The Pope's Rich Bag of Diversity for Families

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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-
Diversity

Continued from Page 23A

as ever. Remarried people are living in adulterous relationships. Kids are enti-
tied 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 budge
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 is-

sues, including LGBT rights and abor-
tion, 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 em-
phazize 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 under-
standing and commitment to the poor,
again and again. He’s been specific, and

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

Pope Francis has also decried envi-
ronmental 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, open-
ly wondering how they could call them-

selves Christians. Families destroyed
by natural disasters, sundered by re-
gional 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 com-
pletely comfortable with the full range
of the messages Francis conveys. On
the left: Single parents struggling to
raise their kids don’t appreciate hear-
ing that they can’t do an adequate job
without a partner; and same-sex cou-
ples, 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 per-
haps even more challenging to those on
the right, particularly because it’s clear
these are the issues the pontiff cares
most about. One Congressman, Paul
Gosar of Arizona, even boycotted Fran-
cis’ 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, cli-
mate 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 suf-
fering? How do we cope with the ques-
tions of how to allocate diminished
resources as natural disasters in-
crease? 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, cap-
italistic orthodoxy than to the legal
structures that support multiply di-
verse families. Messaging and empha-
sis matter more than catechism, and
Francis’ reanimation of Catholicism’s
progressive strain comes at a partic-
ularly 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
do well to heed this advice, as would we

all.

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