

Regarding marriage (and pets), Pope Francis tells it like it is

The Church offers us a rule of life, and a way of living that life. Someone gets angry at poor Pope Francis when he articulates either one. Who gets angry at what depends on who dislikes the Catholic teaching he's just articulated, or who feels like taking offense.

Remember the "breeding like rabbits" controversy of a few years ago? The secular world rejoiced and many conservative Catholics reacted strongly – at what he didn't actually say. In speaking of a woman whose eighth pregnancy might kill her, he said some Catholics think we should have as many children as possible (I could introduce you to some) and that the Church doesn't teach that. The Church will help couples not have too many children.

In the latest controversy, the secular world got angry – and more liberal Catholics reacted. Though to be fair to them, they're reacting to something he did say. They rejected his passing comment in his first general audience of the year about people replacing children with pets, but even more to his claim that married couples should have children.

The passing comment took up just 45 words (in the English translation) of almost 1,500. He said, speaking about "the demographic winter" the world faces and that for many couples, "dogs and cats take the place of children."

That's it. It was an aside. Not, I would have thought, controversial. Just listen to people in line at a doggy day care. It's weird the way some people talk about their pets. A love disordered and misdirected. I speak as someone who absolutely loves dogs. I still can't read my story about the

[death of my dog Moby](#) in public, because I'll start crying.

Even more upsetting and angering to many was Francis' claim that "denial of fatherhood or motherhood diminishes us, it takes away our humanity," that "fatherhood and motherhood are the fullness of the life of a person." They did not like his declaration that "a man or woman who do not develop the sense of fatherhood or motherhood, they are lacking something, something fundamental, something important."

As usual, much of the criticism was just dumb (even that from smart people), and a lot of it cheap. Much of it, from Catholics as well as Protestants and secularists, masked hostility to Catholic teaching and to the Church in general.

Like one from a supposed theologian, at an allegedly Catholic institution, who said that if having children was so good for you, why didn't Francis have children? It's the kind of "haha, gotcha!" criticism thrown out by the conceited kid in eighth grade. The obvious answer – which Francis gave – is that we can learn a spiritual fatherhood and motherhood even if we are not called to have physical children.

Taking down similar criticisms would be easy and maybe entertaining, but I want to stress here that this matter shows starkly how much Catholic teaching contradicts what the Western world believes. Catholic belief is sharply countercultural at many points, and the necessary fruitfulness of marriage is one.

The Western, affluent world thinks getting married and having children have no necessary connection. Marriage is a union of two people who want to be together, for some undetermined amount of time, and want their connection legally recognized. Marriage has no ends or rules, other than the ones the couple chooses. They may or may not have children. Their choice.

The Church teaches that married people should have children if they can. The first line of [the Catechism's section on](#)

[marriage](#) declares marriage “a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring.”

Children aren't an optional extra. They're one of the two ends marriage is for. Marriage isn't given primarily for our enjoyment. It's given to us to get things done in the world. Specifically, two: for the spouses to help each other grow closer to God and for them to have and raise children. That's a lot of work and a lot of sacrifice – and it's work we will not always want to do and sacrifices we will not always want to make. But it's the job we accept, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.

We should enjoy marriage, and – we must be honest – the pleasures of sexual intimacy are a fabulous bonus. But we get the enjoyment as a gift, as a benefit of doing what we've been given to do. And, I think, as an encouragement and aid, because marriage and parenting can hurt a lot and cost a lot.

What the Church teaches about marriage contradicts what our whole society believes. That includes most Protestants, even the fundamentalists, and many Catholics. Remember that dominant cultures don't like countercultures. Or men like the Holy Father who speak with confidence of the challenging truths the counterculture has to share.

David Mills writes from Pennsylvania.