

A NOTE ON AMORIS LAETITIA

BY
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The uproar over Pope Francis and *Amoris Laetitia* continues to crescendo -- and not just on blog sites -- across the globe. Traditionalists, in particular, scent the odor of heresy in what they see as an opening to the total dismantling of the Church's perennial teachings on the permanence of sacramental marriage. Before looking at this claim, it is most important to recall the recent history of the Mass and the reception of Holy Communion as understood and practiced by the faithful before Vatican II.

My senior readers will recall that at a typical Sunday Mass of their childhood perhaps only a few would come forward to kneel at the altar rail. The celebrant could easily handle the distribution of the hosts. The office of Eucharistic Minister was nonexistent. At least in the parishes I knew, one line of communicants at the altar rail was typical. Communion of altar boys was most rare as they would have to request it in advance. I recall one lady who always sat in the front row and received Communion every Sunday. When this was commented on, someone said, "Oh well, she's a convert and is very serious!"

It is true that Pius X urged more frequent communion and under Pius XII the "Pray the Mass" movement was strong (copies of Fr Steadmen's **My Sunday Missal** still turn up online), yet nothing like the phenomenon of everyone at Mass coming forward existed at the time. At the same time, Catholics just didn't get divorced and re-married, and if they did they most certainly did not badger their pastor for Communion. Such a thought would never have crossed their minds. So this combination of circumstances assured that there was no "problem of Communion for the divorced and remarried."

Looking back, people think that these early practices were spiritually deficient, but I do not think that is obviously the case. Certainly, the Church did not think so. She required her children to communicate once a year at Eastertide (and still does), and this was described as a "duty." Not exactly a resounding call to mass Communion. And going well back in history we know that in some periods people only received on their death beds. No, we have a "problem" now requiring papal intervention because of a revolutionary understanding of the Mass that did not exist prior to Vatican II.

The theology of the Mass prior to the Second Vatican Council was firmly tied to the concept of sacrifice. Christ is offered to the Father in reparation for the sins of the world perpetually on all the altars of the world until the end of time. The self-same sacrifice of Calvary is upon the altar in an unbloody manner when the elements of bread and wine are by transubstantiation changed into the body and blood of the risen Christ. What was important, and only important, in those times was that the Sacrifice took place and was consumed as in the traditional Jewish theology of sacrifice. This was accomplished by the Celebrant and satisfied even if no one else was present. All the graces and merits of the Mass were there even if no one came forward to the altar rail. The Mass was complete.

But with the Second Vatican Council a not so subtle new theology of the Mass began to take hold. While the traditional understanding of the Mass as sacrifice was, with some difficulties, retained, a newer idea of the Mass as "communal meal" began to supersede sacrifice. At best the two were held in a kind of uneasy balance. Historians tell us that in the earliest times, the communal meal was soon separated from the Eucharistic sacrifice, but theologians in the wake of Vatican II tried to bring them back together with a strong emphasis on "meal." The altar becomes a table to which the faithful come forward to "dine." As waiters are necessary to deal with the throng, a new institution called "Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist" is devised. They deliver the Host directly into the hands of the diners. Under the post Vatican II "Meal" theology, any denial of communion inevitably appears as the very worst form of inhospitality--some are coming to the table while others sit in the pews ostracized. Priests routinely struggle with this problem at weddings and funerals when non-Catholics see no reason why they should not receive as well. Isn't everyone welcome at the table of the Lord? So the "problem" of communion for the divorced and re-married is tied to a particular post Vatican II interpretation of the Mass and the practices it has spawned. Sinners need to be nourished, so why not all sinners?

It really boils down to preferences and expectations people now have regarding their "rights" in this matter. It should be made clear to all that the Mass remains, as always, a sacrifice complete with all the graces and merits even if no one from the congregation comes to the altar rail.

In summary, due to the prevalence of the "Lord's supper" model of the Mass, increasing numbers of Catholics believe that the communion of the faithful is the high point of the Mass, the consecration being the preamble. We may thus expect continued pressure to extend communion to others now excluded such as homosexuals, contraceptors, and even non-Catholic Christians. In fact, expect to find the actual concept of a "state of Grace" to come under increasing attack.

Now to the specifics of *Amoris Laetitia*. Pope Francis makes two points that are completely unsatisfactory:

1) "Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin--which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such--a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end."

2) "Many people, knowing and accepting the possibility of living as brothers and sisters which the Church offers them, point out that if certain expressions of intimacy are lacking, it often happens that faithfulness is endangered and the good of the children suffers."

In my book **Last Things First**, I indicate four cardinal values of modern culture. They are: Absolute autonomy of the will, sexual gratification, consumerism and entertainment. The upshot of this combination is a people subject to fantasy and infantilism. A populace, in short, who cannot grow up. Obviously, it is a major task to address such people seriously on the topic of family but here are the outlines of an answer. If a person is in an "objective situation of sin," in this case adultery, then the only way they are not culpable is through mental defect or deception in which case their second marriage is void. Barring that unlikely scenario, the vast majority of cases are people who are committing adultery by their own consent. While one might commit an adulterous act without full consent of the will in a moment of passion, to plan and execute a divorce and then enter into a new marriage and stay with it requires considerable forethought. The only way open to such persons to "grow in the life of grace and charity" is to stop doing what they are doing. If you want to mingle your body and blood with the body and blood of the Son of God, you must do as He commands. There is no other way.

The Church has two standing offers for people who have got themselves into invalid marriages: Annulment, and cohabiting without conjugality. Pope Francis has certainly made the former much easier, with which I certainly have no problem. Given today's debased cultural values and the weakness of Church teaching, it is amazing that any Catholic marriages last. Although many lament the large number of annulments in America, at least they indicate that lots of people want to be right with the Church, unlike in Europe, where Catholics just ignore the problem.

Cohabiting without conjugality is addressed in the second quotation above. The general point here is that there may be cases in which such a solution would have negative outcomes causing possible unfaithfulness and problems with (any) children. The general Catholic answer here is that evil may never be done that good may come of it. Human goods are incommensurable, they cannot be

weighed and measured against each other, so that it is against right reason to intentionally destroy one human good (fidelity to the Divine order of marriage) in order to foster another (maintaining peace in the adulterous relationship).

But let us fill some detail into the Pope's example: Mary has left her sacramental marriage, received a civil divorce and married John in a civil ceremony. John is not a Catholic and holds the Church and its teachings in contempt, a fact that Mary knew before their marriage. Mary was lonely and in need of sexual companionship. She also brought two children into this new relationship. Mary realizes that she has made a mistake in her choice of a new husband whom she had initially found to be more exciting than her devout Catholic spouse. The very wildness which had so attracted her turns out to make John unstable and possessed of a roving eye. He was incredulous at the suggestion of a "Josephite" marriage as sex was a central focus of his life. His contemptuous laughter was accompanied with the clear warning that if she became his "sister" he would find a new wife somewhere else and she could take her brats and support them herself. A sad but, in my experience, not uncommon situation. It is obvious what the Catholic answer must be: Mary is heading for deep trouble with this guy and should take her children and get out of there, go to confession and return to the sacraments and, if possible, reconcile with her true husband. But suppose she decides that she has done her duty in offering him the Church's solution (living as siblings) and so decides to stay with him for the sake of her and her children's standard of living? If that is so then what in Heaven's name would be the point of her receiving Holy Communion at Mass? The Pope has told her that leaving the relationship might endanger her children and cause unfaithfulness if she follows Church teaching and lives with her new husband without cohabitation. She accepts this warning, fair enough. But what is the role of Holy Communion here? Is it supposed somehow over the long haul to cause a change of heart? Or would permission to receive much more likely confirm her in her choice to remain in an adulterous state? If she may receive Communion, then what is lacking in her full rehabilitation into the Faith? Over time the question of her adultery will simply fade away as it has done for the thousands of divorced and re-married couples in parishes across America who are currently tripping up to the communion rail every Sunday.

To be fair, nowhere does the Pope actually recommend Communion for the divorced and re-married. But he does seem to suggest the possibility of a "pastoral solution" based on local evaluations at the parish level. Everything is kept quite indefinite--the Pope is, after all, a Jesuit.

In my view we do indeed need to be sensitive to the problems facing Catholic couples today. Civil law used to protect families and no longer does so as in the past when contraceptives, divorce, pornography, sodomy, and abortion were

either illegal or strictly controlled. This failure, combined with uncertain post-Vatican II teaching, places a lot of strain on couples attempting to live out traditional Catholic marriage. My suggestion is to become part of a traditional Latin Mass community where will be found a lot of like-minded young families, homeschool your children, and join an educational co-op. Then do a lot of praying.

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