

The rise of 'devout schismatics' in the Catholic Church

Dissent against the pope has become radicalized because of political devotion that is more about a partisan ideology

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Portraits of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (right) among life jackets during a protest in Barcelona on July 13 against the criminalization of NGOs that rescue refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. (Photo: MAXPPP)

"If Matteo Salvini becomes prime minister, Italy will have a government led by a Catholic who is devout but schismatic."

So said Sergio Romano, a former Italian ambassador to NATO and the ex-Soviet Union, in a recent opinion piece in the Italian daily *Il Corriere della Sera*.

Salvini, 46, is Italy's interior minister. An **anti-immigrant nationalist**, he is also the country's deputy prime minister and its de facto leader. And he is a hero to certain ultra-devout Catholics.

He has stood in opposition to Pope Francis (especially on the migration issue) and has helped show that in Italy, as in the United States, the Catholic Church is now openly divided.

Praying with the pope, disagreeing with his political views

Over the past century Catholics in the Western world have voted for or joined a variety of political parties. But what we are witnessing today in places like the USA, Italy and elsewhere in Europe is quite different.

Long gone is the 20th-century phenomenon of Catholics who could pray with the pope and at the same time vote for politicians that oppose certain teachings of the Catholic Church. That was not just a typical sort of Catholic dissonance.

It was also the sign of a healthy distinction between the Church and state. And it reflected an awareness that lay Catholics had of their political responsibilities and the legitimate pluralism of political cultures, as Paul VI also acknowledged in his **1971 apostolic letter**, *Octogesima Adveniens*.

What we are witnessing now is a new kind of phenomenon. It is characterized by politicians with authoritarian instincts like Salvini who are programmatically trying to undermine Francis' pontificate. Salvini has done so even by voicing a preference for Benedict XVI over the current pope and by forming an alliance with Cardinal Raymond Burke, one of Francis' fiercest doctrinal critics.

This has created a problem not only for the Church but also for the state.

No matter what opponents of the Jesuit pope say, Francis is not the real reason behind the emergence of this new phenomenon. Rather, it is rooted in the response that some Catholics have given to the Church's teachings on one of the major emergencies of our time — how to deal with the reshaping of our world

through massive migration movements and the consequences this has for the role of religion in public life.

A key component in this is the question of religious pluralism, especially in the context of disruptions being caused by globalization. All this has caused a crisis in liberal democracies, which populists like Salvini are opportunistically manipulating in a politically expedient way.

While Francis is publicly in favor of integrating immigrants in a multicultural and multireligious society, there are some Catholics who are very much against this. Politicians like Donald Trump and Salvini are openly appealing to (and using) this discontent to pit these believers against a pope who has broadened the spectrum of what constitutes important moral issues.

A radically evangelical pope refocused the Church

The Christian character of the Catholic Church is now being measured in a way that is significantly different from the recent past, which was marked by its anti-communist stance during the Cold War and its concern for issues of sexual morality between the 1970s and the early 2000s.

The shift is having consequences on the way some Catholics perceive the pope. If every single Catholic were to be polled on their view of Francis' radical teaching, we'd likely see that most of them are in some ways **made uncomfortable by this pontificate**. And if they are not, they should be.

But there is a big difference between Catholics who are not ready to follow the radicalism of Francis and those who accuse him of being a heretic. The latter are part of a new phenomenon of opposition.

Certainly, the Gospel radicality of Francis' teaching has contributed to its rise. But this phenomenon has even more to do with the kind of Church Francis inherited from his predecessors. The 82-year-old pope has been forced to clean up the ideological distortions of Catholicism that have emerged, more or less, in the last two decades. This has been a long process in the making.

In the post-World War II period, having learned from the tragic mistakes of the previous half a century – the alliance between sectors of the Catholic Church with fascism and Nazism — Catholic doctrine accepted, albeit reluctantly, the idea of a distinction between the Church and state (not separation, which is something different). This also meant rejecting temptations toward an ideological marriage between the Church and one particular political ideology.

The Church tended to be a "big tent" where the official teaching on some particular issues coexisted with a visible plurality of political options in the context of the democratic order. The big tent coexisted with the official condemnation of communism, of course, which meant church leaders (clergy, theologians, Catholic politicians) could not share the Marxist ideology. But at the same time, many among the Catholic laity were part of the voting constituency of socialist and communist parties in the Western hemisphere.

Then a new way of understanding the relationship between Catholics and politics began to take shape following the end of the Cold War, the decline of John Paul II's pontificate and the election of Benedict XVI. As biopolitical and sexual morality issues posed new challenges to traditional Catholic teaching, the official magisterium began emphasizing "non-negotiable values" and natural law.

Enter the 'devout atheists'

This set the stage for a new alignment between the Roman Catholic Church and the so-called *atei devoti* (devout atheists) — an Italian expression that describes those atheists who display a public deference towards traditional Catholic teaching on moral and social issues while violating those very same teachings in their private lives.

A love story thus developed between Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI and the *atei devoti*, opening a new phase in the Church's long history of **exercising political expediency** in the Western hemisphere.

The devout atheists tend to see the Catholic tradition as an essential pillar for the preservation of Western civilization. And because of this, certain church hierarchs have given them preferential treatment, even above and beyond that

accorded to "normal" Catholics. They have considered them allies in the fight against secularism and Islam.

It is no surprise then that, in the name of preserving Christianity, these *atei devoti* have voiced support for the U.S.-led wars in the Middle East as a new crusade against Islam, while criticizing the European Union for failing to acknowledge "the Christian roots of Europe" in its foundational texts.

This alliance between the Church and the *atei devoti* was created, most notably, because of two theological factors.

The first concerns the identification of Catholicism and Christianity with Europe and the West. This includes a particular view of Islam that preceded 9/11, but which has been strengthened and radicalized by the convulsions going on in the Muslim world since the return of "**strong religions**" in public life.

The second concerns the **ecclesiology of "creative minorities"** within the Church. Such intentional communities are meant to be a response to the secularization of the Western world and an alternative to the assumption that everyone born in the Catholic faith would remain in the Church. However, the push for establishing creative minorities has also encouraged a certain particularism within the Church.

This, in turn, has produced ideological purity tests that have fostered a kind of ecclesiological Leninism or Jacobinism in the Catholic Church. The real devotion for this new kind of politically devout Catholic is towards a particular political-theological identification of the Church with Western civilization, much more than it is towards the Catholic Church and its long and multifaceted tradition.

From 'devout atheists' to 'devout schismatics'

The transition from the *atei devoti* of the early 2000s to the "devout schismatics" of today has been more of a short step rather than a leap. It can be traced to the 2013 election of Pope Francis who immediately began challenging any identification of the Church with conservative political-theological assumptions –

precisely because they do not express true Catholicism, especially for believers from the global south.

The excessive obsession with only one particular aspect of the Christian faith has always been the path to heresy and schism. Today's "devout schismatics," like Matteo Salvini and his supporters, are in large part those who have embraced Catholicism for its political alignment in the last 20 years or so.

They are devout in the sense that they publicly display their preference for a traditionalist Church and its devotions, such as the rosary. They are schismatics because they openly promote the undermining of the bishop of Rome among the Catholic faithful.

These "devout schismatics" are not only politicians. They also include some theologians, priests, bishops and even cardinals. Their schismatic instincts have been on display since the beginning of Francis' pontificate. But they were particularly visible in August 2018, when some of them – such as Archbishops Charles Chaput of Philadelphia and Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco, as well as Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler (Texas) – sided with Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the former papal nuncio to Washington who called on Francis to resign.

The conduct of Catholics who are opposing the current pope is very different from the **loyal dissent** of believers in the 20th century – from the age of Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to liberation theologians between the 1980s to today.

More devoted to a political ideology than to the Gospel

None of these earlier "dissenters" left the Church or accused the pope of heresy, even though they held theological opinions that differed from official teaching in Rome. Some of them were even persecuted by the Holy Office (today's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) for their writings. Many of them have since been vindicated and their theological insights, even decades later, have been embraced by the official magisterium.

Political and theological dissent against John Paul II and Benedict XVI was not schismatic.

Today's devout schismatics are also different from the adherents of Archbishop Lefebvre's schism. The original ideology of the Lefebvrists was clearly reactionary, if not often outright fascist. But they could not identify with a nationalist leader who appealed to open disloyalty towards the pope in the same way Salvini, Trump and their ecclesiastical attachés are doing today.

This identification between the Catholic Church and a political ideology — or a political party, as for many in the USA — visibly collapsed in March 2013 with the election of Francis, who made clear – with his biography and his persona, even before his teachings – that the Church is transnational and multicultural. It is bigger than nationalist ideologies and civilizational narratives.

Francis has not created the current tensions. Rather, he has exposed them — not only by what he says or does but mostly (and first of all) by who he is and the anti-ideological Catholicism he embodies.

The dissent against this pope has become radicalized with schismatic instincts because this kind of political devotion is more about a partisan ideology than about the Church. Catholicism was exposed to ideological manipulation by those who do not really care for the Gospel, but who are more interested in a particular conservative political culture that found favor in the Vatican and ecclesiastical circles well before Francis.

The identification between Catholicism and Western conservatism has worked because of the limited spectrum of issues so close to the heart of these devoted atheists.

Party and Church have largely overlapped, if not coincided. But every time the Church is identified with a political party, it's always the party that trumps the Church.

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