

When "open dialogue" is a ruse

By [Timothy Villareal](#)

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In his recent address before Congress, Pope Francis invoked the spiritual legacy of Thomas Merton and in particular his "capacity for dialogue and openness to all." This ostensibly fond recollection of Merton is emblematic of the kind of talk that has endeared many liberals, Catholics and others, to Pope Francis: papal language that instills hope for eventual doctrinal change in the Catholic Church on pressing social issues, change ushered in by the pontiff's love of open dialogue with "the other."

For all Merton's devotion to open dialogue, it would be useful to also recall his abundant disdain for dialogic style over substance. Shortly before his death in 1968, Merton addressed an interfaith gathering of monks in Calcutta. "There must be scrupulous respect for important differences," [he said](#),

and where one no longer understands or agrees, this must be kept clear—without useless debate. There are differences that are not debatable, and it is a useless, silly temptation to try to argue them out. Let them be left intact until a greater moment of understanding.

Dialogue, Merton warned, has its limits. Inherent in this warning is a recognition that language itself has its limits, and should not be used the way politicians often use it: to co-opt "the other" as a means to control them.

Merton's lesson on dialogic clarity seems lost on Pope Francis—and nowhere is his non-Merton-esque approach to dialogue clearer than in his treatment of sexuality and gender. This is a pope who will entice LGBTQ people with a statement like "Who am I to judge," only to deliver a ringing insult to same-sex-parented families at the close of his congressional address by claiming that they are, de facto, part of a threat to the family.

Same-sex marriage, of course, is already the law of the land in the U.S., and the pope's views on the matter have no legal relevance. So it would behoove those liberals currently singing the praises of Francis's "open dialogue" to full consider

how his vision of dialogue may impact some of the most vulnerable members of the human family: transgender people.

In January, Pope Francis [met with Diego Neria Lejarraga](#), a transgender man from Spain who had written the pope a letter expressing his feelings of alienation from the church. Whatever was said in that meeting, it had zero apparent effect on the pope's intense opposition to the acceptance of trans people. This is the same pontiff who found time to deal a blow to this cause in [an encyclical on climate change](#):

Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.

For sure, pinning down Pope Francis on what he actually meant by suggesting that another person's gender expression is the *sine qua non* for him to recognize himself in an encounter would be a herculean challenge for even the most intrepid, and patient, of journalists—if they ever had the chance.

But let's remember: transgender people, who endure daily persecution the world over, don't always have the luxury of parsing the pope's statements to find kernels of mercurial compassion. Their margin of survival and safety is too thin. (For more on the torture and killing of transgender people in just one Latin American country, Honduras, read [this report](#).)

And on its face, Pope Francis seems to be contorting Martin Buber's famous "I-thou" proposition—Buber's ideal construction for genuine, empathic dialogue—by directly linking that proposition with gender. He seems to be saying that people whose gender expression is outside the traditional norm—and even those who do not manifest any "masculine" or "feminine" physical attributes—are beyond his own ability to relate. Flowery rhetorical style aside, Pope Francis's statement to transgender and androgynous folks alike seems to be essentially this: shape up, because the way you look makes you too darn freaky to even relate to.

Already, Pope Francis's conflation of climate change with gender and sexuality issues is providing fodder for anti-LGBTQ forces within the church. [Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski writes](#),

Minimizing our carbon footprint, implementing sustainable farming techniques, protecting the O-zone layer, working to reduce waste and pollution are part of "Creation care" – and in attending to these things, we exercise our stewardship over the earth; but at the same time, defending marriage, promoting the family, protecting the young, are also part of the "Creation care" necessary for human flourishing on planet Earth.

Memo from Wenski, by way of Francis, to the millions of same-sex-parented families in America and around the world: fundamentally, you're just as injurious to God's glorious creation as the corporate polluters are. Given this low status, it's hardly surprising that the pope could not resist a final dig at them in his congressional address.

As Merton said again and again, open dialogue among people genuinely willing to be impacted by the experiences and voices of others is a beautiful thing indeed. But will American Catholics be able to distinguish genuine calls for open dialogue on controversial issues from strategic efforts to rhetorically co-opt political opponents? At a time when Pope Francis is flexing his political muscle in the halls of state power, on issues pivotal to how we carry out our lives—literally everything from our most intimate relationships to how we structure our economy—now may be the chance to find out.