

A woman recently spoke to me after the morning Mass at St Basil's church about something she had seen on the web that had left her disturbed and confused. It featured a number of men who identified themselves as Catholic priests. Their message was that all the popes since the Second Vatican Council in the mid 1960s had been heretical or, at the least, not validly elected.

This was the first time, she said, that she had encountered anything like that and it shocked her. In fact, such views began to appear not long after the end of the Council. A small but vociferous group of priests and lay people in various countries strongly disagreed with some of the decisions made by the bishops, decisions which they saw as incompatible with the Catholic tradition. In the name of that tradition, they came eventually to reject not only the teachings of the Council, but the Council itself. Such opposition is extreme and is embraced by only a very small minority of Catholics.

In the wake of the Council and of the different interpretations that were being given to it, many Catholics in Europe as well as in the Americas became polarized in their views of it. Some believed that the Council marked the beginning of a process of change that had to be continued while others appealed

to the letter of the conciliar documents against the changes that the first group were calling for.

That debates, tensions, and conflicts developed in the post conciliar period is not surprising. Such things have followed every major council in the past.

One of the Council's overarching concerns was the relation between the church and contemporary culture. This is a difficult and complex issue given, among other things, that contemporary culture takes different forms in different parts of the globe.

The situation of the pope in the world and church of today is in some ways uniquely challenging. On the one hand, he is more visible than ever before. Pope John Paul II offered a new model of the papacy as a travelling preacher and teacher who, because of the media and the strength of his character and personality, was able to be a powerful moral and spiritual authority on the world's stage.

The 24 hours news cycle as well as the more or less instantaneous reporting on statements, opinions, and events around the world represent a considerable challenge to politicians and other public figures and perhaps especially to the leader a church that tries to be home in every culture.

A particularly difficult challenge for recent popes has been how to deal with the polarization that I mentioned a moment ago. The challenge was already there during the pontificate of Pope Paul VI who met increasing opposition to his efforts to implement the liturgical and other conciliar decrees. Pope Benedict XVI tried to reach out to conservative movements, but in doing so became the object of criticism from individuals and groups the media identify as liberals.

The terminology of liberal and conservative, a terminology that is very much at home in politics, is inadequate when it comes to some of the key issues that presently divide Catholics. Such categories often get in the way of any kind of fruitful dialogue.

Recent developments have made the tensions and divisions that have been present in the church for some time more visible. Above all, they have revealed the depth of the negative feelings that some have toward Pope Francis. They see him as undermining traditional views and practices. Sometimes it is a simple question of emphasis; other times it has to do with his way of doing things.

An aspect of Pope Francis that has stood out for me from the beginning of his pontificate is his effort to embody in his own life and activity what he understands to be at the heart of the teaching and life of Jesus. Perhaps the

simplest way of getting at it is the word “mercy.” Jesus preached and practiced mercy, mercy for the poor and the outcast, the sick and the sinner. Twice he encouraged his disciples to understand the prophetic saying, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” He summed up much of his moral teaching in the phrase “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.” On the cross, he granted the good thief pardon and prayed to the Father to forgive his executioners.

Here, I believe, is the key to much of what Pope Francis says and does. What some seem to find scandalous about him is the all embracing nature of his mercy. The prisoners whose feet he washed on Holy Thursday included women and men, Muslims and Christians. That same mercy has motivated him in seeking to help refugees whether Muslims, Christians or people of no religion. His concern for ecology focuses in a special way on the poor who are often the first to suffer the ravages of climate change. He encourages parents of a gay child, “Don’t condemn, dialogue, understand. The child has a right to a family.”

Given our present situation, the prayer for the church that comes just before communion has taken on, for me, a special significance. “Look not on our sins,” we ask, “but on the faith of your church and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will, who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.”