

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY, MELBOURNE SENATUS, 8 JANUARY 2017

Since the publication of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation On Love in the Family *Amoris Laetitia*, there has been some confusion in its regard. With some theologians and even a few cardinals raising questions about its teaching, I've repeatedly been asked for guidance.

So: opponents claim *Amoris Laetitia* is ambiguous or even wrong on the questions of whether there truly are types of action (such as adultery) that are intrinsically evil and so never justifiable; of whether God's commandments are always possible for us to keep; of whether the divorced and remarried who continue to live together as husband and wife must in all circumstances be refused the Sacraments by a priest. (This last I already covered in April's *Allocutio*.)

Now, anything is rightly interpreted only in context. And for Church teachings, individual documents exist in context of the whole teaching of the Church (and this is clearly Pope Francis' own intention – see e.g. *AL* 301; 307; 308). Both in the Magisterium and Scripture – even Jesus' own words (e.g. *Mt* 19:9; *Lk* 14:26) – we do occasionally find statements which might firstly seem ambiguous, so we delve deeper and interpret teachings in light of each other.

If a teaching is ambiguous between contradicting other teachings or being in harmony with them, faith tells us the latter is the true interpretation. This is definitely so for infallible teachings; but even for non-infallible teachings, there is strong presumption in favour of the harmonious interpretation (since there is presumption of the Holy Spirit's guidance).

True, in exceptional cases it can be legitimate to withhold assent from non-infallible teachings. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis* 24-31 (1990)) However, 'such a disagreement could not be justified if it were based solely upon the fact that the validity of the given teaching is not evident or upon the opinion that the opposite position would be the more probable.' (*DV* 28) The onus of proof is on the person disagreeing with the magisterial statement. In the absence of sufficient proof otherwise (at least to their own honest satisfaction), they must give the teaching the benefit of the doubt.

The grave decision to withhold assent should only be made by one sufficiently qualified, and after ample prayer and study. And even then the Church tells us 'the theologian will not present his own opinions or divergent hypotheses as though they were non-arguable conclusions' and 'will refrain from giving untimely public expression to them.' (*DV* 27) Some people, abandoning this caution, seem to be on the path to a generalised opposition to the Holy Father, with grave spiritual danger.

With *Amoris Laetitia*, non-infallible but still authoritative, there certainly exists a reasonable interpretation whereby it is in full harmony with past teachings. (This is really the natural meaning of the text, read carefully.) So there is no objective basis to claims that one *must* oppose Pope Francis' teaching, due to its supposed disharmony with earlier more authoritative teaching. We must take the interpretation whereby both old and new teachings are correct.

In summary, it remains absolute truth and unchanging Catholic teaching that sacramental marriage is indissoluble; that there do exist intrinsically evil types of action that are never objectively justifiable (such as adultery, as between someone divorced from their legitimate spouse and their new partner in a civil marriage); that the faithful can always avoid mortal sin with the help of God's grace; that a person consciously persisting in mortal sin may never

present themselves for Holy Communion. Nothing in *Amoris Laetitia* can be shown to contradict these teachings; on the contrary, various of its texts directly or indirectly reaffirm them.

Pope Francis rejects, along with St John Paul II, ‘gradualness of the law’, whereby God’s law objectively forbidding intrinsically evil acts would supposedly be subject to degrees. (295; 300) And, he says, ‘the law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace’. (295)

Some of his critics might claim he goes on to contradict this in later sections. But it is a strange interpretation that assumes an author will easily contradict himself. It is more natural to seek harmonisation – which can be found without much difficulty, as those later passages are all in the context of factors reducing the knowledge or freedom of the persons involved. (301-302) We recall that for mortal sin there must be grave matter, and the *subjective* conditions of full knowledge and fully free consent. Pope Francis leaves untouched the obvious doctrine that an adulterous union always *objectively* constitutes grave matter. However, according to Catholic teaching a person whose conscience is confused or in error still must in God’s sight follow their erroneous conscience. (cf. 303; *Catechism* 1790)

This state of error or lack of freedom may be more common than we imagine. A poorly-instructed Catholic, only gradually deepening their faith, might easily have a ‘perplexed’ conscience, whereby it seems to them they will sin no matter which of two choices they make. This never truly happens with God’s law, but someone can wrongly imagine they are in that situation – in which case, whichever choice they make is not really a free choice to sin. (cf. 273; 301)

A priest must lead people to the full truth of God’s law, helping them to form a *correct* conscience. (303) Yet as the Pontifical Council for the Family explained under John Paul II, this would best be a gradual process, if he foresees that the person, confronted with the full explanation of doctrine in their present state, would most likely simply move from good faith into mortal sin. (*Vademecum for Confessors* 3.8 (1997))

I have been dealing with whether the controverted teachings of *Amoris Laetitia* are in fact true. This is a separate issue from whether those teachings’ overall practical effects at this time are likely to be positive: was the Pope’s teaching action prudent, or has it created more confusion than it was worth? But it is hardly the task of every Catholic to debate the *prudence* of every action of popes, past or present. We have quite enough to do discerning how God wants us personally to act, without worrying about the prudent course for every other person as well. And whichever way, this is water under the bridge.

The truth of *Amoris Laetitia* is also a separate issue from whether some further clarification from the Pope on its meaning might be helpful, as has been requested, to rule out false interpretations. After all, even Jesus’ teachings can be misinterpreted. And as there have in fact been various misinterpretations of *Amoris Laetitia* the Magisterium may at some point choose to further clarify its teachings. That is for the free discernment of the Holy Father. We ourselves certainly can and should help clear up any misinterpretations among people we encounter, while also promoting the fruitful teachings of *Amoris Laetitia*, and its beautiful message of mercifully seeking out the lost sheep.