral leadership in this world dominated by situational ethics.

No one would characterize me as a “pray, pay and obey” Catholic. Indeed, conservative Catholics would probably tag me with the pejorative “cafeteria Catholic,” meaning one who picks and chooses which Church dictums to follow.

The counter to this myopic view is to point out that above all else the Roman Catholic Church affirms the right of an individual to exercise his or her own conscience after prayerful consideration of church teachings. Much of Catholic doctrine has evolved over the two thousand years the Vatican bureaucracy has functioned; and many senseless rules have been promulgated by fallible men in that span.

Pope Francis understands this which is why he is calling on Catholics to refocus on the basic injunctions in the New Testament that ask people to care for the poor, help their fellow men and women in distress, and put into practice one of the few commandments stated by the Lord: to love one another. Another commandment from the Lord was to “judge not lest you be judged.”

Again, Francis says only God can judge for only God knows the heart,. He adroitly side-steps the issue of gays and lesbians in the Church by stating all should be made to feel welcomed regardless of sex, creed, color or orientation.

The Pope has now embarked on a remarkable exercise made possible by modern technology. He has sent every diocese a questionnaire built around

the notion of the family as the domestic model of the Church in the basic unit of society.

Many parishes are already holding meetings to develop their response which is especially appropriate as Christians everywhere focus on the Holy Family and the birth of Jesus. The responses are then forwarded to the Bishop or Archbishop of the diocese; a summary and consensus document is crafted and sent to Rome. It all leads to a Bishop's Synod in 2014 and a General Assembly in 2015.

I participated recently in a session at my parish.

Of the 30 people there, 20 were women and ten were men. Most of the women were divorced and single parents. Most of the men there were in stable long-time marriages, but only two were under 40.

The purpose of the questionnaire appeared to be to garner whether the church is providing sufficient support to the laity (Not even close was the answer) in dealing with the challenges presented to church-goers trying to raise children in a culture that glorifies hedonism, sexual promiscuity, easy divorce and a changing definition of whether marriage can only be between a man and a woman as well as condoning cohabitation before marriage regardless of the genders.

Left unanswered was just exactly how is the family defined today given that in many places the traditional family (father, mother, children) is less than a one quarter of "households" in the United States according to the latest census.

One could argue the questionnaire overlooked the role of women becoming more pronounced in raising children as single parents, obtaining more education than men, and increasingly becoming the breadwinners. Just that week General Motors announced its first female CEO.

Though it appears inextricably intertwined it is being treated as a separate issue by the Church whether it should or not.

But, when will the Catholic Church acknowledge that women inevitably will become deacons and ultimately (maybe 100 years from now) be allowed into the priesthood? Who knows where this process will lead? Like the beloved

Pope John XXIII, who started the Vatican II process in the mid-60's, Pope Francis truly trusts the Holy Spirit to guide the process and to follow wherever the Spirit leads.

The key question remains unanswered at the beginning of this latest venture: How can one discuss the role of "family" as the domestic representation of the Church in society's basic unit when families are in such a state of change and so many families are headed by one (usually female) person, not the traditional two. Aren't demographics alone against the traditional family unit persisting much longer?

This new Pope one suspects, though, knows just what he is bringing out into the open in order to refocus the Catholic Church back to what Jesus said the abundant life was all about: loving one another, helping those that need it, not judging and putting one's faith and trust in God.

Merry Christmas!