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Pope Francis and the Gospel of Life

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One of the privileges of being a new bishop is the opportunity to travel to Rome for a conference of all the new bishops appointed over the course of the past year. There were over 100 bishops from around the world, including seven from the United States. The Vatican Congregation for Bishops arranged a variety of speakers to address us on various topics and to give us a sort of orientation to our new ministry in the Church. My first few days, however, were spent at the Pontifical North American College, the American seminary in Rome. There I was able to spend time with Father Michael Hickin, a Fargo priest who is currently serving as a spiritual director at the PNAC. I also visited with William Slattery, a Fargo seminarian who is beginning his third year at the PNAC. It was delightful to see them and even to have some good Italian meals together.

Certainly the highlight of my visit to Rome was the opportunity to meet Pope Francis. The Holy Father addressed all the assembled bishops and then each of us had an opportunity to greet him personally. I introduced myself as the Bishop of Fargo, and also assured him of our prayers and our thanks for his service as pope. It was an extraordinary moment, and I felt a strong sense of the unity and universality of the Church as we listened to the Holy Father's exhortation. We also had the opportunity to celebrate Mass in St. Peter's Basilica and made a private visit to the tomb of St. Peter. I have been to St. Peter's many times before, but this first visit as a bishop to the tomb of the Apostle Peter was a beautiful reminder that the Church is indeed one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

On Sept. 20, the very day of our visit with Pope Francis, a well-publicized interview with the Holy Father was released in various journals around the world. As we have come to expect, Pope Francis had some challenging and provocative things to say, and I am certain his words will be re-read and analyzed for quite some time. The spin of his remarks, however, was a bit troubling. Some secular reports of the pope's interview gave the impression that he was departing from long-held Catholic beliefs and moral teachings, even on issues of life and sexuality. One abortion supporter at the Red River Women's Clinic in Fargo was even seen holding a sign that said "Your pope is against you!" Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

Without question, Pope Francis is bringing his own approach to his office and to his teaching ministry. But it would be grossly incorrect to assume that he is discarding the Church's key moral teachings on issues like abortion and the right to life. He is saying, however, that the Church's teachings on life and family and sexuality flow from and are rooted in the fundamental Gospel of Christ. Rather than standing apart on their own, they emanate from the saving mercy of Jesus.

What the media didn't tell us was that the pope spoke on the very same day to a group of physicians, and in no uncertain terms he reaffirmed the Church's constant teaching in defense of the dignity of all human life, especially the most defenseless. In the face of a culture that wants to eliminate some lives, especially those that are physically or socially less desirable, Pope

Francis says that our response “is a decisive and unreserved ‘yes’ to life”. Some have asserted that the Holy Father is backing away from the language of the “culture of life” and the “gospel of life,” but he explicitly uses this language to emphasize the sacredness of all human life. So despite what you might have read in the papers, Pope Francis is as pro-life as anyone in the Church!

On the subject of abortion and the unborn, Pope Francis declared to the physicians gathered with him, “Every child who, rather than being born, is condemned unjustly to being aborted, bears the face of Jesus Christ, bears the face of the Lord, who even before he was born, and then just after birth, experienced the world’s rejection”. And he reminds us that there are others who share in this sacred dignity. “And every elderly person,” he says, “even if he is ill or at the end of his days, bears the face of Christ.” Life, he says, is “sacred – at each phase and at every age”. He adds that “The first right of the human person is his life... That is why concern for human life in its totality has become in recent years a real priority for the Church’s Magisterium, especially for the most defenseless...” So, far from diminishing the Church’s teaching on the sacredness of life, the Holy Father is reaffirming and elevating it, and he helps us to see this teaching within the totality of the whole Gospel, as a part of the Good News that Jesus Christ died for all of us, and his image can be found in every person, especially the most helpless, those most in need of our care.

Pope Francis gives each of us a mandate: “Be witnesses and diffusers of the culture of life.” All of us, but especially members of the Church, must recognize “the transcendent dimension of human life, the imprint of God’s creative work, from the first moment of its conception. This is a task of the new evangelization that often requires going against the tide and paying for it personally.” The Holy Father reminded those present that the Lord is “counting on you to spread the gospel of life.” Indeed, the Lord is counting on all of us to spread the gospel of life.

In his final words to the gathered physicians, Pope Francis said “Never fail to ask the Lord and the Virgin Mary for the strength to accomplish your work well and to bear witness courageously – courageously! Today courage is needed – to bear witness courageously to the gospel of life.” No backtracking there! In fact, the Pope is fulfilling his own particular mission, which is to strengthen the faithful for their own witness to Christ. Furthermore, he is telling everyone who will listen that life is sacred and inviolable. Let us pray that the world will hear his words and that all will be convinced of their truth.

For the full text of Pope Francis’ Sept. 20 address to participants at the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations meeting, go to http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/index.htm and look under “Speeches” in September 2013.