

# Gossip and slander: Satan's strategy against Francis

"Everyone ask yourselves: Do I build unity in my family, parish, and community, or am I a gossiper? Am I the reason for division and difficulty?" said Pope Francis on September 25 at his weekly general audience.

"Humility, gentleness, magnanimity, and love for preserving unity are the real pathways of the church," he said. Talking badly about others hurts everyone, said the Pope.

People have been gossiping ceaselessly about the Pope ever since the media went bananas on September 19 over his interview, "A Big Heart Open to God". The Pope controversially said in it that priests "cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods," and that it is "not necessary to insist upon these issues all the time."

The secular media immediately created a phony story about how the new Pope is changing the tone and direction of the Catholic Church. The interview was over 10,000 words long but the media decided to treat those select phrases in isolation. In the larger context (an interview for fellow Jesuits), the word "abortion" only shows up three times, "gay" twice, and "contraception" once. Clearly the secular media has an unbalanced obsession.

When CBC's The National interviewed me at home over Skype, I ridiculed the notion that they had uncovered here "ground-breaking remarks" by the Pope. The CBC edited my critique down to



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eight seconds: "Whatever the Church teaches about abortion, gay marriage, or contraception, he doesn't deny, and he's not changing anything, so there's no breaking story here," I said.

Their method of framing what I had to say was to label it as "conservative" and to show a preference for those with "liberal" views on abortion, gay marriage, or contraception. They let the latter take the Pope's comments out of context and redefine their meaning as papal progress.

This is the same bogus narrative that happens whenever the media reports on the Catholic Church and the Pope. Everything is reduced to a crude political narrative, in which there is no nuance, only "conservative" versus "liberal," and "right" versus "left." The media then cheers on the side anointed to embody the forces of progress.

But there is a larger significance to this reductionistic narrative. Yes, it is stupid and unfair that for the media every story is only about conflict, politics, and power. But there is more at work here.

The larger significance is that even if the crude tale is not true—the crude tale that this Pope represents a progressive political side in an internal struggle within the Church—then the media has shamelessly decided to construct a grand narrative about its new hero Pope



Paul Haring / CNS

Pope Francis waves as he leaves an audience for journalists in Paul VI Hall at the Vatican March 16.

Francis anyway.

Why? Because it is the Big Lie that they want to come true.

Ever since his election, they have invented an epic narrative about the political meaning of his papacy. And because they want this Big Story to come true, they are showering him incessantly with praise and flattery.

There is a diabolical dimension here. Surely you can picture the Evil One, laughing at all the gossip and lies on the Internet, hoping the Pope will one day wake up, sick of it all, and give in to the Big Temptation. What if the Pope were to decide one day that his destiny, his life story, is indeed the Big Lie that the digital media has been telling about him all along?

Do you see how easy that would be? From the high mountain of the digital media, from its seductively global vantage point, the Pope could see all the king-

doms of the world and all the splendor of their ruling elites bestow their love and approval upon him as their chosen progressive idol. He could give his assent to their celebratory love. All he would have to do is bow down and worship the Big

Story already written by the media. The starring role is his for the taking. Thankfully, our Pope spurns the Big Lie. He knows the wisdom of the True Story. Thus the novelist Daniel McInerney helpfully points out an interpretive key to understanding the Pope's recent remarks: namely, the Pope thinks primarily in terms of stories, of narrative form, and not of philosophical or theological explanation.

"What Francis says about moral principle in the interview has dismayed many of his staunchest allies," writes McInerney. "But in speaking about the need of principles to be embodied in time does not mean that Christian principles are open to anyone's interpretation or that they are 'relative' to whatever story one fancies oneself living. Not at all—Francis's narrative attitude is simply that human persons are not made

for moral truths, but moral truths are made for human persons."

"Sadly, the real narrative that so many are living in our culture is that of being a wounded soldier in a great spiritual war. According to Francis's imagination, the Church is the 'field hospital' that goes out to those strewn over this battlefield and attends to their wounds. And what are these wounds, most essentially, but their failures to be in love with Jesus Christ? It is this love which must first be enkindled in the human heart, in the blaze of which all moral principles make sense and become themselves lovable."

And that's the real story here: Pope Francis has a big heart open to God. Small hearts prefer gossip and lies.

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