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"The Two Sides of the Catholic Church"

Letter to the Editor by Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone

Opinion/Open Forum

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No question that Wednesday was a game-changer for the Catholic Church. And lots of opinion-makers have been chiming in these past few weeks on the kind of changes this church needs to make. Pope Francis, though, likely appears to many, especially the politically active, as something of an enigma. Is he right or left?

His commitment to the poor is not just lip service, but one of true solidarity, living a life of radical simplicity. Indeed, as the votes came in, the newly elected pope thought of the twin scourges of our time (as of most times), poverty and war, and so called on the name of Francis. "Right away, with regard to the poor, I thought of St. Francis of Assisi, then I thought of war," he told an assembly of journalists. "Francis loved peace and that is how the name came to me.

"(St. Francis was a) poor man, a simple man, as we would like a poor church, for the poor."

On the other hand, when it comes to the usually polarizing moral issues of our time, the pope comes down on the wrong side of the culturally fashionable. Some have even referred to this as "the two sides of the Catholic Church."

Catholics, though, do not view these issues through a political lens. We do not adopt a consistently "liberal" or "conservative" position on each of them. Rather, we critique them according to foundational principles, such as what best upholds human dignity, what protects the most vulnerable, what supports the principle that society should not overstep what individuals can do, and what builds solidarity.

Protecting human life in the womb, supporting the poor (including the mothers of those babies), and coming to the aid of the vulnerable migrant is, for us, not a political oxymoron but a consistent ethic of life. We can and do work with people of all political and religious persuasions with whom we can partner for any particular cause, but, at the end of the day, we're politically homeless.

I am very happy that San Francisco, named for the saint of peace, has a history of interfaith cooperation. It is one of the many things I love about being in San Francisco. I have learned from this that one can hold stereotyped opinions about an individual or group of people so long as one does not actually personally know any of them. But when there is a human encounter, when we get to know each other, barriers of prejudice, hatred and bias drop away.

In even the simplest sacrificial love for the most vulnerable, our own hearts can be raised above the mundane pressing anxieties of daily existence and we can even catch a glimpse of the divine. True love becomes possible, even with differences remaining.

Yes, there are two sides to the church, but they are complementary, not conflicting. They embody truth that does not change, love that cannot fail. While we fail at times to live up to this, it is a constant call to commit to the dignity of every human person.

This month Christians celebrate Easter, a religious festival with a universal lesson. Peace comes from self-giving and forgiving, from moving away from constant preoccupation with self to caring for the welfare of others. This year we have a timely pope, who embodies these timeless truths in a particularly compelling way. Can we do the same?