

Pope Francis and The Ultra Conservatives Continued

AS PRESENTED IN PART ONE, Pope Francis is doing his theology from an integral heart-mind unity, that is, integral dogmatic and pastoral theology. Because pastoral decision making is often “fuzzy” because it deals with “grey” matters that are not black and white, a document such as [*Amoris Laetitia*](#) , is also somewhat obtuse. Nonetheless, at every point there is an ambiguity there is also a clarification close by or previously stated in the document. Often times the ambiguity is on the part of the reader who misses what the pope is actually saying. His method is not to write this exhortation in black or white but to leave it somewhat grey because pastoral theology is itself somewhat grey. However, for those who can see in grey, it is not overly difficult to discern what the pope is communicating.

Thus, it is necessary to put on a grey lens before proceeding to review the document.

Having done so, it should be possible to read the so-called problematic paragraphs and interpret them pastorally in order to show that they are indeed clear enough. Pope Francis’ writing style is, in fact, rather ingenious; it could be argued that it is an illustrative exercise birthing pastoral thinking. That is, it is intended to induce pastoral thought in the mind of the reader, if he or she is capable and willing to engage in that type of thought rather than the simple black and white thought of dogmatic theology that many have grown accustomed to.

Most Catholics are aware of, or have heard that, the Church’s approach to scripture is “Systematic”. Systematic theology is uniquely Catholic theology. It means that

every scripture must be interpreted in the light of all the other scriptures because scripture forms one unified whole, one body of infallible truth. No scripture should be interpreted in isolation from other scriptures. Most certainly scripture cannot be interpreted correctly if other passages are ignored or treated as if they did not exist.

This is the case with *Amoris Laetitia*. The document must be read and interpreted in its entirety not in parts, “cherry picking” difficult passages and interpreting them in isolation from the rest of the document, from points that have been made elsewhere that clarify the issue.

For example, Pope Francis specifically states:

“This discernment (to live together under the conditions just stated and perhaps others) can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church.... These attitudes are essential for avoiding the grave danger of misunderstandings, such as the notion that any priest can quickly grant “exceptions”, or that some people can obtain sacramental privileges in exchange for favours” (para 300).

Clearly, exceptions are infrequent and not easily given! Moreover, according to Pope Francis

“It must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule. That would not only lead to an intolerable casuistry, but would endanger the very values which must be preserved with special care” (para 304).

As will be illustrated below, Pope Francis upholds traditional church teaching on marriage; his intent is to uphold the “very values which must be preserved with special care”. Although his pastoral theology might at first glance appear to be leading in another direction, a close and systematic read will

clearly show that it does not; as he states; “it may never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church. *Amoris Laetitia* does not prescind from the Gospel. The difficult paragraphs must adhere to the perennial truths upheld by the Church according to the pope’s own statements within the document (para 300 and 304).

THE SO-CALLED DIFFICULT PARAGRAPHS (300-305)

Para 300

*“Priests have the duty to “accompany [the divorced and remarried] in helping them to **understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church** and the guidelines of the bishop... What we are speaking of is **a process of accompaniment** (the couple is not alone) and discernment which “guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. **Conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and on what steps can foster it and make it grow”***

1. “Given that gradualness is not in the law itself (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 34), this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church.... These attitudes are essential for avoiding the grave danger of misunderstandings, such as the notion that any priest can quickly grant “exceptions”, or that some people can obtain sacramental privileges in exchange for favours.”

Actually, the entire dilemma is solved right here. Francis clearly states that in helping divorced and remarried understand their situation, priests must do so **“according to the teaching of the Church”**. He is concerned

about the establishment of a relationship so that there can actually be a **“process of accompaniment and discernment”** necessary to **“guide the faithful”** to the truth of their situation as they stand before God. It is due to such a close bond between priest and couple that it becomes possible to eventually form a “correct judgement” , a correct judgement that is highly unlikely unless a relationship exists in which a priest pastor is guiding a couple to the truth about their relationship before God, how to improve it, and what steps can be taken to obtain fuller participation in the life of the Church – a judgmental attitude practically makes all of this impossible.

Para 301

“For an adequate understanding of the possibility and need of special discernment in certain “irregular” situations, 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. Hence it is can no longer simply (automatically) be said that all those in any “irregular” situation” are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule (which is as mitigating circumstance-but there are other more detailed and better ones). A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding “its inherent values” or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin (for example not being able to live singly and afford taking care of the children thus sending them to public school because the Catholic school is not affordable or because a father figure is needed due to family alienation coupled with living in a crime ridden neighborhood.)

Because it is clear that their are mitigating circumstances

such as fear, duress, ignorance etc. there is room for mitigation in the case of the divorced and remarried.

*“That servant who knew his master’s will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely; and the servant who was **ignorant** of his master’s will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating **shall be beaten only lightly**. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more” ([Luke 12:47-48](#)).*

An irregular situation is not necessary a sinful situation.

In fact, Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary lived in a highly “irregular situation”; could they receive Holy Communion?

An unmarried couple or a couple married civilly might be living in continence or earnestly striving to overcome their physical attraction – it does happen. Francis’ point, I believe, is that continence is more likely to be achieved to the extent that the couple shares a close relationship with a priest and participates in the life of the Church as long as they are committed to improving and striving to do so including regular confession, prayer and penance.

Para 302

*“The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly mentions these factors: “imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by **ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments**, and other psychological or social factors” (that inhibit a free decision necessary for a “human act” versus “an act of man” – a human act requires both knowledge and willful consent, an act of man is an act done by a human but under compulsion without a free will or with a free will but in ignorance). In another paragraph, the Catechism refers once again to circumstances which mitigate moral responsibility, and*

mentions at length *“affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, **conditions of anxiety** or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate moral culpability. Under certain circumstances people find it very difficult to act differently. Therefore, while upholding a general rule, it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions or decisions is not the same in all cases.”*

Francis is merely pointing out the more common mitigating factors, but he is not excusing anyone; they are still “responsible” for their actions and decisions; however, before any black and white judgments are made, mitigating factors should be considered and if applicable, applied.

Para 303

“Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one’s pastor, and to encourage an ever greater trust in God’s grace. Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal. In any event, let us recall that this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized.”

An “enlightened conscience” must be sought and its chance of occurring is greatly increased when a priest is present and able to act as a spiritual guide. The pastor can help a couple recognize and cooperate with God’s grace to become

consistently better. It is not enough to tell a couple that they do not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel and then leave them – that is a black and white dogmatic judgment, not a loving pastoral one. Pastoral care begins when a priest discerns the situation and if after discerning it he does make such a judgement, he is in a position to now help educate and form the consciences of the couple before him. It is too easy to merely say you are sinning and cannot receive the sacraments – this is not love!

Para 304

*“I earnestly ask that we always recall a teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas and learn to incorporate it in our pastoral discernment: “Although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects (in the head it is all perfect but not in reality)... In matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles; and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all... The principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail. **It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded** or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all (Summa Theologiae, I-II, q. 94, art. 4.236) particular situations.”*

Now, appealing to Saint Thomas Aquinas, Pope Francis is appealing to perhaps the all time favorite of the ultra-conservative crowd (one of my own too). The pope is simply making the point that was iterated in Part One about pastoral and dogmatic theology, speculative and practical thought and the necessity of fusing heart and mind in decision making. It is clear that Pope Francis knows what he is talking about, he is the Vicar of Christ after-all. Quoting Aquinas, he clearly states that “ **general rule, principle or truth can “never be**

disregarded.”

HOW MUCH CLEARER CAN IT GET?

However, in their particular “*formulation*” or application, general rules are no longer universal. This is not the pope’s opinion; it is the constant teaching of Aristotelian Philosophy and Scholastic Theology. Aquinas’ “[*Treatise on Man*](#)” (the human soul) and “Aristotle’s [*De Anima*](#)” are tough reading, perhaps this helps explain why some ultra-conservatives do not get it. Nonetheless, the issue is clear and the pope has firm grasp of metaphysics and the essence, powers and operations of the human soul a highly abstract and difficult intellectual attainment; few come away having mastered it like the pope has.

PARA 304 Continued

“At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule. That would not only lead to an intolerable casuistry, but would endanger the very values which must be preserved with special care.”

Again, Pope Francis is simply correct, a particular practical discernment cannot be elevated to the level of a general rule, to the level of an absolute truth or an ontological judgement. This again is proof enough that he does *not* condone illicit relationships. No matter how great a particular mitigating circumstance might be, it can never replace the general truth given by Christ to man in both the natural and divine laws. **If a licit mitigating circumstance cannot rise to the level of a general truth then certainly the licit but potentially illicit behavior that it makes acceptable can never rise to the level of a general truth – that would “endanger the very values which must be preserved with special care.”** The pope is saying so much clearly right here – why all the confusion?

Pope Francis is in absolute support of the truth and demonstrates it to wise and loving eyes that can look and see. In fact, he even states that the very truths and “values” that we hold dear *“must be preserved with special care.”* He is not excusing sin; he is mercifully and pastorally guiding souls to the best of his ability within the objective parameters of the law, stretching it to its horizontal bounds as Christ spread His arms on the cross.

Para 305

*“For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in “irregular” situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church’s teachings, “sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families”. **Let us remember that “a small step** (like having the couple sleep in separate rooms) (making a house rule and vowing to stick to it) (vowing that they will always be fully dressed in front of each other; agreeing to have separate rooms etc.) **in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties”** (that is, a life where everything is in order and abundantly provided for. One might be a life fully screwed up, dysfunctional family, unformed conscience, the whole thing, the other hardly a care). The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality.”*

FOOTNOTE THAT GOES WITH PARA 305:

“In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. Hence, “I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather

an encounter with the Lord's mercy" (Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium [24 November 2013], 44: AAS 105 [2013], 1038). I would also point out that the Eucharist "is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak" (ibid., 47: 1039)."

Christ is merciful, so merciful that he wants to excuse sinners. He did not come to condemn them but to forgive them. To the extent that a couple feels love and compassion coming at them from the Church community, they are all the more likely to open up and cooperate with their pastor. Of course, the pope is presuming that "small steps" in difficult situations are being made, that confession is taking place, and people are making a real effort to improve – like a penitent homosexual trying to refrain from illicit relationships and going to confession, he or she might backslide, in fact, falls are expected. But to the extent that they are sincere, penitent and really trying, to that extent the mercy of God is showered over them, communion is denied to no one who has confessed and is sincerely trying to live a proper life.

Thus, Cardinal Ratzinger taught

*"If the divorced are remarried civilly, they find themselves in a situation that **objectively contravenes God's law**. Consequently, they cannot receive Holy Communion as long as this situation persists. ... The faithful who persist in such a situation **may receive Holy Communion only after obtaining sacramental absolution** ... when for serious reasons, for example, for the children's upbringing, a man and a woman cannot satisfy the obligation to separate, **they take on themselves the duty to live in complete continence**, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples."*

Pope John Paul II stated the same:

*“Reconciliation in the sacrament of Penance which would open the way to the Eucharist, can only be granted to those who, repenting of having broken the sign of the Covenant and of fidelity to Christ, are **sincerely ready to undertake a way of life that is no longer in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage**. This means, in practice, that when, for serious reasons, such as for example the children’s upbringing, **a man and a woman cannot satisfy the obligation to separate, they “take on themselves the duty to live in complete continence, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples”** ([Familiaris Consortio, 84](#)).*

Pope Francis, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI all agree; civilly remarried divorcees must go to confession and strive to be chaste (in mind and body) and have a valid and compelling reason for living together that precludes sexual encounter.

A priest leading people this way is exercising real pastoral care. **Sins are not being excused; sinners are being healed.**

Penitents are being chastised, but they are being chastised by wisdom in mercy and love.

These situations present real pastoral moments that should be cherished, moments that bring people closer to Christ and to His Church while at the same time gently putting discipline into the lives of penitent sinners in the context of mercy and love. If they fall, as expected they will, they are to be corrected, forgiven, and encouraged to take up the cross again. According to tradition, even Jesus fell three times and He told us to forgive [seventy seven times](#). He knows we all will fall, so why are we upset when a divorced and re-married couple fail at chastity when they are sincerely trying to attain it? More specifically, why is anyone upset when a divorced-remarried couple for the sake of the children vow to live with each other in chastity, frequent confession, regularly pray and sacrifice under the direction of a pastor

who is leading them to spiritual perfection because they love and trust him who first showed mercy and compassion to them while gently guiding them and progressively leading them to the fullness of truth and communion?