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The Pope and the Right

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Pope Francis's latest headline-making exhortation has conservative Catholics on the defensive.

"NOW it's your turn to be part of the loyal opposition," a fellow Catholic journalist said to me earlier this year, as Pope Francis's agenda was beginning to take shape.

The friend was a political liberal and lifelong Democrat, accustomed to being on the wrong side of his church's teaching on issues like abortion, bioethics and same-sex marriage.

Now, he cheerfully suggested, right-leaning Catholics like me would get a taste of the same experience, from a pope who seemed intent on skirting the culture war and stressing the church's mission to the poor instead.

After Francis's latest headline-making exhortation, which roves across the entire life of the church but includes a sharp critique of consumer capitalism and financial laissez-faire, politically conservative Catholics have reached for several explanations for why my friend is wrong, and why they aren't the new "cafeteria Catholics."

First, they have pointed out that there's nothing truly novel here, apart from a lazy media narrative that pits Good Pope Francis against his bad reactionary predecessors. (Many of the new pope's comments track with what Benedict XVI said in his own economic encyclical, and with past papal criticisms of commercial capitalism's discontents.)

Second, they have sought to depoliticize the pope's comments, recasting them as a general brief against avarice and consumerism rather than a call for specific government interventions.

And finally, they have insisted on the difference between church teaching on faith and morals, and papal pronouncements on economic issues, noting that there's nothing that obliges Catholics to believe the pontiff is infallible on questions of public policy.

All three responses have their merits, but they still seem insufficient to the Francis era's challenge to Catholics on the limited-government, free-market right.

It's true that there is far more continuity between Francis and Benedict than media accounts suggest. But the new pope clearly intends to foreground the church's social teaching in new ways, and probably seeks roughly the press coverage he's getting.

It's also true that Francis's framework is pastoral rather than political. But his plain language tilts leftward in ways that no serious reader can deny.

Finally, it's true that there is no Catholic position on, say, the correct marginal tax rate, and that Catholics are not obliged to heed the pope when he suggests that global inequality is increasing when the statistical evidence suggests otherwise.

But the church's social teaching is no less an official teaching for allowing room for disagreement on its policy implications. And for Catholics who pride themselves on fidelity to

Rome, the burden is on them — on us — to explain why a worldview that inspires left-leaning papal rhetoric also allows for right-of-center conclusions.

That explanation rests, I think, on three ideas. First, that when it comes to lifting the poor out of poverty, global capitalism, faults and all, has a better track record by far than any other system or approach.

Second, that Catholic social teaching, properly understood, emphasizes both solidarity and subsidiarity — that is, a small-c conservative preference for local efforts over national ones, voluntarism over bureaucracy.

Third, that on recent evidence, the most expansive welfare states can crowd out what Christianity considers the most basic human goods — by lowering birthrates, discouraging private charity and restricting the church's freedom to minister in subtle but increasingly consequential ways.

This Catholic case for limited government, however, is not a case for the Ayn Randian temptation inherent to a capitalism-friendly politics. There is no Catholic warrant for valorizing entrepreneurs at the expense of ordinary workers, or for dismissing all regulation as unnecessary and all redistribution as immoral.

And this is where Francis's vision should matter to American Catholics who usually cast ballots for Republican politicians. The pope's words shouldn't inspire them to convert en masse to liberalism, or to worry that the throne of Peter has been seized by a Marxist anti-pope. But they should encourage a much greater integration of Catholic and conservative ideas than we've seen since "compassionate conservatism" collapsed, and inspire Catholics to ask more — often much more — of the Republican Party, on a range of policy issues.

Here my journalist friend's "loyal opposition" line oversimplified the options for Catholic political engagement. His Catholic liberalism didn't go into eclipse because it failed to let the Vatican dictate every jot and tittle of its social agenda. Rather, it lost influence because it failed to articulate any kind of clear Catholic difference, within the bigger liberal tent, on issues like abortion, sex and marriage.

Now the challenge for conservative Catholics is to do somewhat better in our turn, and to spend the Francis era not in opposition but seeking integration — meaning an economic vision that remains conservative, but in the details reminds the world that our Catholic faith comes first.