

Pope Francis or Steve Bannon? Catholics must choose

American alt-right leader enlists Catholic allies to turn people against the pope

Robert Mickens, Rome

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Among all the world's political and social leaders, Pope Francis stands increasingly alone as the most powerful force for global peace and stability. Thank God – and the cardinals who elected him in March 2013 – that the Argentine Jesuit is the current Bishop of Rome.

In an age when alt-right populists are masquerading as Christians and using religious symbols to scare believers into embracing racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and ultra-nationalism – all so starkly at odds with the Gospel, by the way – Francis has played an indispensable role in preventing a dangerous spiral into a full-blown clash of civilizations.

This is because there are people as crazy as the populists in other currents, as well.

Another pope may not have had the courage, fortitude or deep and genuine faith to stand against all this and not allow himself to be co-opted to the Christian sovereigntists' cause.

And while the 82-year-old Francis has not been able to convince enough voters to reject the populists, he has kept most bishops, cardinals and other Catholic leaders from publicly endorsing them. This is no small matter.

Populists state that their intention is to defend the Judeo-Christian heritage of the Western world. And, unfortunately, this is quite enticing to those for whom Catholicism is, in essence, a Eurocentric philosophical ideology and moral code.

Tribal Catholics of the "no salvation outside the Roman Church" type like the message.

And the man who has enlisted them is Steve Bannon.

The American millionaire populist who rails against the elites

Chief architect of Donald Trump's election to the U.S. presidency and co-founder of the far-right *Breitbart News*, the 65-year-old Bannon is now the most famous ringleader of the alt-right's populist fear-mongering movement.

He's been wildly successful at peddling news that is fake and convincing otherwise rational people that it's actually true.

How else could a former Goldman-Sachs investment banker, whose personal wealth (according to *Forbes*) is between \$9.5 million and \$48 million, build an entire movement on the premise that his adversaries are "elites" out to crush the working class?

Bannon's chief adversary right now is Pope Francis. He's doing all he can to turn people against the pope. And he's getting some help from fellow Catholics who don't particularly like the current pope and who happen to be journalists.

One of them is Thomas Williams, a former Legionary of Christ who writes for *Breitbart*. He left the scandal-plagued religious order some time ago to marry the daughter of former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Mary Ann Glendon, with whom he secretly had a child while still a priest. Williams is a great friend and ally of Bannon's.

And then there is Edward Pentin. He is probably the most prominent among Bannon's journalist supporters, for no other reason than the fact that he serves as Vatican correspondent for the mainstream, though conservative *National Catholic Register* in the United States and often writes for a similar paper in Great Britain, the *Catholic Herald*.

The Bannon interview in the Catholic press

In a recent article in the [Register](#) ("Pope Francis and European Populism: Is More Dialogue Needed?"), Pentin gave Mr. Bannon free rein to slam the pope.

The sovereigntist leader criticized Francis for refusing to meet with Italy's populist, anti-immigrant deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, mockingly saying the pope is always talking about dialogue, so why not with the populists?

In fact, Salvini has admitted that he's never requested a meeting with Francis, which Pentin conveniently omitted.

Bannon also went after the pope for daring to criticize Trump's wall policy on the Mexican-U.S. border during the 2016 presidential election campaign. "He has never really been called out for that," charged Bannon.

Called out for what? Holding up Gospel principles and repeating what even John Paul II (a hero for Bannon) famously said: "Build bridges, not walls"?

Pentin records that what Mr. Bannon finds "most disturbing" about Francis is that he is "essentially siding with the global elites, not the poor."

Evidently, that's because of his accommodating stance on immigration, which Bannon says is hurting "working-class people" in southern Europe or in the southern United States.

There's that fear card again. The immigrants are taking all our jobs. And if fear is the most potent weapon in politics, as just about everyone knows, it has no power against the seemingly fearless Pope Francis.

Pope Francis accused of being a Greens party politician and Marxist

Now we must give credit to Pentin, or perhaps his editors at the *Register*, for not printing the most vitriolic and idiotic parts of his June 4 telephone interview with Mr. Bannon. And there's certainly a lot of vitriol, as well as dubious assertions.

But Pentin did, in fact, publish every bit of that interview – on his personal blog and on a site called the [European Conservative](#), an online monthly magazine sympathetic to Bannon's conservative political views.

The interviewer asks a few leading questions and is clearly of a similar mind with the interviewee.

"(Francis) has basically taken it upon himself to be the front man for the party of Davos, going against the sovereignty movement... He is lying about his actions in dealing with the most existential crisis I think the Church has ever been in (i.e. regarding sex abuse)... now inextricably linked with this pope," said Bannon.

He mocked Francis for being "fixated on issues like climate change," excoriated him for "cutting a secret deal with the Chinese Communist Party," accused him of being a front man for the "far left" Greens party and basically branded him as a Marxist. He also warns that Francis is leading the Church towards a schism.

There are all sorts of other garbage in this interview, so I'll leave it at that. I probably would have never even seen the whole thing because the *National Catholic Register* – which is not exactly the most enthusiastic pro-Francis publication – had the good sense not to publish or link to it.

More Catholic supporters of Bannon and the populists

It was another journalist that brought the full-length Bannon interview to the attention of many of us. That was Robert Moynihan, founder and editor-in-chief of *Inside the Vatican*, a conservative Catholic magazine published ten times a year.

Moynihan regularly sends out his "Letters" and in one of the recent editions he offered the Bannon interview, taking the view that Pope Francis urgently needs to dialogue with the populists in order to avoid – now brace yourselves for this – a schism in the Catholic Church, just as Bannon warns.

Bob Moynihan is a bright guy. But he tends to be a bit apocalyptic, very much given to the more foreboding messages from Our Lady of Fatima. Not surprisingly, he is a Eurocentric Catholic who is deeply inspired and shaped by the writings and person of Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI.

But I think he's mistaken to take Bannon's erratic and divisive rants seriously. Or, put it this way: to expect Pope Francis to rush to have a dialogue with Bannon and his supporters.

And, by the way, they include a number of cardinals. Some of them like Raymond Burke are openly supportive. Others, like Hungary's Pèter Erdő (because of his own ambition, and those of others, that he succeed Francis as pope), are more discreet with their support.

Another Catholic figure who shares most of Bannon's views is Newt Gingrich, a former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and one of the most divisive politicians of our times.

His wife is Donald Trump's ambassador to the Holy See, but Newt is really the president's eyes and ears (and de facto envoy) in the Vatican.

Catholics must choose

Pope Francis has made "dialogue" one of the most important principles of his pontificate and is trying to convert the entire Church to this method of engaging the world, dealing with others and resolving problems.

But the type of dialogue and discourse the pope is talking about is aimed at uniting or unifying people; integrating immigrants; striving for a more equitable distribution of wealth and the goods of the earth; working together to protect "our common home," all of God's creation; breaking down misunderstanding among the various religions and building peace and harmony on the basis of our common humanity as children of the one God.

Bannon and his ilk, on the other hand, are bent on dividing and excluding others. They accentuate the differences of race, religion and nationality. They favour social Darwinism that rewards the strongest and cleverest, to the detriment of the weak and the poor. And the list goes on...

Catholicism is at its best when it is not exclusionary -- when it embraces both/and, rather than reducing everything to either/or.

But, in this case, Catholics must make a choice. Either they stand with Francis, or they stand with Bannon.

This time it really is either/or.

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