

# One Catholic Theologian's Impression of Pope Francis

The names of Catholic theologian Hans Küng and Pope Francis are both in the news because Küng was sighted saying friendly things about the pope, and the pope was apparently saying friendly things about God and atheists.

Such stories demand or evoke in this "sighter's" mind some historical recall that helps set the news in context.

Background: In June 1966, one year after the modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council, when there were still many Catholic priests in Canada, hundreds of them gathered in Montreal for four days at then-Loyola, now part of Concordia University.

On stage were Catholic Hans Küng, Baptist Harvey Cox, Lutheran Martin E. Marty and host Father Elmer O'Brien, S.J. We guests were evidently competing for the "Chutzpah-in-Theology" Guinness record by agreeing to appear on stage for four hours with no texts, scripts or notes.

O'Brien and members of the audience made up of priests were free to ask questions or bring up topics of any kind. I ran through all the theology I knew, but learned much by listening. (Chutzpah? We were 38 years old!)

While we two Protestants did not have anything personal at stake with respect to the papacy, Küng did.

A star peritus (adviser) at the Council, he had dreamed dreams inspired by John XXIII and was seeing them dimmed by Paul VI, about whom he was ambivalent.

Those dreams turned into nightmares for Küng as John Paul II and Benedict XVI – the latter had earlier been a friend of Küng's from Tübingen, Germany – countered much that the Council had achieved. Or so, at least, it appeared to

Küng.

Which brings us to the present day, when surprises greeted those who pay attention to Catholic factions and the papacy. On Tuesday, May 21, *The National Catholic Reporter* front-paged a Küng [article](#), “The Paradox of Pope Francis.”

In it, the recently self-retired Küng told of celebrating his 85th birthday by leading off with three “astonishments” he expressed about the new pope’s style, approach and agenda.

The Catholic far-far right – for example, the Novus Ordo Watch website dedicated to “Exposing the Pseudo-Catholic Church of Vatican II” – issued a [judgment](#) headlined: “Francis Gets a Thumbs-Up from Hell’s Apostle: Apostate Hans Küng ‘Extremely Delighted’ with Election of Bergoglio as ‘Pope Francis’.”

Most conservative Catholics distrust or despise Küng, but are more moderate when referring to him.

We’ll stand by (in the Cox and Marty Protestant worlds) and watch this drama unfold. We could see that Küng’s salute came with his fingers crossed as he spelled out what it will take for Pope Francis to reform the Curia and the Episcopate.

It’s time to turn briefly to the pope. Recently, in a homily at Mass, on the basis of a text from the Gospels, he preached something generous or generous-sounding, or usable or misusable by universalists, humanists and atheists.

The headlines on our “Search” page illustrated the confusion: “Pope Francis Says Atheists Can be Saved,” “Pope Francis Suggests Atheists’ Good Deeds Get them to Heaven,” “Heaven for Atheists?” “Pope Francis did NOT Say that Atheists Will Be Saved” and many, many more.

The pope’s homily will be exegeted, refined, nuanced and debated for some time to come.

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Reaction to it and publicity about it only illustrate how eager Catholics and non- and anti-Catholics are to discuss issues about eternal destiny and the temporal life of the Church.

Küng should be happy about this turn. And so will be many others who will find the media featuring other things about the Christian world than battles over sexuality in specific and biology in general.

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