

Widener University Delaware Law School

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The Pope's Rich Bag of Diversity for Families

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POPE FRANCIS JOURNEY TO AMERICA 2015

Positive View



Pope Francis delivers his speech as he leads an evening prayer service at St. Patrick's Cathedral on Thursday in New York.

AP

The pope's rich bag of diversity for families



DELAWARE VOICE
JOHN CULHANE

Philadelphia and the surrounding areas are in the throes of Pope-mania. After a week of shuffling cars around, closing roads and various other daunting logistics, the city greeted the pontiff yesterday. He's captured the popular imagination and has killer poll numbers – a 70 percent approval rating, with 86 percent of Catholics giving him the thumbs-up.

But what message is Pope Francis conveying? As he made clear during his address to Congress on Thursday, it's a mixed bag for rich diversity of families existing today.

For those remarried after divorce, for single parents, and for LGBT families the doctrine is the same

See **DIVERSITY**, Page 27A

"We must get to know people, listen, expand the circle of ideas."

POPE FRANCIS

The pace of the modern world pressures families



DELAWARE VOICE
BAHIRA TRASK

I am a scholar of families and family change, and yet, even I am astounded by the rapid transformations we have witnessed over the last half-century in American families. As our society diversifies and becomes more racially, ethnically and religiously complex, and as socioeconomic disparities grow, we are seeing more and more variations on "traditional" family life. Single parent and dual-income families have become the norm, and now are more common than the once prevalent two-parent, single-earner households of the mid-20th century. These changes are relevant because most of us will experience a multiplicity of family types in our lifetimes.

And yet, in the United States, families remain sym-

See **FAMILIES**, Page 27A

Diversity

Continued from Page 23A

as ever. Remarried people are living in adulterous relationships. Kids are entitled to a mother and a father. And gays and lesbians shouldn't even be sexually active – let alone be raising children. On other matters, too, the Pope hasn't budged from church teaching on the ordination of women or on the use of birth control as a way to limit the size of families. Both are forbidden, and Francis has said so.

He hasn't said these things *often*, though. Quite the contrary, early on in his papacy he signaled his intention to pivot away from hot-button social issues, including LGBT rights and abortion, saying: "It is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time. The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent."

Rather, Francis has chosen to emphasize issues that call the Catholic Church back to its more progressive, social justice leanings. And it's this emphasis that reflects a much more positive view of the multiplicity of families and the day-to-day struggles that often commandeer their lives. Through both his statements and his actions, he's demonstrated an understanding and commitment to the poor, again and again. He's been specific, and

provocative – everything from trickle-down economics, to financial speculation, to youth unemployment has engaged his attention and energy.

Pope Francis has also decried environmental destruction, linking it to climate change and noting, correctly, that the burdens of devastation fall most heavily on the poor, especially in developing countries. He's called for developed countries (including ours) to develop more generous policies on immigrants and refugees. He's called out weapons manufacturers, too, openly wondering how they could call themselves Christians. Families destroyed by natural disasters, sundered by regional conflict, or devastated by gun violence find an ally in this Pope.

Wherever one falls on the political spectrum, then, it's hard to be completely comfortable with the full range of the messages Francis conveys. On the left: Single parents struggling to raise their kids don't appreciate hearing that they can't do an adequate job without a partner; and same-sex couples, having just won a long, sometimes bitter, struggle for the right to marry understandably criticize the conclusion that they're not supposed to be raising kids together – a conclusion that, not incidentally, isn't supported by the evidence.

But Pope Francis' message is perhaps even more challenging to those on the right, particularly because it's clear these are the issues the pontiff cares



SUCHAT PEDERSON/THE NEWS JOURNAL

Thousands wave and cheer as Pope Francis rolls by in his popemobile to speak at the Independence Hall in Philadelphia on Saturday.

most about. One Congressman, Paul Gosar of Arizona, even boycotted Francis' address to Congress because of anticipated statements about climate change. Rick Santorum, the possibly perennial presidential candidate, wants the pope to focus on issues of "theology and morality" rather than climate change, which, according to Santorum,

isn't our most pressing issue.

Santorum, though, is wrong twice. As Pope Francis has made clear, climate change is a moral issue. There can be few, if any, subjects more fraught with moral implications: How do we slow the changes that are already happening, and causing human suffering? How do we cope with the questions of how to allocate diminished resources as natural disasters increase? And in what condition will we leave the planet to our descendants? Why aren't these issues our "most pressing"?

On balance, Pope Francis poses the greater challenge to conservative, capitalistic orthodoxy than to the legal structures that support multiply diverse families. Messaging and emphasis matter more than catechism, and Francis' reanimation of Catholicism's progressive strain comes at a particularly fraught historical moment: a moment sensitive to inequality, worried sick over the fate of the only planet we've got, and eager for someone to bind these issues together as this pope has been able to do.

As he's said: "We must get to know people, listen, expand the circle of ideas." Our elected leaders would do well to heed this advice, as would we all.

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