

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

We've been discussing some debates around Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* (*AL*). It's been a necessary discussion: people have asked me about it, and a few Catholics, influenced by criticisms of the Pope, seem at risk of an attitude of generalised opposition to him (just like other Catholics in earlier pontificates). That's always disastrous for any Catholic – and for a Legionary in particular, the Legion ethos would founder without faithfulness to the Magisterium.

The last part of our discussion concerns worthy reception of Holy Communion. (This unfortunately gets a bit technical, because both the Pope's writing and some of the criticisms of it are themselves fairly technical.) So first, restating obvious Catholic teaching – someone consciously persisting in mortal sin must never in any circumstances present themselves for Communion. That derives from St Paul (*1 Cor* 11:27-28), and St John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (*EE*), strongly reaffirmed it: '...“I beseech, beg and implore that no one draw near to this sacred table with a sullied and corrupt conscience. Such an act, in fact, can never be called ‘communion’, not even were we to touch the Lord's body a thousand times over, but ‘condemnation’, ‘torment’ and ‘increase of punishment’”. (*EE* 36, quoting St John Chrysostom.)

So if only for their own welfare, those conscious of mortal sin (committed, that is, with full knowledge and consent) absolutely must repent before receiving, with a firm purpose of sinning no more. Pope John Paul also re-stated the rule that prior confession in the Sacrament of Reconciliation was required. (*EE* 36)

Without spelling this out all over again, Pope Francis clearly presupposes it when, speaking of those in irregular marriage situations, he limits possible reception of Communion to those whose ongoing actions do *not* fulfil all the conditions of mortal sin: '...one thing must always be taken into account, lest anyone think that the demands of the Gospel are in any way being compromised. The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations' from which we understand that not all those who outwardly appear to be grave sinners are necessarily '...living in a state of mortal sin'. (*AL* 301; cf. fn. 336)

Now, the responsibility of the *recipient* is a different question from the responsibility of the *minister* of Communion. So firstly, a priest directly encouraging an unrepentant mortal sinner to sacrilegiously receive would be a false shepherd doing spiritual harm. True, it's long been held that the priest mustn't refuse one coming forward whom he knows to be a sinner *privately*: he's not authorised to publicise the sin. (St Thomas Aquinas gave the example of Jesus giving Communion to Judas.)

Still, if someone's continuing *public* conduct is objectively in grave violation of God's law, the Church's norm remains that the minister must refuse them. And unlike with the *recipient's* responsibility, that's even the case where there might be no mortal sin, due to a lack of full knowledge or freedom. For one thing, that's to reduce the risk of others being misled about Church teaching, if they saw an apparent public sinner receiving. (Canon 915; John Paul II *Familiaris Consortio* 84; *EE* 37)

However, this last rule, though long-standing Church law (and obviously influenced by some divine laws), can't itself be shown to be an absolute of divine law with no exceptions conceivable. So with many limitations (*AL* 297-300) Pope Francis seems to allow some leeway in its application for those in irregular marriage situations, (*AL* fn. 351) if scandal is avoided (*AL* 299) and the priest has discerned the subjective conditions of full knowledge and freedom required for mortal sin aren't present. (*AL* 305; see Canon 844 for parallel cases.) (At least that seems the most natural interpretation of the Pope's words, though a more conservative reading is also possible.)

This has been the most controversial point for some traditionalists, who maintain that the Pope can't permit this, and the priest must always refuse Communion to the divorced and remarried, regardless of their subjective responsibility. But really, it is within his supreme power to allow this. Unlike the responsibility of the *recipient persisting in mortal sin* not to receive, this action of the *minister* (regarding those *not* guilty of mortal sin) concerns flexible Church law rather than absolute divine law.

So why has Pope Francis done this? To make it easier to break God's law on marriage? No, to provide greater access to Eucharistic grace so that struggling people can gradually better understand and keep God's life-giving law. Will it work that way in practice? That's his call. The nature of the Eucharist, we gather from St Paul, makes it a 'harmful' medicine for those conscious of being in mortal sin. But this isn't so for those already in sanctifying grace (perhaps objectively breaking God's law, but lacking full knowledge or freedom). So the Pope writes: 'By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God'. (*AL* 305)

Sometimes we might imagine faithfulness to Catholic teaching always means taking the path of greater strictness. But like the Gospel, Catholic doctrine is a balance. Heresies like Novatianism, Donatism and Jansenism erred not by being too lax but too rigorous. And various popes have done things that could superficially have been seen as illegitimate new departures, but which were in fact valid and now just seem normal to us.

Our true path is to veer neither left nor right, but to stay faithful to Christ and his Vicar, the Pope – whoever that may be. This Catholic attitude is derided by some traditionalists with the term 'ultramontanism', a historical position that exaggerated papal authority. True, as previously discussed, obviously things a pope says unofficially aren't intended by him as magisterial and binding, and in exceptional circumstances someone can even legitimately withhold assent from a non-infallible magisterial teaching.

However, we should always keep in mind this permanently valid declaration of the First Vatican Council: '...the Roman Church, by the disposition of the Lord, holds the sovereignty of ordinary power.....Regarding this jurisdiction, the pastors and the faithful...are bound by a duty of hierarchical subjection and of true obedience, not only in things which pertain to faith and morals, but also in those which pertain to the discipline and government of the Church spread over the whole world...This is the doctrine of Catholic truth from which no one can deviate and keep his faith and salvation.' (*Pastor aeternus* DS 3060)