

Baltimore Archbishop Lori says Pope Francis interview has a ‘tone of invitation’

By Christopher Guntz

editor@CatholicReview.org

Twitter: @ReviewGuntz

Archbishop William E. Lori reacted to a wide-ranging interview with Pope Francis published Sept. 19 in *America* magazine with two analogies: the pontiff as bridge-builder, and the pope hitting a “reset button.”

The archbishop of Baltimore was in his former Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., for the installation of his successor when he first scanned the interview. When Bishop Frank J. Caggiano, a native of Brooklyn, N.Y., delivered his homily, he talked about the connection between the Brooklyn Bridge, Bridgeport and spiritual bridges.

“It occurred to me sitting there at that installation Mass that that is what Pope Francis is doing,” Archbishop Lori said, building bridges so that faithful churchgoing Catholics, as well as those on the margins, or those who are searching “can rediscover or perhaps discover for the first time the love of a personal God who comes to us in Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

And Francis hit the reset button, Archbishop Lori said, that we can focus on first things first: God is a trinity of persons, a personal God, whose love is fully revealed in his son Jesus and communicated to us through the Holy Spirit.

By opening our hearts and being transformed by that love, “then following the commandments and listening to the wisdom of the church on moral and social issues becomes more reasonable, becomes possible,” and accepting the church’s teaching is not so much a duty but a response of love and gratitude, the archbishop said in an interview with the *Catholic Review*.

He appreciates the coverage media outlets provided about the interview, because most made clear the pope wasn’t changing any church teaching, but changing the tone.

“The tone is one of invitation. ... one that allows us to prioritize,” Archbishop Lori noted, adding that he thinks the pope is saying that once a person has fallen in love with God and been transformed by that love, “then you can revisit the church’s teaching on sexuality, on marriage, on a whole host of social issues, with a new

heart, new eyes, new ears and perhaps these things will be seen in a new light and make more sense.”

In the interview, Pope Francis said, “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods.”

Archbishop Lori noted that “we live in the real world” and at times these difficult issues are presented “not on our timetable, but on the timetable of the culture.” In light of that, “We make sure that we contextualize our responses in terms of Gospel priorities.”

For the archbishop, it’s not so much that society thinks the church cares only about sexual issues and doesn’t help the poor and vulnerable. He emphasized that the U.S. bishops’ conference and most dioceses he knows of, including Baltimore, are focused first on evangelization, “a fresh proclamation of the word of God.”

“Once the love of Christ shines forth from our hearts, then loving the poor, serving the vulnerable, walking in the ways of beatitudes and the Commandments are a way of life. It’s what you call discipleship, following Christ together in the church,” Archbishop Lori said.

He noted that Pope Francis has said the church should not simply be a “Catholic NGO” (non-governmental organization), because then we’re just competing with many other organizations doing great things.

The church offers “a tremendous array of services to many people in need as ... a response to the love of God poured forth into our hearts by the Holy Spirit,” the archbishop added. “That’s why we want to do so in freedom because we want to be able to make our unique contribution as followers of Jesus Christ, as a way of bearing witness to the Gospel.”

He said one of Francis’ comments – that the church should not only welcome and receive people by keeping the doors open, but also find new roads to reach people – is a good description of the new evangelization.

A bishop he admires often says that the church cannot say, “‘We’re here, come and see us.’ We shouldn’t say, ‘This is what we offer. Come and get it.’ ” Instead, we need to follow Christ’s admonition to the Apostles before he ascended: “Go ye therefore and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Baptize them. ...”

Archbishop Lori said, “I think the new evangelization means going out into the highways and byroads of the culture, meeting people where they are. Sometimes that’s the social media. Sometimes that’s going down to the Greene Turtle. Sometimes that’s simply being out and about where people can have a chance to ask their questions, voice their worries, share their anxieties, sometimes their disappointments, even, yes, their anger.”

In the interview, Pope Francis said, “All the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief, and the people display this infallibilitas in credendo,

this infallibility in believing, through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together.” Archbishop Lori noted that includes all the faithful throughout history, back to the time of the early disciples. It includes doctors of the church, the saints, the spiritual masters as well as people of today.

He said he experiences this himself when he encounters a couple who generously and lovingly welcome children with special needs into their homes, and those “living the vocation of marriage to a heroic degree.”

“That sends me back to my chapel saying, ‘Oh my goodness, what kind of a priest am I?’ And that inspires me,” the archbishop said.

He also sees it when the faithful stand shoulder to shoulder with the folks at Our Daily Bread, who are what Mother Teresa might call “Christ in one of his distressing disguises.”

“That’s where you meet up with the sense of the faithful,” he said. “I think that the faith is alive, it’s continually touching people’s lives. As people are transformed by the love of God, fully revealed in Christ and poured forth into their hearts by the Holy Spirit, then the faith comes alive. Then they receive the faith, then their sense of the faith begins to develop and then you see it in extraordinary ways.”

Archbishop Lori was impressed by the pope’s identification of himself as a sinner in need of God’s mercy, noting that in the writings of almost any saint, “that saint will accuse himself or herself of being a sinner. Because the more you progress in the spiritual life – in a word, the holier you become – the more you perceive God’s holiness and the more clearly you see your own sinfulness.”

He said that is a great example.

“I think the pope showed all of us, myself included,” Archbishop Lori said, “exactly the right starting point for our prayer, for our ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and for assessing our own response to all that the Lord has done for us.”

“If we all began with repentant hearts,” the archbishop asked, “if we all began conscious of our weakness and our dependence on God, how many disagreements and divisions would be overcome in the life of the church, to be sure, but also in the broader society?”

Archbishop Lori said he has not yet met Pope Francis in person, but is “looking forward very much” to meeting him in October when he visits the Vatican in his role as Supreme Chaplain of the Knights of Columbus.

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