

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY, MELBOURNE SENATUS, 5 FEBRUARY 2017

Last month I spoke about Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), answering some of the questions people have raised with me. As I explained, the several passages some have found confusing can be harmonised with the Church's existing teachings without too much difficulty, especially read in context of other passages in *Amoris Laetitia* itself.

Of course, a pope can't simply invent new doctrines, but always acts to interpret God's Word, handed on in Scripture and Tradition; Pope Francis, naturally, claims no differently. It's ridiculous to imagine a new pope could just wipe the slate clean and abolish past teachings – he's the servant of the Word of God, not its master.

As Vatican II tells us, the Magisterium of Pope and Bishops 'is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed'. (*Dei Verbum* 10)

Still, this doesn't mean that it is *our* place to stand in judgment whether Magisterial teachings match Scripture and Tradition as they must – this would really just be to substitute our own fallible private interpretations.

Historically, divisions among Christians have often grown due to perceptions that one side or another of the Gospel truth was being neglected. To keep the full balanced picture and build unity, it's good to clearly proclaim the truths that opponents of *Amoris Laetitia* fear are at risk:

So firstly, the indissolubility of marriage. This is restated repeatedly by *Amoris Laetitia* itself (52, 53, 62, 77, 86, 123, 178, 243): it's quite incorrect to accuse Pope Francis of watering this down.

Secondly, concerning what are called intrinsically evil actions: St John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (VS) ('The Splendour of Truth') cleared up numerous confusions in moral thinking, most especially reaffirming the Church's teaching, following Scripture, that there exist 'intrinsically evil' types of action (such as adultery, blasphemy, or direct killing of the innocent) – that is to say, acts evil of their very nature, that are never objectively justifiable, regardless of circumstances or supposed good intentions. (VS 79-83) There is no 'gradualness of the law' whereby God's prohibition of these actions would somehow admit of degrees. (John Paul II *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) 34; Francis AL 295, 300)

'It would be a very serious error to conclude... that the Church's teaching is essentially only an "ideal" which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated...' (John Paul II VS 103) And God's grace always makes it possible to avoid deliberately sinning against what we know to be his law: '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.' (Francis AL 295) 'Keeping God's law in particular situations can be difficult, extremely difficult, but it is never impossible. This is the constant teaching of the Church's tradition, and was expressed by the Council of Trent...' (John Paul II VS 102)

Thirdly and finally, concerning conscience, which people sometimes use to justify all sorts of things: it's true to say we must always follow at the time what our sincere conscience tells us is God's will – even though we might later learn our conscience was mistaken. As long as we're not to blame for our own error (for example, by not sufficiently seeking out the truth in the first place) then we're not to blame for our wrong action done in ignorance, and in a sense, it's what God expected of us (since we *thought* it was the right thing). (Cf. *AL* 303)

However, rather than speak of the primacy of conscience as some writers do, it's clearer to speak of the primacy of truth. St John Paul explained the subordination of conscience to truth: 'It is always from the truth that the dignity of conscience derives. In the case of the correct conscience, it is a question of the *objective truth* received by man; in the case of the erroneous conscience, it is a question of what man, mistakenly, *subjectively* considers to be true... It is never acceptable...to make the moral value of an act performed with a true and correct conscience equivalent to the moral value of an act performed by following the judgement of an erroneous conscience.' (*VS* 63)

Even if we're not to blame, the action we do following a mistaken conscience, 'does not cease to be an evil, a disorder in relation to the truth about the good...Thus, before feeling easily justified in the name of our conscience, we should reflect on the words of the Psalm: "Who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults" (*Ps* 19:12). There are faults which we fail to see but which nevertheless remain faults, because we have refused to walk towards the light.' (*VS* 63)

And then (*VS* 64) St John Paul quotes Vatican II: 'In forming their consciences the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth.' (*Declaration on Religious Liberty* 14) So fully in line with all this, Pope Francis insists in *Amoris Laetitia* that the Church must always proclaim the full truth about marriage, avoiding 'any kind of relativism', (*AL* 307) and priests must guide people to form consciences enlightened by truth. (*AL* 303)

Next time I'll conclude by speaking about worthy reception of Holy Communion, where once again, God's law is obviously unchanged that someone consciously persisting in mortal sin must never in any circumstances approach Holy Communion, or be encouraged to do so by a priest, until they've repented, with a firm purpose of sinning no more.

As legionaries, we can give a great example of fidelity to all the Church's teachings, working to heal any sort of division we might encounter, and building, under Pope Francis, Successor of Peter, charity and unity in the truth.