

July 31, 2017

Feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola

Your Holiness,

I write this letter with love for the Church and sincere respect for your office. You are the Vicar of Christ on earth, the shepherd of his flock, the successor to St. Peter and so the rock upon which Christ will build his Church. All Catholics, clergy and laity alike, are to look to you with filial loyalty and obedience grounded in truth. The Church turns to you in a spirit of faith, with the hope that you will guide her in love.

Yet, Your Holiness, a chronic confusion seems to mark your pontificate. The light of faith, hope, and love is not absent, but too often it is obscured by the ambiguity of your words and actions. This fosters within the faithful a growing unease. It compromises their capacity for love, joy and peace. Allow me to offer a few brief examples.

First there is the disputed Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia*. I need not share my own concerns about its content. Others, not only theologians, but also cardinals and bishops, have already done that. The main source of concern is the *manner* of your teaching. In *Amoris Laetitia*, your guidance at times seems intentionally ambiguous, thus inviting both a traditional interpretation of Catholic teaching on marriage and divorce as well as one that might imply a change in that teaching. As you wisely note, pastors should accompany and encourage persons in irregular marriages; but ambiguity persists about what that “accompaniment” actually means. To teach with such a seemingly intentional lack of clarity inevitably risks sinning against the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. The Holy Spirit is given to the Church, and particularly to yourself, to *dispel* error, not to foster it. Moreover, only where there is truth can there be authentic love, for truth is the light that sets women and men free from the blindness of sin, a darkness that kills the life of the soul. Yet you seem to censor and even mock those who interpret Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* in accord with Church tradition as Pharisaic stone-throwers who embody a merciless rigorism. This kind of calumny is alien to the nature of the Petrine ministry. Some of your advisors regrettably seem to engage in similar actions. Such behavior gives the impression that your views cannot survive theological scrutiny, and so must be sustained by *ad hominem* arguments.

Second, too often your manner seems to demean the importance of Church doctrine. Again and again you portray doctrine as dead and bookish, and far from the pastoral concerns of everyday life. Your critics have been accused, in your own words, of making doctrine an ideology. But it is *precisely* Christian doctrine – including the fine distinctions made with regard to central beliefs like the Trinitarian nature of God; the nature and purpose of the Church; the Incarnation; the Redemption; and the sacraments – that frees people from worldly ideologies and assures that they are actually preaching and teaching the authentic, life-giving Gospel. Those who devalue the doctrines of the Church separate themselves from Jesus, the

author of truth. What they then possess, and can only possess, is an ideology – one that conforms to the world of sin and death.

Third, faithful Catholics can only be disconcerted by your choice of some bishops, men who seem not merely open to those who hold views counter to Christian belief but who support and even defend them. What scandalizes believers, and even some fellow bishops, is not only your having appointed such men to be shepherds of the Church, but that you also seem silent in the face of their teaching and pastoral practice. This weakens the zeal of the many women and men who have championed authentic Catholic teaching over long periods of time, often at the risk of their own reputations and well-being. As a result, many of the faithful, who embody the *sensus fidelium*, are losing confidence in their supreme shepherd.

Fourth, the Church is one body, the Mystical Body of Christ, and you are commissioned by the Lord himself to promote and strengthen her unity. But your actions and words too often seem intent on doing the opposite. Encouraging a form of “synodality” that allows and promotes various doctrinal and moral options within the Church can only lead to more theological and pastoral confusion. Such synodality is unwise and, in practice, works *against* collegial unity among bishops.

Holy Father, this brings me to my final concern. You have often spoken about the need for transparency within the Church. You have frequently encouraged, particularly during the two past synods, all persons, especially bishops, to speak their mind and not be fearful of what the pope may think. But have you noticed that the majority of bishops throughout the world are remarkably silent? Why is this? Bishops are quick learners, and what many have learned from your pontificate is *not* that you are open to criticism, but that you resent it. Many bishops are silent because they desire to be loyal to you, and so they do not express – at least publicly; privately is another matter – the concerns that your pontificate raises. Many fear that if they speak their mind, they will be marginalized or worse.

I have often asked myself: “Why has Jesus let all of this happen?” The only answer that comes to mind is that Jesus wants to manifest just how weak is the faith of many within the Church, even among too many of her bishops. Ironically, your pontificate has given those who hold harmful theological and pastoral views the license and confidence to come into the light and expose their previously hidden darkness. In recognizing this darkness, the Church will humbly need to renew herself, and so continue to grow in holiness.

Holy Father, I pray for you constantly and will continue to do so. May the Holy Spirit lead you to the light of truth and the life of love so that you can dispel the darkness that now hides the beauty of Jesus’ Church.

Sincerely in Christ,

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Former chief of staff for the U.S. Bishops' committee on doctrine