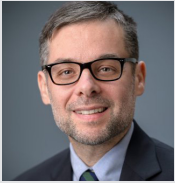


BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 146: APRIL 26, 2018



MASSIMO FAGGIOLI is professor in the department of theology and religious studies at Villanova University and a frequent contributor to *Commonweal* magazine. He spoke with Boisi Center director Mark Massa, S.J. and Boisi Center graduate research assistant Jack Nuelle about Pope Francis' effect on the American Church, before he appeared as part of a larger panel discussion on Pope Francis alongside Lisa Sowle Cahill (Boston College), Rev. J. Bryan Hehir (Harvard University), and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (Boston College). The following interview has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

MASSA: I guess I'll start off with the broadest question – has the fact that Francis is pope made a difference in American Catholicism? And if it has made a difference, what kind of difference—how has Francis made a difference as distinct from John Paul II and Benedict XVI?

FAGGIOLI: Well, so we are now in the beginning of the sixth year of this pontificate. And I think Francis has made a difference in Catholicism worldwide. In U.S. Catholicism, I believe he has made a particular kind of difference in that he has made the deep rifts and tensions and divisions that have been there for a long time but were kept under a lid through institutional measures, ideological measures, for three decades, emerge. So, the impression that we have and which is sold and marketed by some high-profile Catholic writers, is that this pope has created division – or worse.

My contention is that he has merely liberated energies, so he hasn't created a new rift. I think he has made evident the rift that exists on a number of issues that have to do with social teaching, i.e., on the ideological alignment of Catholicism in the U.S. and globally. More generally, he has done something that I don't believe those who voted for him expected, which was to shape his own paradigm of Catholicism in a way that is not less bold than what John Paul II or Pope Benedict

XVI did, and it is part of the transition to a truly global Catholicism – something particularly unsettling for a US-based worldview.



The complicated nature of his pontificate is that it came after a long period – thirty-five years – of one long pontificate under two popes. John Paul and Benedict had a very close relationship that has no parallel really in modern history, so you have one paradigm: 1978 to 2013. Anyone coming after this would have been a big challenge. A Jesuit from Latin America who was not academic – that has been a

great event in the historical sense. That's why all these discussions about "continuity vs. discontinuity" in the Catholic tradition are to some extent meaningless, because you cannot deny that this pope is a big event. There's no denying that. When there is an event, by definition there is some discontinuity, and this is what I think is the big picture.

MASSA: In the Catholic press, there are a lot of public criticisms voiced to the pope by American Church leaders, by bishops. And the perception, at least in the Catholic press, is that the American Church – the American hierarchy – is more critical of Francis than hierarchies elsewhere. Would you agree with that assessment – that the American bishops are more critical of Francis?

FAGGIOLI: I do agree. You have a small percentage of those bishops who are openly critical. You have a large portion who are just trying to understand what this pontificate means. After five years, many bishops are still trying to understand, and this is not unique to the U.S.

What is unique to the U.S. is that Pope Francis is seen basically as an alien – ideologically, politically, theologically – compared to the paradigm that shaped the episcopate in the west between the mid-1980s, more or less, and 2013. This is a specificity of the U.S. Catholic Church, together with another specificity,

which is that U.S. Catholicism in some sense is mirroring the political polarization that there is in the country, so this is something you won't find in other countries. Take the Catholic Church in Australia, for example, which is to some extent culturally similar to the U.S.: they don't have a two-party system, and they don't have a two-party Church, so that is a big difference.

But you're right – the voice of the hierarchy here has been particularly either aligned with the harshest critics against Pope Francis or reluctant to say something, for example, about these hints or suggestion that there's a schism going on or there will be a schism because of Pope Francis. One might have expected that the bishops would be more vocal on one of the "four notes" of the Church, which is its unity. We haven't seen that, and this is – speaking as a Church historian – quite surprising, because it is one of the few things that is typical of Catholicism – some basic sense of unity. That is one of the most visible specificities of U.S. Catholicism.

MASSA: I was reading the other day that they theorize that you can divide the American hierarchy into thirds. A third are for the Pope, a third are against the Pope and a third sort of have their finger the air, waiting to see which way the air is blowing and what will happen next. Do you agree with that?

FAGGIOLI: I tend to agree. The big difference between American Catholic bishops and other bishops is that American Catholicism, because of its history, has a very visible militant character, which means that also bishops tend to be militant in the cultural and political sense. The natural predisposition of most bishops around the world in big Christian countries is to be status quo minded – not conservative but institutionalist.

What's typical of U.S. Catholicism – specifically of U.S. conservative Catholicism – is that it is concerned with Francis in a militant way that in some cases turns into insurgency. This is one of

the interesting things about Francis – he has turned a conservative culture into a culture that doesn't see the status quo as sustainable anymore, which is interesting because, until five years ago, the status quo was assumed to be fine forever. This is, I think, one of the "apocalyptic" functions of this pontificate. Apocalyptic in the sense that Francis is lifting the veil from some assumptions that we took for granted, but they were more assumptions than truths.

"I believe Pope Francis doesn't think that his "business" is about taking care of western civilization."

MASSA: As a fellow Church historian, I always tell my students never use never, always avoid always. But, the precedent will be broken at some point, and you have to be prepared for that. How much of American culture and more specifically of the American Catholic Church do you think Francis gets? There's a perception that he doesn't really understand – and maybe is not interested in – North American culture. Do you think that's true?

FAGGIOLI: I think this is true to a large extent. That's one part of what I called, since very early in his election, Francis' "American problem." He is not familiar with North American, English speaking, Anglo Catholicism. And that's biographical. Another problem is that, as a Latin American – and especially as a Latin American Jesuit – it's very hard to be neutral looking at the United States for very obvious historical, political, and cultural reasons.

In this sense, Francis' visit to the U.S. in September 2015 could have had a periodizing effect, could have changed the relationship of Pope Francis to the U.S. But it didn't; it opened a short window of a short honeymoon, and then two big things happened in 2016. First

was the publication of *Amoris laetitia* in April 2016 and then the rise of Donald Trump in the Republican primaries in the Spring of 2016 and the election to the presidency in November 2016. For reasons other than Francis' policies and statements, the relationship between Francis and the U.S. has been uniquely marked by tensions at all levels. It's not just the institution but intellectuals, included Catholic theologians.

The most difficult thing I think for American Catholics to accept is that Francis has declared void and false the equation that for many decades was sold as typical of Catholicism, which is an identification between Christianity and the west, the center of Christianity being Catholicism and the center of the west being the U.S. This is really an important moment. It's a change of a paradigm. It's much more than a global vision of understanding history. It is much bigger, so in this sense I think the U.S. Catholic Church will have to take more time to digest this pontificate – more time than other Churches – because this pontificate has questioned a few assumptions that were given as a reassurance, in some sense, by the previous pontificates.

MASSA: Well, since Paul the Apostle – it's been a Western Church and a Eurocentric Church.

FAGGIOLI: But in this last fifty years, between Paul VI and Pope Benedict, popes were very optimistic about American culture. They saw and talked mostly about the positive. They had some sense of destiny or mission of the U.S. in global history and in Church history. For Paul VI, because of the United Nations and because of rise of the importance of human rights on the global scene. For John Paul II, because of anti-communism. For Pope Benedict, because of the clash between civilizations: he is the pope elected by the conclave that comes less than four years after 9/11. For Pope Francis, the U.S. doesn't really have an exceptional role, and for some this is really a new and surprising way of looking at the USA. For him, the U.S. is a country like others.

NUELLE: Is it an accurate characterization that Francis is not somebody who would be inclined to change Church doctrine but is instead interested in raising up other doctrines that have been less vocalized in the last two pontificates?

FAGGIOLI: I think Francis is theologically traditional and conservative in the sense that he's cautious. He's conservative in the sense that he's not aggressive or trying to impose an idiosyncratic view. He has always exercised his ministry emphasizing the importance of self-restraint, of not playing the infallible card or the definitive card or the "Rome as the last word always" card. In this sense, he is retrieving some voices or some sensibilities that had been neglected for a long time.

One of the typical accusations against him or criticisms is that he is a liberal. It's interesting because, in both the Latin American culture and European culture, "liberal" means status quo. It doesn't mean change. It means the status quo. So, he cannot be called a liberal theologically or politically because that word makes no sense for him and for most Catholics around the world. Also, theologically, because what he has done mostly is to rehabilitate those who had been investigated or silenced or shunned for thirty years.

In this sense, his emphasis on the poor Church and the Church for the poor has created, I think, a more hospitable home for Catholics of different backgrounds. This is what is very surprising for some, because after a sequence of two pontificates – of two conclaves and two pontificates – when a certain worldview had won the day, many assumed that an emphasis on the poor is done and over.

This pontificate is surprising, because it has reopened a dossier that many had assumed had been completed. He's not a liberal theologian or a conservative theologian. He's a theologian who's concerned that Catholicism could be fossilized under a glass because this is not how his experience is and it is not how



Catholicism and experience have always related one to the other. That is a fundamental thing. I mean his experience – he's not a convert but he is a "born again Catholic" in some sense because he had a very difficult relationship with his superiors, the Society of Jesus, the Vatican, with his own vocation. This is something that is not typical of the biography of a pope, and so that, I think, plays a role in how he sees Christianity. It's more a spiritual thing for him than a plan.

MASSA: The truism in the United States is that, while the vast majority of the people in the pew in Catholic Churches really admire and like Francis, there is a division in the hierarchy. And one of the most common explanations for that is the alleged alliance that Catholic conservatives have made with Protestant evangelicals on a range of issues. Do you think that's a reliable way of explaining at least some of the hierarchical concerns about Francis – that Francis seems to be upsetting these alliances that, as you say, people thought was just part of the foundation?

FAGGIOLI: First, it's a matter of clerical hierarchies. But as we know, in U.S. Catholicism – any Catholicism in general – there are other hierarchies – the intellectual hierarchy, the social hierarchy, and the financial hierarchy – and so they were all challenged by the article in *Civiltà Cattolica* by Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa in July 2017, which

as we know, was vetted by the Vatican. And so that was certainly a message. It became almost official that the American experiment of this political, ideological ecumenism was under review in Rome.

So, if one article of that kind gets published in *Civiltà Cattolica*, it sends a very particular message, which is not a threat or sanction, but is Rome examining what's happening in this history of ecumenical projects on political issues or social issues.

But on the other side, there is a very delicate button to push: American Catholicism has been redefined more than any other Catholicism in the world by a very significant and intellectually important influx of converts (in some way similar to what happened in European and British Catholicism in the early-mid 19th century before Vatican I). This is something that it's not easy to talk about for some (please note that my wife is a convert). This influx of converts has created a culture of change within Catholicism in the U.S. that is different from other Catholic Churches in the world because it assumed that there was some kind of contract that had been signed by those who chose to leave their own Churches and become Catholic, and so this element of change brought by Pope Francis works in a certain way for Catholics who have spent their lives in the Catholic Church. It works differently for those who have become Catholic five, ten, or fifteen years ago.

That article in *La Civiltà Cattolica* will be read by Church historians in twenty or fifty years who want to understand what was going on between the USA and the Vatican during Francis' pontificate. The article is a very important signal of that also because it was written by the editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica* together with a non-Catholic Latin American theologian.

MASSA: I was talking to one of my Roman spies. I said what's the chance that the Vatican knew that Spadaro was going to do that? And he paused and he smiled and said no opera performed in

the Baths of Caracalla is more choreographed than the editorials of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, so he said I would find it truly astonishing to believe that the people in the Vatican didn't know this was coming and approved it, so they were mouthing things that I think made a lot of people – especially a lot of these conservative converts from Protestantism – extremely nervous.

FAGGIOLI: Sure. And they wrote about it. I mean, to be very transparent, it's not a conspiracy theory. *La Civiltà Cattolica* is now published in other languages (including English), so that was a very public position of Rome vis-à-vis the Church in the USA, but also to the rest of the global Catholic Church.

NUELLE: So, these people who are up in arms about *Amoris laetitia* – they think that it's this disastrous beginning of a downward slide into heresy? Is this feeling purely about fears of it being heretical? Is there something deeper than doctrine at stake here? Does this concern of certain Catholic populations speak to a sociological understanding and a certain worldview that is more compatible with a world in which *Amoris laetitia* was not written?

FAGGIOLI: So, this is a big question. The concept of the two Bishops' Synods of 2014-2015 and *Amoris laetitia* is basically that the gospel in the Catholic Church is the ultimate measure and the law should make sense in light of the gospel. And this has always been very challenging. Why is it more challenging on that issue in the United States? Because in the United States, the whole narrative of these last fifty years – I mean after Vatican II – is around a culture of the family and of sexuality and of marriage. So you have a fear of a decay of civilization, of our American culture failing because marriages cannot stay together, because you have families exploding.

Family and marriage are for critics of *Amoris laetitia* not a theological or spiritual issues. They are seen as civilizational issues, and the narrative tends to be civilizational, not theological. They say

“He’s not a liberal theologian or a conservative theologian. He’s a theologian who’s concerned that Catholicism could be fossilized under a glass...”

that if we give one inch on this, it's not just about how many people will get communion in the Church or be consistently of the Catholic Church. It's the downfall of the western civilization. I believe Pope Francis doesn't think that his “business” is about taking care of western civilization.

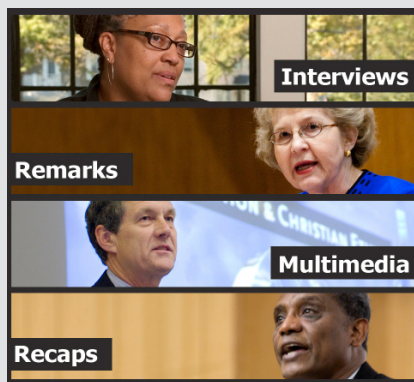
Moreover, in most Churches in the world, what *Amoris laetitia* says has been common practice in these last thirty years – I mean at least since the early '80s. John Paul II already realizes in the synod of 1980 that there's something that's not working.

In the rest of the world, a connection between Christianity or Catholicism and issues of family and marriage is framed in a completely different way. For example, the most interesting thing that Francis has done and talked about after being elected, when he was a priest or a bishop, was his daily encounters with all these

people that were clearly coming from irregular situations – up to his pastoral encounters with prostitutes and convicts. This is the reality that is defining for him. It's not a reality that exists somewhere and it's an exception. Reality for him is not the middle-class family with kids and a cat, dog, SUV and so on. The standard for him is the prostitute or the teenager mother in the slum of Buenos Aires. That is the standard for him. And so that is fascinating, I think, because it implies some kind of reversal in the criteria of Christian morality.

So here Francis is really saying our Christianity shouldn't be moralistic. And the fact is that often Christians tend to be more moralistic than moral. This is not just a problem for today. It's a bigger problem today because our Catholic conversation, especially in the U.S., is dominated by news outlet journalism and not by pastors, not by theologians, so this is something that is usually overlooked. And so how many of those militant Catholics today that we see on the Internet – they learn something from their bishop or their pastors compared to what they learn from their preferred news outlet? This is something new. And Francis happened in this moment.

[END]



Visit bc.edu/boisi-resources for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860

fax 617-552-1863

boisi.center@bc.edu

 [boisicenter](https://www.facebook.com/boisicenter)

 [@boisi_center](https://twitter.com/boisi_center)

