Pope Francis stresses mercy amid culture clashes

by Harry Bruinius

September 2, 2015

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Pope Francis asserted his global papal authority on Tuesday, authorizing Roman Catholic priests around the world to offer reconciliation and forgiveness to women who have had abortions.

The move represents another example of what has become a hallmark of Francis' papacy: promoting a more pastoral tone amid the culture-clashing issues of same-sex relationships, the status of divorced Catholics, and now abortion.

Although Catholic teaching condemns each of these in the strongest terms, Francis has often emphasized compassion and the need for the church to continue to minister to those Catholics who may not measure up to its moral teachings.

Conservative Catholics have bristled at some of these pastoral emphases, decrying what many perceive to be a more liberalized direction for the church—including Francis' controversial encyclical on climate change.

In addition, the pope in a sense made a political statement Tuesday, bypassing the traditional authority of bishops, most of whom are conservative in the United States, and who authorize the priestly duties within their dioceses. It's perhaps akin to President Obama using his executive authority to go around a conservative Congress.

Some theologians who have applauded the pope's efforts remain a bit uneasy with the way he's wielding his authority in this matter.

"My own reaction to this is, it's a good teaching moment for Francis to do this, to put sacramental confession on people's radar screens," said Bruce Morrill, a professor of Catholic studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee, who is also a Catholic priest. "I have no doubt this comes from his deep pastoral sensitivity to people, and his desire to do whatever he can to advance this reinvigoration of the church as first and foremost to try to share the love and mercy of God."

At the same time, Morrill had concerns.

"I hate to be critical of the pope, but there's something slightly ironic in this," he said. "From the start, he's said that his agenda includes allowing local bishops conferences and local bishops to have more of the authority proper to them—to make the church less of a corporate office in Rome sort of driving everything from the top down."

Francis has already designated 2016 to be an "Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy"—a rare yearlong period in which the church emphasizes forgiveness of sins and universal pardon. Usually a Catholic version of the jubilee year happens every 25 or 50 years, though the last was held in 2000 during the tenure of Pope John Paul II and was known as the Great Jubilee.

But "extraordinary jubilee years" may also be convened by the pope for particular occasions or special reasons. The last was held in 1983 to celebrate 1,950 years since the death and resurrection of Jesus.

"I am convinced that the whole church—that has much need to receive mercy because we are sinners—will find in this jubilee the joy to rediscover and render fruitful the mercy of God, with which we are all called to give consolation to every man and woman of our time," Francis said in announcing the extraordinary jubilee year during Lent earlier this year.

Empowering all priests with the authority to hear confessions and release those who are truly repentant from the automatic excommunication of abortion is a way to promote this year of mercy, observers say.

"This is a typical Francis move in that way," Chad Pecknold, a theologian at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., told the *Washington Post*. "With the whole Planned Parenthood thing, a lot of Catholics threw up their hands and said, 'Why isn't the holy father saying anything?' This is him saying something. He is saying: abortion is a grave sin."

Local bishops do not always authorize parish priests to handle matters of "mortal sins" like abortion—those most serious of sins that produce a full rupture with God, according to church teachings.

For such grave sins, many bishops decide to handle the matter themselves or designate the duty to certain high-level priests, who can offer the sacrament of reconciliation and restore those honestly seeking forgiveness into full communion.

But Francis empowered all local priests to offer reconciliation and forgiveness to women who have had abortions, or to men and women who have participated in the procedure, also considered a mortal sin.

In a letter to the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, the pope said priests should express "words of genuine welcome combined with a reflection that explains the gravity of the sin committed."

Also in the letter, Francis said the tragedy of abortion is sometimes experienced by those who may not realize its "extreme harm." Others, even as they experience the moment as a defeat, may believe that they had no other option.

"I am well aware of the pressure that has led them to this decision," the pope said. "I know that it is an existential and moral ordeal. I have met so many women who bear in their heart the scar of this agonizing and painful decision. ... The forgiveness of God cannot be denied to one who has repented, especially when that person approaches the Sacrament of Confession with a sincere heart in order to obtain reconciliation with the Father."

In the U.S., 53 percent of white Catholics say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, according to a 2013 Pew Research Center poll, with 41 percent saying it should be illegal in all or most cases.

"Francis has a far more pastoral, not political, approach to abortion—one of the most contentious issues in the Catholic church today," Catholics for Choice said in a statement. "Pope Francis—unlike his two predecessors, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI —is trying to bridge the gulf between what the hierarchy says and what ordinary Catholics really do in their lives."

But Jon O'Brien, the group's president, added that "despite what Pope Francis has said, I do not believe that Catholic women will be queuing up to ask for forgiveness."