

## Straw Men & Stereotypes

Sometimes I think our Holy Church is as polarized and divided as our nation currently is. There seems to be a deep-seated inability to affirm any goodness or truth in those with whom we disagree.

Consequently, as I heard one news commentator describe it, we are separating out into “tribes.”

In my observation of this phenomenon, the tactic I observe in the most strident partisans is the appeal to the “straw man.” The creation of a “straw man” is a tactic by which one distills out of an opponent’s position or beliefs the worst possible example or consequence.

It is much easier to give an example than to define it, and there many from which to choose: In the immigration debate, one “straw man” is the “criminal rapist/drug-dealer.” If one, somehow, wants to make a case for welcoming Central Americans who are fleeing gang violence, lawlessness, or political persecution, the opponent will present this “straw man” in opposition; as if to suggest the primary type of person crossing the southern border is depraved, violent pathological pervert. I suppose the other word which applies in such a case is “demagoguery.”

I use the foregoing example only because it’s a rather clear and contemporary example. I propose that it is a shameful approach to a complicated human tragedy and something which should set off alarms in our Christian consciousness.

As is true in the political sphere, there seems to be a “left” and a “right” in the Church. Somehow this polarization has managed to cast being “*pro-life, pro-traditional marriage, pro traditional morality*” and, on the other hand, being “*concerned for the poor and social justice*” mutually exclusive programs. The “straw man” for the “left” is the *crazy, foaming at the mouth, pro-life zealot* protesting at the abortion clinic. The “straw man” for the “right” is something like the *old, hippie, feminist, cafeteria Catholic*.

If I may conflate “straw men” with “stereotyping,” it could be argued that there is some truth in these, otherwise fallacious, arguments or examples: Can one find a murderer or rapist among the thousands of illegal immigrants crossing our borders? There is no question about it! Is that example truly

representative of the thousands who have arrived or are striving to come here? Obviously not. That is just a play on people’s darker angels of racism and/or xenophobia!

And, while there are certainly (many?) examples to be found of “crazed zealots” and “liberal cafeteria Catholics,” these caricatures prevent people from engaging in charitable dialogue: They are just ways of demonizing whole swaths of people as a certain “type” and claiming the high-ground. Even worse, it seems, is to make personal morality issues and social doctrine issues somehow incompatible with one another. Of course, there is no “partisan” in the Church who would admit it so baldly as I have put it, but this is the effect when they use such matters as “litmus tests.” Herein, I think, is something Pope Francis is attempting to challenge in his recently released Apostolic Exhortation.

I suppose that one could argue that the Gospels are guilty of creating the “Pharisee straw man” to some extent. The Pharisees are consistently characterized as close-minded, superficial, and arrogant, (among other things.) But one has to understand that, at the writing of the Gospels, the young Church suffers persecution and much in the way of controversy among Jewish converts. Obviously, the polemical aspect of the Gospels is a response to the most aggressive antagonists among the Pharisee’s who are trying to stomp out the budding Christian Faith. I would assert that the good examples of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea provide a more nuanced picture for our consideration.



As our Lord rightly says, “*a house divided cannot stand;*” we must be on guard against these tendencies to demonize others and/or reduce them to some caricature of a thing we detest. As always, abundant humility and compassion are the best way. May the Lord increase these in all of us by His Grace.