

Pope Francis and the Ultra Conservatives – Francis is Right – “They Don’t Get It”

RECENTLY FOUR CARDINALS (Carlo Caffarra, Raymond Burke, Walter Brandmüller, Joachim Meisner) presented Pope Francis and Cardinal Gerhard Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with a series of five questions or “*dubia*” (or *doubts*) requesting that he clarify certain sections of his recent Apostolic Exhortation, [*Amoris Laetitia*](#) (The Joy of Love) which, they claim has caused “grave disorientation and great confusion” in the Church.

The central issue revolves around the admissibility of divorced and remarried couples to Holy Communion. The four cardinals assert that *Amoris Laetitia* seems to contradict earlier papal teachings, specifically *Familiaris Consortio* given by Pope John Paul II. Specifically, they point out concern with Chapter Eight paragraphs 300-305, which they claim are being used by some bishops to permit divorced and remarried couples to receive the sacraments in violation of perennial Church teaching.

Pope Francis is accused of being fuzzy, unclear and dogmatically in error. The real problem really is that people who are making such allegations, for the most part, “don’t get it”.

The Church just passed through a “Year of Mercy”. Presently, the entire universe is resounding with the echo of Divine Logos: “Mercy-Mercy-Mercy” and of His Mother who is asking for reparation from her children for the sins of others, asking penance from those who love God for those who are steeped in sin. Our Lord and Our Lady are asking for love, mercy,

compassion, and sacrifice for sinners while Catholic ultra-conservatives are calling for their heads, calling for punishment, divine retribution, alienation and chastisement. The pope is correct, they “don’t get it”. But neither do the ultra-liberals who make excuses for sins, condone them, militantly embrace their own sin and that of others and refuse to ask for forgiveness – they don’t get it either.

The Holy Father is the Vicar of Christ – His representative on earth. As such, he is expected to mirror the wishes, will, and desires of his King. And it is the King’s will, at this special moment of human history, that mercy be the theme of His Church, that mercy be showered over all the earth from the rising of the sun until its setting in every clime and place. Jesus, Himself, revealed to Saint Faustina that this gift of mercy is His last gift to the Church before He returns in glory as the world’s judge.

Until that time, between now and then, He desires Mercy, especially mercy for the greatest sinners. Thus, He further revealed to Saint Faustina that those who have the most right to His mercy are the most grievous sinners:

“Let the greatest sinners place their trust in My mercy. They have the right before others to trust in the abyss of My mercy. ... Souls that make an appeal to My mercy delight Me. To such souls I grant even more graces than they ask” [\(Diary of Saint Faustina Para 1146\)](#).

Jesus has a

“[...special compassion for the worst sinners](#), because they are most in need of His mercy.”

Pope Francis is keenly aware of God’s mercy and of His desire

to extend it everywhere, especially toward hardened sinners. He is acting accordingly as the Vicar of Christ; he expects Catholic clergy and laity to do the same. God wants forgiveness, mercy and compassion, not judgment, severity and legalism.

The Hour of Mercy is a time to pronounce, to pronounce the good news, *not* to renounce.

“For I came not to judge the world, but to save the world”
([John 12:47](#), [John 3:17](#)).

With this Message of Mercy ingrained in mind, it is easy to unravel the confusion. We are living in an Hour of Mercy. Mercy is the universal theme of the Church being announced and lived by its universal shepherd. The pope is *not* in error; he has *not* forgotten or rejected earlier church teaching about the sanctity of marriage and the sinfulness of illicit union.

However, **he is teaching as a pastor**, as a “Good Shepherd”, the good shepherd who has “come to save that which was lost”, the good shepherd who leaves ninety-nine righteous people and goes in search of the one that is lost because **it is the will of the Father than none of his sheep be lost**:

“What think you? If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them should go astray: doth he not leave the ninety-nine in the mountains, and go to seek that which is gone astray? And if it so be that he find it: Amen I say to you, he rejoiceth more for that, than for the ninety-nine that went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father, who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish” ([Matthew 18:12-14](#))

Now, if no one goes after them, the stray and sinning sheep, but instead reject, criticize, judge and in their self-righteousness ostracize them, how are they to be saved? The

pope unlike the self-righteous Pharisees who murmur, saying: ["This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them"](#), is willing to embrace a sinner with mercy and compassion; mercy and compassion are slow to judge but quick to love.

If the first thing a person does *vis a vis* a hardened sinner is judge, the relationship is over. **The quickest way to the mind is through the heart – it does not work the other way for most people**, especially people who have been conditioned by a culture of sin, by a constant barrage of propaganda and manipulation, psychological warfare by means of association etc. In such a world as this, there are many sheep gone astray and they need a shepherd. If clergy and lay evangelists act with a judgmental attitude, few will be evangelized.

Modern men and women are like sheep in desperate need of a wise and loving friend to shepherd them; however, they often remain without a shepherd because the shepherds on the extreme left are often too blinded by concupiscence and irascibility to properly lead anyone, while those on the ultra-conservative right are often too busy satisfying themselves intellectually and too judgmental to have compassion.

What is the attitude of Jesus the Good Shepherd? When He looked upon the vast throng of lost humanity, He had COMPASSION ON THEM" because they were lost and in agony – being lost in deep sin is not fun!

"And seeing the multitudes, he had compassion on them: because they were distressed" ([Matthew 9:36](#)).

It was then that He said to His apostles, ["The harvest indeed is great, but the labourers are few"](#).

Francis is acting like a good laborer in the Hour of Mercy. He is acting like St. John Bosco, a saint who did get it, a saint who reached out to the street boys, the gang-bangers, of

Northern Italy and beyond when no one else, including many clergy, wanted anything to do with them – too upsetting to a comfortable life-style, too filthy to bring home – too risky to deal with – too impure to mingle with their cultural refinement. St. John Bosco had many adages, a man full of folk-wisdom. One of his many: **“The time is long, but the cure is sure”**. Dealing with sin requires time and patience, patience that grows out of love and mercy. With love, with mercy, over time healing can occur; it does not occur (in most people) by a quick intellectual fix following some sage advice from a counselor – this is for relatively advanced people, which a sinner – lost in sin – is not.

At this time in human history, a time of MERCY, the Church must do its evangelical work pastorally. To fail pastorally is to fail as a shepherd. Shepherds *pastor* sheep, they do not discuss philosophical and theological treatises with them. Clergy formation involves much detailed philosophical and theological formation and deep intellectual growth. *The proper place for this type of discussion is the seminary*. It is hoped that before a man leaves a seminary that he makes a connection between his intellectual formation and the pastoral care he must give to his sheep. Intellectual learning is intended to facilitate his work as a pastor. A college professor is *not* a pastor. Many clergy and laity, usually among the ultra-conservative, the crowd accusing Pope Francis of heresy etc., have failed to make the transition. They act as if they were still in the seminary; instead of love, mercy and compassion for sinners they are deeply dissatisfied with the state of things and want to lecture people about their faults and especially about the faults, shortcomings and theological errors of the pope and bishops; indeed they want to lecture the pope himself. Instead of seeing a soul to be saved, they see a sinner to be disciplined and a pope to be castigated for not being more severe.

Correction and discipline should and must be forthcoming, but they work better after a relationship has been established on

the basis of mercy and love. In the last analysis, love is greater than knowledge, love alone endures for eternity.

Saint Francis de Sales understood this well: **“More bees are attracted by a spoonful of honey than by a barrel of vinegar.”**

Some people, for whatever reason, just do not get this – do not get the intersection of learning and knowledge with love and mercy, the intersection of dogmatic and pastoral theology, the intersection of heart and mind.

Then, infected by this inability, they proceed to read papal teachings such as *Amoris Laetitia*. Because they “don’t get it”, they approach the document as if it were an *intellectual exercise*, when in fact, it is a *pastoral exhortation*.

They just cannot put the whole thing together. Like some Protestants who cherry-pick scriptures picking passages that support their point and neglecting or ignoring others that do not support their position, they act like the others do not exist.

Practical and Speculative Intellect- Have the Clergy forgotten Their Philosophical Education?

Every priest and many lay men and women have studied philosophy, but afterward many forget what they learned or fail to apply it to their service of others. Every priest and student of classical and scholastic philosophy has learned (or should have learned) the difference between the “speculative intellect” (SI) and the “practical intellect” (PI). In short, the SI begins its work by grasping first principles and reasoning from them to reach logical conclusions that must be accepted if the principles are true and the logic is correct (logical deduction from premise to conclusion: A-B therefore C). The PI operates differently; it is not involved in deductive logic, a purely intellectual exercise. Rather,

the PI involves the intellect in its *application mode*, that is when the intellect applies truths grasped by the SI to everyday practice. The SI operates in the intellectual realm of acquired wisdom, the realm of dogmatic truths that are discovered by the intellect BEFORE they are afterward applied outside the mind to practical everyday reality, where theory must meet practice if it is to be successful. The SI operates interiorly, the PI must operate in the real exterior world. The mind and the world are two very different places.

The PI does *not* begin with logical first principles, it begins with the end or the conclusion reached by the SI as a result of reasoning to conclusions from principles, discursive logic. A logical conclusion or end is the last thing discovered by the SI, but it is the first principle of the PI, which must make prudential judgments about which means are to be chosen to reach a desired end. The human mind *necessarily ascends* to a logical conclusion derived by way of the SI, but the means derived by the PI to achieve a derived end are only probable. No one necessarily ascends to them because many other means may be discovered, some better than others, some faulty some not – no one knows for sure if the means they choose will actually result in the acquisition of the end – they are only probably sure. Thus, for the SI the end is last in the order of acquisition (the end or fruit of as long train of thought), but for the PI, the end is first in the order of operation because without the end no one would know where they were going or how to derive means to get there.

Thus, the work of the practical intellect begins with the end and is calculative and probable while that of the SI begins with first principles to discover an end and it is rational and certain of its conclusions. That is, the SI necessarily ascends to its conclusions in order to avoid a logical contradiction. The SI begins with first principles to reach certain conclusions, but the PI begins with ends to reach probable conclusions.

For example, if after an exhaustive study of the human soul, the SI determines that human beings should pursue happiness as an end then it is up to the PI to determine just how the end of happiness should be achieved. To achieve happiness, the PI must first know what happiness is and then figure out how among a world of constant change and flux that happiness can actually be attained. Because **circumstances are always changing, what works in one time or place might *not* work in another. Even if the SI discovers necessary truths, no progress can be made toward their attainment if the PI is deficient.** Knowing that happiness is an end to be achieved is a “black and white” issue – it is clear. But knowing how to achieve happiness in a given place or time among an endless array of possibilities and constantly shifting contingencies is a very difficult exercise. It is this later that Pope Francis is concerned about; nothing is black and white in the practical realm of constantly shifting contingencies i.e., the pastoral realm. Even if a priest, or lay evangelist, is certain of the highest truths, this certainty is practically useless unless the PI is capable of making prudential judgments about how best to achieve these truths in diverse environments and among diverse people and cultures.

Clearly knowing the truth, knowing black and white dogma is necessary but insufficient for the work of evangelization, which is the major work of the Church!

Pastoral theology depends upon the PI as much as it depends on the SI, perhaps moreso. Pastors must deal with constantly changing realities and shifting situations that effect how they might or might not succeed given a set of unique circumstances. Moreover, before a practical or prudential judgement can be made, facts must be gathered, the greater the quantity and quality of the information the better. Clearly, it is a mortal sin to divorce, remarry, and receive the Eucharist. This much is black and white. However, there are subjective and mitigating circumstances that might alter the

judgement if they were known.

In the case of human moral decision making, the acquisition of facts presupposes proper relationships, making prudential or practical judgments requires information and knowledge of unique circumstances. Pope Francis is coming from this perspective, the pastoral perspective of the PI, while those who are confused are coming at the question dogmatically from the black and white understanding of the SI.

The latter *only* works in the classroom, in the university or seminary where truths are being ascertained and acquired. **The real world, however, is not a place of truth acquisition, it is a place of truth implementation,** implementation of truths previously acquired in the classroom. A parish is not a seminary; it is a place of practical reality where souls must be served and saved among a constantly shifting array of unique circumstances. If a pastor fails to acquire this information because he fails at relationships, his parish will most likely fail and his sheep, will be poorly served. He cannot treat them as a pedagogue teaching theology lessons; first the heart must be reached. This requires *mercy* and *compassion*, especially in a time as far gone as the present.

Practical decisions – pastoral decisions are *not* black and white. Priests must realize that they are no longer in the seminary. Moral casuistry (application of speculative or dogmatic truths to everyday contingencies) is always probable. While theological truths are unchanging and universal, their application is ever-changing and relative. Thou shall not kill is a black and white clear moral precept. However, what about self-defense, what about soldiers defending their country, what about the mitigating circumstances of killing in the heat of passion versus pre-meditated murder etc. Things become quite complex when the move is made from speculative black and white principles to the grey area of their application – the realm of pastoral theology.

[“Some priestly formation programs run the risk of educating](#)

in the light of overly clear and distinct ideas, and therefore to act within limits and criteria that are rigidly defined ... and that set aside concrete situations."

In short, people complaining that they are confused want everything to be black and white as Pope Francis asserts.

"In life, not everything is black over white or white over black. No! The shades of gray prevail in life. We must teach them (seminarians) to discern in this gray area" ([National Federation of Priests Councils](#)).

No one can make a practical moral judgement without first acquiring the facts of a case (the gray area). But no one can adequately acquire the facts from a person living in sin if he or she does not first dismiss and overlook many faults and repulsive behaviors, which enable him to withhold judgement and enter into a relationship necessary for the acquisition of information and to make correct assessment of the state of a soul. If instead, a priest makes snap judgments based on black and white dogmatic truths pertaining to right and wrong behavior, relationships will be strained and end prematurely, or fail to develop at all, in which case there is no hope of conversion, the very purpose of evangelization.

Many rigid ultra-conservatives are looking at Francis' teachings through the lens of dogmatic theology rather than through the lens of mercy and compassion, pastoral theology, which is often very confusing. Unfortunately, practical pastoral decisions are rarely black and white. Dealing with divorced and remarried couples is a pastoral issue. It certainly involves the application of black and white speculative or dogmatic principles, but no case is the same; shifting circumstances require prudential insight because sometimes circumstances that appear objectively sinful might be morally licit, such as the case of divorced-remarried couples living together chastely as brother and sister. If a

Christian fails to acquire practical knowledge of the facts, in this case, a chaste living arrangement, but quickly jumps to a black and white conclusion thereby condemning an innocent couple, he or she sins not only against justice, but also against charity. It is necessary to see both with the eyes of the intellect and with the eyes of the heart. One **without** the other is always deficient. **Speculative wisdom must be united to and enlightened by emotive love** because:

*“Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices **with** the truth” ([1 Corinthians 13: 4-6](#)).*

Priestly learning does not involve education alone – it involves education and formation. EDUCATION in knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, and FORMATION in self mastery, mercy and love. Without the later, priests and laity alike are “confused” and tend to see everything in “black and white.” The remedy is growth in mercy and love as Pope Francis continually stresses!

END OF PART ONE – TO BE CONTINUED

PART TWO WILL EXAMINE THE ALLEGED DIFFICULTIES WITHIN “AMORIS LAETITIA” IN LIGHT OF WHAT WAS PRESENTED IN PART ONE