When I first began writing about the Church and Islam, I devoted a lot of space to describing ways that Church leaders could resist the spread of Islam. It seemed only a matter of time until they would wake up to the need to resist. As it turned out, however, that assessment was overly optimistic.

The immediate task, as I soon learned, was not to find ways to counter Islam, but to convince the Church's hierarchy that Islam ought to be resisted. There's no use talking battle strategies to people who won't admit that they have an ideological enemy.

The enemy is not Muslims *per se*, but a belief system adhered to by the majority of Muslims, albeit with varying degrees of commitment. Although Islam does not easily lend itself to moderation, many Muslims manage to practice their faith in peaceful ways. Others merely give it lip service, and still others are on fire with a passionate zeal to spread it—by fire and the sword if necessary.

The idea of opposing dangerous ideologies is not foreign to Americans, but the idea of opposing an ideology that is also a religion is more problematic. It has become increasingly problematic now that we live in an era in which merely disagreeing with another's opinions is tantamount to a hate crime. So, just for the record, critiquing Islam does not mean that one hates Muslims. Criticizing Islam is not the same as criticizing Muslims, any more than criticizing communism is equivalent to criticizing Soviet-era Russians. One can acknowledge the humanity and good intentions of others without having to endorse their ideology. And if their ideology or belief system presents a grave danger to others, it would be wrong not to criticize it. Of course, one should employ tact and prudence when offering such criticism.

The distinction between Citizen X and his beliefs is a simple one. You do not have to respect his beliefs, but you should try to respect him as a fellow human being. Many Catholic leaders, however, have difficulty making this distinction. Rather than try, they have, in the case of Islam, simply declared it to be an upstanding fellow religion with many similarities to Christianity. That way, no one's feelings are hurt. The problem of Islamic terrorists and extremists is handled in the same way: they are assumed to be a small minority who have misunderstood the peaceful nature of their religion.

By the same token, it stands to reason that critics of Islam have also misunderstood Islam, and need to be set straight. If they persist in their obstinacy, they are dismissed as bigots and "Islamophobes." Likewise, Church officials assume that opponents of Muslim immigration must be poorly informed, or else racist and xenophobes. If they loved their neighbor, they would not challenge his beliefs or question his religious practices

Under Pope Benedict XVI there were signs—such as his Regensburg Address—that the

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Church was developing a more realistic view of Islam. But whatever ground was gained by Benedict was given up by Francis. Indeed, it seems fair to say that under Francis, the Church's understanding of Islam regressed. Perhaps the most glaring example of this regression can be found in the Pope's assertion that "authentic Islam and a proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence." It's hard to imagine any of his predecessors or any of their advisors making a similar claim.

Unfortunately, very few churchmen have taken issue with Francis's profoundly flawed view of Islam. Instead, many have joined the chorus—some out of naiveté, some out of misplaced sensitivity, and some, perhaps, out of cowardice.

Several decades have passed since the emergence of worldwide Islamic terrorist networks, and Church leaders are still clinging to a fantasy-based view of Islam. In their defense, it must be admitted that other world leaders have also been in thrall to the cult of sensitivity, and have been equally slow in giving up their dreamy narratives. For a long time, Western leaders kept repeating the mantra that Islamic terror had nothing to do with Islam. But now their tune is beginning to change. The Austrian prime minister has threatened to close one of Vienna's largest mosques, the French have shut down numerous mosques and deported several radical imams, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have effectively closed their borders to Muslim migrants, and Hungary's prime minister has unapologetically defended the Christian identity of his country.

It's strange that the Church which, because of its history, ought to be the first to know, appears to be among the last institutions to grasp that Islam is not really a religion of peace.

Or, perhaps, Church leaders do understand the dangers of Islam and have adopted a strategy of silence to protect potential victims of Islam. That's one plausible defense of their inaction. Perhaps they fear that any criticism of Islam will bring harsh reprisals against Christians living in Muslim lands. During World War II, Catholic leaders quickly learned that denunciations of Nazism brought swift and deadly reprisals against both Jews and Christians. As Nazi power increased, the Vatican developed more covert tactics for helping Jews to escape, and Catholics to resist.

One might argue that today's Catholic leaders are following a similar strategy in the hopes of mitigating the persecution of Christians and other minorities. But there's a difference. If the Church simply maintained a prudential silence about Islamic aggressions, that argument might make sense. But Church leaders have not simply refrained from criticizing Islam. Instead, they have taken every opportunity to praise Islam, to declare their solidarity with it, and to join in various Islamic initiatives, such as the campaign against "Islamophobia." Judging by the Church's great solicitude for Islam, one would think it was the most

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persecuted faith on earth, rather than one of the chief persecutors.

The Church's current Islam policy does not look like the cautious approach of one who is dealing with a dangerous enemy. It looks more like the trusting innocence of one who thinks he has no enemies. Pius XII may have maintained a prudential silence about Nazi evils once it became apparent that many innocent people would pay the price, but he never praised Nazism as a force for peace, and he certainly never declared the Church's solidarity with it.

By contrast, Church leaders and Pope Francis in particular, have become, in effect, enablers of Islam. Pope Francis has denied that Islam sanctions violence, has drawn a moral equivalence between Islam and Catholicism ("If I speak of Islamic violence, I must speak of Catholic violence"), and has campaigned for the admittance of millions of Muslim migrants into Europe. Moreover, he has criticized those who oppose his open borders policy as hard-hearted xenophobes. In return for his efforts, he has been publicly thanked by several Muslim leaders for his "defense of Islam."

One might be tempted to use the word "collaborator" instead of "enabler." But collaborator is too strong a word. In its World War II context, it implies a knowing consent to and cooperation with an evil enterprise. It seems clear to me that the pope and others in the hierarchy are enabling the spread of an evil ideology; however, it's not at all clear that they understand what they're doing. Francis, for instance, seems to sincerely believe that all religions are roughly equal in goodness. Thus for him, the spread of any religion must seem like a good thing. It's an exceedingly naïve view, but one that seems honestly held.

But one can't plead ignorance forever. Eventually, the reality of the situation will become plain to all but the most obtuse. At that point—at the point the threat is undeniable—we assume that the people in power will wake up and take the appropriate actions. But what if the awakening comes too late? The pope, for one, has shown little evidence that he will change his views on the subject. If anything, he has doubled down—recently going so far as to say that the rights of migrants trump national security. We should not look to the pope to lead the way on this issue. He seems constitutionally incapable of entertaining doubts about his Islam policy. It looks like the impetus to change course will have to come from bishops, priests and Catholic laity. They had better get busy. There is no time to waste.

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