

Undermining the church? Or *being* it?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[Some fairly rough stuff](#) in the John Podesta email hack from Clintonites Jennifer Palmieri and John Halpin. While I don't think they're 100 percent wrong (or right) on the substance, the (private) tone they take toward conservative converts to Catholicism sure is condescending.

Less convincing is the anger over [Podesta's own comments on the notion of a "Catholic Spring."](#) Voices for Progress founder Sandy Newman emailed Podesta about the idea in 2011:

There needs to be a Catholic Spring, in which Catholics themselves demand the end of a middle ages dictatorship and the beginning of a little democracy and respect for gender equality in the Catholic church.... I don't qualify to be involved and I have not thought at all about how one would "plant the seeds of the revolution," or who would plant them.

From Podesta's response:

We created Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good to organize for a moment like this. But I think it lacks the leadership to do so now. Likewise Catholics United. Like most Spring movements, I think this one will have to be bottom up.

To be clear, Podesta's "we"—[contra Sarah Pulliam Bailey's writeup](#)—isn't referring to the Clinton campaign. This is from 2011, about orgs founded years before. "We" means either the Center for American Progress, which Podesta led at the time, or his broader orbit in center-left Washington—a circle associated with the Clintons but hardly coterminous with HRC For President.

Not that this distinction would do much to dampen the outrage—outrage!—some feel. Philadelphia archbishop [Charles Chaput says](#) Clinton has “an entourage riddled with anti-Catholic bigots.” [Rod Dreher characterizes the groups](#) in question as “front groups” meant “to secretly undermine Catholic teaching.” Oh, and there’s this from Dreher: “Podesta ought to be excommunicated.”

Okay then! But the problem with these responses isn’t their tone. It’s their narrow understanding of what the church is—and what movement organizing is.

When I encounter an exchange like Podesta and Newman’s, I see it through this lens: the classic tension between defining church from the top down (by the official leadership, inheritors of institutional tradition) vs. the bottom up (by the people, without whom you don’t have a church). Protestants know this tension; it exists writ small every time a Lutheran or Methodist pastor sits in a worship committee meeting deciding whether a given idea is bad enough to be worth overruling. In the Catholic Church it’s often writ a good bit larger.

[Tweet: "The real problem is that Podesta's critics have a narrow understanding of what the church is." https://ctt.ec/g2U90+](#)

One continually gets the sense, however, that traditionalists like Chaput and Dreher see a rather different tension: between those who define the church from the top down and those who seek to destroy the church.

And such critics’ unwillingness to acknowledge bottom-up legitimacy extends beyond the “people’s church” to their understanding of political work. Now, these particular Catholic groups are very establishment Washington, hardly the grassiest of roots. But they aren’t just “front groups”! They involve actual American Catholics mobilizing others around shared values. As anyone who’s done that kind of work can tell you, it’s often a complicated mix of top-down and bottom-up, like church itself.

Podesta seems to be indicating that a more purely bottom-up movement is needed. But that doesn’t mean that the nonprofits in question are the polar opposite. And in any case, both are legitimate examples of public engagement by Catholic people. Podesta’s statement simply indicates that he understands the tension between top-down and bottom-up, institution and people. For his critics, the church equals the institution—and any group that challenges church leaders is a competing institution, seeking only to undermine. Even if that group happens to be comprised of individual Catholics.

Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, for its part, [says they're not trying to reform the church](#), merely to “promote the settled issues of the church” that Archbishop Chaput *et al.* tend to downplay. But really, even if they were a reform group, that shouldn't be controversial. That's church, or part of it.