**Who I am to Judge? Pope Francis trumps the Bishops and Simultaneously Makes the Catholic Vote Disappear and More Important**

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The road to the White House has a number of different possible paths, but one of the most prominent involves capturing the Catholic vote in states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. In winning these states in 2008, Barack Obama had social justice inclinations and a disposition against war that coincided well with the Catholic point of view. However, the Obama position on matters of life – abortion, stem cell research, assisted suicide – did not fully coincide with what St. John Paul II denominated matters of intrinsic, objective evil. Nonetheless, Obama won the Catholic vote by 14% in 2008 and by 9% in 2012, and these Catholic totals were necessary to prevail in the battleground states.

But does that mean that the Catholic vote was a game changer in these earlier elections? Or does a ballot cast by a Catholic voter contrary to the moral teaching of the church indicate instead that Catholics have now joined the ranks of other believers for whom the fact of religious affiliation does not in the end actually determine how they will vote?  In 2008, there were loud and strident demands for orthodoxy made by highly conservative members of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in America.  Some of these demands included the threat of denial of communion if one supported Senator Obama.

Enter Pope Francis and the five words heard around the world: “who am I to judge?” In the 2016 election what is the significance of these words for the formation of conscience and its proper reflection in a Catholic vote? Will this gentler, more inclusionary, more merciful means of instruction yield by virtue of conversion of heart greater conformity with the fullness of the Catholic instruction? And insofar as pastoral counseling occurs not on the front pages but quietly in one-on-one instruction and in prayer, does that mean that the Holy Father will be succeeding one soul at a time even as he’s losing the ratings battle by damping down the pitched controversies between the conservative hierarchy and prominent candidates and their supporters who frequently argue for an appreciation of more than one way to advance Catholic social teaching? With an approach more sensitive to the dignity of the human person, and more inclusionary, has Pope Francis facilitated the disappearance of the Catholic vote from the larger political discussion?  Who benefits from this more inward-looking instruction -- Mrs. Clinton or Mr. Trump?