

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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BISHOP SCHNEIDER'S DILEMNA

Recent entries in Bishop Herman Schneider's journal reveal his growing personal and spiritual anguish over Pope Francis and his new style of papal leadership.

2/18/14: That silly survey from last fall about the family is beginning to haunt me. It was so long and involved and asked questions that only a bishop or loyal theologian could adequately answer that I didn't encourage it here. I had a deacon send it out but he tells me the responses were predictably hard to tabulate and had a variety of uninformed opinions. Waste of time. I answered the questions based on church teaching and sent it in as our official diocesan response.

But now other countries are reporting their results and they consistently show that many people either do not know or do not follow official teaching. After all the time, energy and money spent on Catholic education, we end up with adults who don't believe in or follow our teaching. We obviously have to teach better because they are influenced by our secular culture more than by our teaching. I have spent a large part of my life, as a priest and a bishop, promoting Catholic education. I am very discouraged by these results.

Now the local media wants my response to the reports and a statement on how people voted here in the diocese. I will put them off for now but I fear this ill-conceived Synod this fall. What will I say then?

2/23/14: I don't feel like writing much tonight. Too tired and getting depressed. Just one thing: Francis is not pro-life enough. I spent years emphasizing anti-abortion and fighting Roe v. Wade and the pro-choice crowd. I wanted Cardinal Burke as Pope; he would take a strong stance against abortion.

On the other hand, I don't disagree with Francis. He stresses the basics of the gospels and who can argue with compassion, mercy and love? I just thought we were beyond that – that the basics were covered and we had to stand up for the implications of those virtues, like opposing abortion, gay marriage, contraception. Francis is back to basics when we are past the basics. It is frustrating!

3/5/14: I am becoming more intrigued and appalled by Francis, all at the same time. I cannot oppose him publicly, not only because he is so popular but mainly because he is

the Vicar of Christ. Burke would have been better but it is as it is. To be honest, I also admire Francis and yet he remains the greatest personal challenge to my ministry. Many of my retreats in the seminary and as priest and bishop emphasized the centrality of love, and I believe that. But Francis' way of showing it is not the way I thought Popes and Bishops were supposed to show it. We have to guide and direct people. That's our role. But he wants us to love directly. I see what he does but I have never done it that way and I doubt if I can at this point. It is a personal and difficult struggle for me. I talked with my spiritual director the other day and he wasn't too helpful. I sometimes wish I weren't a bishop any more. I used to enjoy it but I am losing my footing.

3/8/14: I had the thought today that maybe the problem with Francis is that he is not managing the media very well. He is too much off the cuff, spontaneous. The media is always right there and anything he says or does leads to endless speculation and analysis. And people follow the media. Other Popes taught love, compassion and mercy too but they controlled their message better. It was part of documents, encyclicals, prepared homilies. Francis just says and does what he wants at the moment. That's no way to be a world leader in this age of instant communication. He has to control his message better.

3/11/14: Tomorrow we have a provincial meeting of bishops in Chicago. Perhaps this will be Cardinal George's last meeting with us. The agenda is typical but I wonder how much I should say about my struggles with Francis. If I say something, will it impact my career? I'm not sure how much I can say with these bishops. We also have to report on our survey results and I am not sure how I want to do that either.

I will not initiate any comments on Francis but if the others do, maybe I will say something. This job is getting harder by the day. I would just as soon stay home.