The New Literalism and Fundamentalism
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Catholics—even more so liberal Catholics—are usually quick to criticize anyone who seems to interpret Scripture too literally. Indeed, liberal Catholics often don’t even want to view a lot of it as historical. Liberal Catholics and leftists generally are also ready to rebuke people who adhere to aspects of traditional Christian morality, especially on sexual matters, as “fundamentalists” (they don’t say much about Islamic fundamentalism, however, which is the truly dangerous expression of religious fundamentalism in our day). So, it’s interesting that among liberal Catholics, but even others who are well-meaning (including some Church leaders), we witness a kind of literalism with reference to certain biblical statements and Church teachings that expect people to surrender their reason, good judgment, and attentiveness to context and the realities of nuance. This can be observed especially when they consider certain public issues.

A good example is the immigration question. We are told that the various passages of Scripture, such as Matthew 25, that exhort us to “welcome the stranger” require us to accept immigrants without question, even those who are here illegally. Some regard the law as irrelevant or unjust—without ever taking the time to show how from the standpoint of ethics or moral theology it can be judged to be unjust—because, after all, the people who come here are just looking for a better life. They often don’t want to consider such things as: the issues of border security, criminal gangs that have implanted themselves in the U.S. because of the ease of coming here
and the troubling level of crime among illegal immigrants, the reports of terrorists who have used the southern border as a gateway to enter, the need to correct the corruption and the selfish and irresponsible elites in Latin American countries that have caused the deprivation of the masses and tempted them to leave, the diseases that have appeared or recurred in the U.S. because of so many unscreened entrants, the financial burdens on state social service and educational systems that have to be borne by already overtaxed American citizens, the fact that many corporate cheerleaders for illegal immigration like it because it gets them off the hook for paying a just wage (which is, by the way, a central mandate of Catholic social teaching), the undermining of respect for the rule of law generally because it is permitted to be flouted on this subject, and the possible weakening of the civic bond that holds a political community together when many people enter it who do not share a common vision or its basic principles (this is seen especially acutely with Islamic immigration).

To insist that this range of issues concerned with illegal immigration be ignored simply because Scripture says to “welcome the stranger” is not just a literalism impervious to context and qualification, but asks people to surrender their minds. Catholicism, however, is not a “blind faith” religion but one in which faith and reason work in harmony. Such Catholic “immigration literalists,” who suggest that their fellow Catholics who want to stop illegal immigration somehow are not upholding Church teaching, don’t seem to remember that Pope St. John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, says that one has the “right to emigrate” when “there are just reasons for it” (#25), and that “as far the common good rightly understood permits” nations have a duty to accept immigrants (#106). The liberal Catholics among these immigration literalists have seldom been concerned about dissent on contraception, but are ready to point the finger about something that in no way involves such an unconditional and uncompromisable moral teaching.

Illegal immigration is hardly the only issue where we see such literalism. Scripture tells us to “feed the hungry,” and Christians understand that they have an obligation to assist those in need. What this has too often come to mean, not just for Catholic “social justice” activists but also for many in the institutional Church in the U.S., is to endorse and push for more government programs, to expand the welfare state. While one can understand the temptation to “grab for what is there,” it is negligent to ignore the countervailing problems of the welfare state—such as bureaucratic inefficiency, runaway costs, the increasing burden on taxpayers, the growth of government dependency and suppression of incentive, and the violation of subsidiarity. To claim that people who refuse to lend wholehearted support
for it are somehow not acting as Christians should is another example of asking people to surrender their reason and good judgment. Here, too, we see a cherry-picking of the principles of Catholic social teaching. Pope St. John Paul II’s trenchant critique of the Western “social assistance” state in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (#48) is not paid attention to. The new literalism and fundamentalism doesn’t understand—or want to consider—that *how* something is done is often as important as what is done. It also seems easier just to expand or set up a government program instead of working to build up the civil society sector, as Catholic social thought had stressed so strongly until recent decades, to address human needs.

Similarly, when the Church speaks in her social encyclicals about the obligation of better-off countries to assist poor ones she does not say that the funds have to be forked out without conditions or accountability or that giver nations must deprive their own citizens in order to do this. In fact, Blessed Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio* specifically says, “the *superfluous* wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations” and stresses accountability (#49, 54). Also, when the Church speaks of the necessity and value of international organizations and increasing their authority this doesn’t mean that they should be given a blank check or the rights to violate subsidiarity or national sovereignty (*see Pacem in Terris* #132–141). In fact, in light of problematic developments, John Paul said international organizations were in need of reform (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* #43). When one listens to both liberal Catholics and their secular compatriots it seems as if they are impervious to such qualifications and realities.

The way some Catholics interpret the Church’s teaching with regard to relations with other religions, as set out in such Vatican II documents as the *Decree on Ecumenism* and *Nostra Aetate*, also rings of literalism and fundamentalism. They think that the Church simply says to accept other religions with no questions asked, so that something like a searching examination and critical assessment of, say, Islam is to be avoided. It becomes what Fr. Kevin M. Cusick has called “ecumania.” At its worst, for some among the liberal Catholic crowd, it slips toward syncretism. The *Decree on Ecumenism* seeks the ultimate “restoration of unity” among Christians, but takes note of the “defects” in “the separated Churches” (#1,3). What *Nostra Aetate*, on non-Christian religions, most fundamentally is about is acknowledging that there are things that are “true and holy” in these other religions (#2) and “promoting unity and love among men” (#1). Neither of these documents claim that other religions have the *fullness* of the truth that the Church has or that it’s somehow uncharitable.
to point out their shortcomings and problematical teachings or that Catholic apologetic efforts cannot be directed toward their adherents.

Now, in the aftermath of Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* we are seeing not just liberal Catholics but others in the Church jump on the bandwagon of climate change (aka: global warming). Even though they gloss over the kinds of statements I’ve mentioned in other social encyclicals, they take this as if it’s now a teaching of the Church. This is in spite of the fact that the encyclical itself says, “the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions” (#188). The new literalists seem unaware of the fact—some may deliberately be ignoring it here—that social encyclicals don’t contain just moral mandates, but are also chock-full of non-binding interpretations, reflections, and recommendations. It is especially disheartening to see some in the institutional Church going along with this just because, it appears, the Pope said it—even though it’s not the nature of, and isn’t put forth as, a moral teaching. It was shocking to read, for example, that Argentinian Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, the chancellor of two pontifical academies and who certainly should know better, claimed that Francis’s statement on climate change was authoritative moral teaching. In other words, just because something appears in an encyclical, irrespective of context, it’s magisterial teaching. This is literalism run amok.

Finally, we see the new literalism and fundamentalism in a convoluted attitude about charity and forgiveness that has become deeply embedded in Catholic thinking as it is in the culture—and which owes more to secular compassion than to Christian charity. For many, being charitable has come to mean don’t make moral judgments about what a person has done and don’t hold him to account or expect personal reformation. Right now, this is vividly seen in the push by some in the Church’s hierarchy to admit Catholics in invalid marriages to Holy Communion. As with much of the new literalism and fundamentalism—like the old literalism and fundamentalism that we observe with many Evangelicals—it fixates on part of a particular Scriptural account or of what’s in the Bible generally on a subject, absolutizes it, and ignores the rest. While it’s true that Christ told the adulteress who was going to be stoned that he would not condemn her, he also instructed her to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Even many faithful Catholics forget the last part of the passage about the prodigal son. The passage is not just about the need to forgive and the joy that comes upon repentance, but it also expresses God’s pleasure about those who have remained steadfast and faithful. While the father makes the elderly son understand the need to accept and rejoice in his brother’s return to the fold, he also assures him that “all that I have is thine” (Luke 15:31).
So, a new literalism and fundamentalism, which gives an incomplete and skewed picture of how Christians are to address some of the great issues and challenges of our time, is astir in the Church. Faithful Catholic laity need not just to be cautious about being ensnared by it, but also must lead the way in correcting and opposing it—especially in this time when some in the clergy and hierarchy either don’t recognize the problem or can’t bring themselves to challenge it and other dangerous trends in the Church and culture.