

## Letter from the Editor – The audacity of Pope

Posted by [TBN Editor](#) On 01/23/2018

**Hollywood, MD** - My late maternal grandmother—the MOST Catholic woman I have ever known—might start spinning in her grave if she knew I was about to write an essay for publication offering some measure of criticism for the Pope. Well, why not? He's holy but he's not God. But even if you are not Catholic—even if you are non-Christian, atheist, agnostic or a sun-worshipper—you can't deny the Pope is a world figure and what he does and says matters. He's a major player on the world stage.

With that said, there's a bit of dismay and concern among the world's throng of Catholics due to some things Pope Francis has done and said lately. What he did recently was hand out a prestigious church award—that most Catholics probably didn't even know existed—to a Dutch woman who is an unabashed supporter of abortion rights. The plaudit—The Pontifical Equestrian Order of St. Gregory the Great—has been awarded before by other popes to individuals with less than stellar reputations. Even more recently were Pope Francis' appalling comments declaring that the alleged victims of a Chilean bishop accused of sex abuse were “committing slander.” The ongoing allegations of sex abuse by some members of the clergy—and the discovery of efforts to cover up the crimes—has enveloped the church in scandal. The Pope's comments don't help and he has since acknowledged this error.

There's another—much less egregious, thankfully—controversy in which Francis has been embroiled. While flying back to Rome from Peru, the Pontiff performed a marriage ceremony for cabin attendants Paula and Carlos. According to Reuters, “conservative Catholic commentators and bloggers who regularly criticize the pope on a host of issues blasted the wedding at 36,000 feet. They said it would make it difficult for pastors to deal with Catholic couples who want to get married in unusual secular locations instead of the church.” Philip Pulella, who wrote the story for Reuters, pointed out that the pope said the situation was different since the couple had already been married in a civil service eight years ago and they were not able to marry in their parish because the church collapsed in an earthquake. Alas, if only all of Francis' controversies were this benign.

Pope Francis has also been taken to task for preaching against climate change, an arguably secular issue. Many of his U.S.A. critics find his words and deeds un-American, forgetting, perhaps, that he's a South American and thus, not sworn to uphold and defend the U.S. Constitution.

Only the men sequestered at the Vatican back in 2013 when Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was chosen to succeed Pope Benedict know why they voted the way they did. It's their prerogative to choose a leader in an extremely non-transparent procedure. Francis was the ninth oldest man elected pope. Many of us will always recall his visit to the Washington, DC area—and several other East Coast locations—in 2015 as an uplifting experience. Despite the controversies, his has been a positive tenure. In my opinion, however, Pope Benedict may have set a very good precedent that Pope Francis may want to consider following. Rather than hold onto the papacy until death—something popes traditionally do—Benedict chose to retire. He turned 90 last April. Retirement, it seems, agrees with him. As the baggage piles up, Francis might find it agrees with him, too.

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