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WHY MORAL ABSOLUTES MATTER

Far from being rigid, moralistic or legalistic, insisting on the reality of moral absolutes promotes human flourishing and true human freedom.

Dr. Samuel Gregg

At the core of the now-famous *dubia* submitted to Pope Francis by four cardinals is the question of moral absolutes. By “moral absolutes,” Catholicism doesn’t mean vague generalizations such as “don’t offend others” or even more specific claims like “don’t steal unnecessarily.” Instead the Church has something very particular in mind: that there are intrinsically evil acts which admit of no exception whatsoever.

Back in 1984, Saint John Paul II affirmed, “The whole tradition of the Church has lived and lives on the conviction” that “there exist acts which *per se* and in themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reason of their object.” An example of such an exceptionless norm is the direct killing of an innocent person. Even if an act of directly killing an innocent person might save an entire city from destruction, such an act remains intrinsically wrong. It can therefore never be freely chosen—period.

As the late pope’s words indicate, this understanding of moral absolutes has always been Catholicism’s position. It’s also earned the Church considerable criticism over the centuries, including from some Catholic theologians in more recent decades. Some consider this teaching to be impractical or idealistic. Others believe it *is* acceptable to, for example, directly kill innocent lives in some

circumstances in order to attain apparently higher goals. But Catholicism's insistence that certain acts may never be done has also been affirmed by other Christians, Jews, and even pagans. Socrates famously claimed, "It is better to suffer wrong than to do it." Perhaps he understood something which some Catholics don't.

So, putting aside the specific context surrounding the four cardinals' *dubia*, why are moral absolutes so important? Why is Catholicism so insistent on this point?

Abandoning moral absolutes facilitates evil and irrationality

Christianity has never denied what might be called certain relativities in morality. One such relativity is that many moral principles apply variously. Take, for example, the commandment to honor our parents. The requirements of living out this positive commandment rightly vary with persons and circumstances. Some of the ways in which an eleven year-old child honors his living parents can't help but be different to how an adult honors his aging or deceased parents. Note, however, that acknowledging this variability involves no denial or undermining of the objectivity, universality and absoluteness stressed by Catholic ethics.

By contrast, if we try to relativize those *negative* norms which forbid absolutely, the door opens quickly to barbarism. Suddenly it becomes conceivable that the choice to carpet-bomb cities full of noncombatants might be ok if it's deemed likely to undermine the enemy's will to fight. Maybe it's occasionally fine to terminate a life of a person who you view as enduring unbearable suffering. Perhaps a government, in

order to forestall an invasion by Nazi Germany and prevent a subsequently brutal occupation, might choose to hand over its Jewish minority to the SS and certain extermination.

Put another way, in the absence of negative moral absolutes, you are at least in principle open to doing evil in order to realize good. That means you *are* willing to freely choose to do evil.

The deeply irrational nature of all this is illustrated by the truth that the only alternative to a morality that stresses exceptionless norms is some form of consequentialism. According to this way of thinking, as no less than John Rawls once wrote, “the good is defined independently of the right, and then the right is defined as that which maximizes the good.” The difficulty is that this involves trying to determine good and evil by seeking to measure something which can’t be quantitatively measured: i.e., moral good and moral evil. Consequentialism can thus only lead to moral irrationality.

Without moral absolutes, conscience loses its foundations

A second problem with rejecting the negative moral absolutes is that it undercuts the integrity and coherence of something which Catholicism has especially emphasized: the idea of conscience. Catholicism holds that there are two levels of conscience. The first is called *synderesis*.

This encapsulates the notion that knowledge of unchanging truths about good and evil is written into our nature as *rational* beings. As Saint Paul says, all humans have a basic prior knowledge of the essential elements of moral truth (Rm 2:14-15). To obey conscience-as-*synderesis* is to adhere to moral truths knowable through natural reason, including the truth that certain acts are intrinsically evil.

The second level of conscience is what Aquinas called *conscientia*. This is Aquinas's way of describing the *act* of applying the basic knowledge of *synderesis* to concrete situations. *Conscientia* thus involves individuals making practical judgments about what to do in light of *synderesis*. That's why an erring *conscientia* doesn't necessarily absolve me of guilt. The guilt may involve my suffocation over time of the voice of *synderesis*: of consistently deciding, for instance, that there may be circumstances when it's acceptable to commit perjury.

Applying *conscientia* isn't a simple exercise. Prudence is involved as we deduce on the basis of positive and negative principles how to act in different conditions. But the truly prudent person will always exclude from the range of possible choices any act which involves directly violating the negative moral absolutes. For, not to exclude such choices would be to (1) act unreasonably and (2) deny the moral truth found in our *synderesis*. It would also risk turning the discernment, to which Pope Francis often refers, into a process of rationalizing evil acts. In short, there is *no* prudent act which involves violating any of the negative moral absolutes. No one can prudently discern that it's permissible in some circumstances to engage in idolatry.

Moral absolutes protect and promote the good

But does God insist that we may never do certain things because he wants order for the sake of order? The answer is "No." God also asks us never to do certain acts because He loves us and wants us to flourish.

In a time of emphasizing God's mercy, we risk forgetting that God is also a Lawgiver. This was most clearly manifested in the Decalogue given to the people of Israel by Yahweh. The same Decalogue was explicitly and rather bluntly reaffirmed by Christ in his encounter

with the rich young man (Mt. 19:16-19), especially the second tablet's prohibitions (Mt 19:19), the observance of which Christ identified as a condition for eternal life. Paul states that the law which is fulfilled by Christian love is summarized in the Commandments, most particularly the negative commandments contained in the second tablet (Rm. 13:8-10). These negative commandments are, as Aquinas writes in his *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, always binding and in every situation (*semper et ad semper*).

But what's noticeable about these negative commandments is how each of them protect certain fundamental goods in which we can choose to participate and thereby flourish precisely as human beings. The prohibition against directly killing the innocent, for instance, underscores the requirement to protect the good of human life. Likewise, the prohibition against bearing false witness highlights the good of truth- knowing and truth-telling.

To observe the negative commandments in each and every action is thus indispensable if we want to participate in such goods. The moral absolutes consequently function as signposts on what Christ describes as "a hard road that leads to life" (Mt. 7:14). In this sense, adhering to these absolutes is the first step towards true freedom, at least as that word is understood by Christians. Freedom, for the Christian, isn't just or even foremost a question of negative liberty. Rather, it's the living-out of the Christian life: the flourishing which we realize through living the virtues and achieving mastery over ourselves as children of God.

To reject or obscure the negative moral absolutes in the name of being pastoral, prudent, discerning, accompanying others etc., is thus to downplay or even deny the truth that everyone—rich, poor, man, woman, Jew, Gentile—is called to greatness by God. As one

saint once wrote, “*When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone.* It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the ‘poorest of the poor’ on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal” (VS 96).

Moral absolutes help disclose man’s ultimate horizon

There’s little question that adhering to the moral absolutes is demanding. For some, it’s even resulted in martyrdom. The last years of Thomas More’s life not only exemplify this, but also highlight further reasons why the moral absolutes are so significant for Christians.

It’s well-known that More tried to avoid publicly confronting Henry VIII’s policies after resigning the Lord Chancellorship in 1532. Yet, when asked to affirm the Oath to the Act of Succession on 12 April 1534, More declined to do so. He refused to specify the reason for his choice, beyond stating that swearing the Oath would violate his conscience. Nonetheless it’s clear that central to More’s refusal was his certain knowledge that he was being asked to affirm on oath something to be true which he believed to be false—an act that More, like all other Christians, understood as something which may never be done.

One reason we know this is that More emphasized this theme in writings composed while imprisoned in the Tower of London. In one note, More wrote: “Every act of perjury is (as it seems to me) a mortal sin without any exception whatsoever.” More’s act of *conscientia* thus involved being faithful to part of the *synderesis* written into reason itself and confirmed by Revelation: the moral absolute that it’s never permissible to lie on oath.

More's refusal to violate this exceptionless norm and thus sin mortally only makes sense if he believed that such a choice would in fact separate him from God and endanger his salvation. To that extent, More's refusal to lie on oath reflected his confidence that God's offer of eternal life which he makes to all people includes respecting the moral absolutes proposed to us as part of God's providential plan. More's adherence to the moral absolutes in the face of pressures which most of us would find unbearable consequently testified to the trust which God asks us to have *in* him and his promise of oneness *with* him if we freely choose, as More wrote in his Tower cell, "to walk the narrow way that leadeth to life."

Of course, every single one of us has departed from that way many times. All of us have violated one or more of the moral absolutes throughout our lives. The good news is that through a simple act of acknowledging our sins and resolving to go and sin no more, we can get up and continue walking on the path towards true freedom and true life.

Without the negative moral absolutes, however, we can have no sure knowledge of evil, when we have chosen it, and how it imperils our salvation. Considered in these terms, the moral absolutes are far from being a burden. Instead they are a tangible sign of God's love for us. To forget that in the name of being merciful would be folly itself.

Dr. Samuel Gregg

Five Words That Would Calm the Storm

[Steve Skojec December 13, 2016](#)

In one of the pivotal scenes of the Gospel — one of several moments in which the apostles begin to recognize Christ’s true power — we find Jesus asleep in the stern of a tempest-tossed boat.

And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that the ship was filled. And he was in the hinder part of the ship, sleeping upon a pillow; and they awake him, and say to him: Master, doth it not concern thee that we perish? And rising up, he rebuked the wind, and said to the sea: Peace, be still. And the wind ceased: and there was made a great calm. And he said to them: Why are you fearful? have you not faith yet? And they feared exceedingly: and they said one to another: Who is this (thinkest thou) that both wind and sea obey him? (Mark 4:37-40)

This is one of my favorite scriptures. Like so much of what happens in the New Testament, the speech is restrained, the drama of the scene muted. But explore the subtext: at least four of the apostles — Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John — were experienced fisherman, who spent their lives on the water. The storm must have been absolutely ferocious for them to have been so terrified. They turn to Our Lord and find Him sleeping, and they get a bit upset. As they rouse Him with their concerns of imminent doom, He turns and with just three words — “Peace, be still” — he brings the storm to heel.

The Roman Pontiff, whom St. Catherine of Siena famously referred to as “Our Sweet Christ on Earth”, also has the power to calm the raging storm now buffeting the Barque of Peter. It is not the battering of wind and waves that endangers the vessel, but confusion, error, and doubt — and worse, a rapidly metastasizing schism, spreading like a deadly poison throughout the Mystical Body of Christ.

When it comes to the self-made crisis in the Church — the mounting battle over marriage, divorce, remarriage, sacraments for those in objective grave sin, and the question of the existence of objective sin itself — our Holy Father, like the very Christ he is duty-bound to serve, has at his disposal five simple words that would pacify the tempest:

“No. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.”

These are, of course, the only answers that a Catholic could ever give to [the *dubia*](#). There are no other options. No exceptions. No pastoral discernment. No need for verbosity or for yet more nuance.

Distilled down to a crudely simple form, the *dubia* are essentially as follows:

1. **Can the divorced and remarried who are still engaged in a sexual relationship receive absolution and communion without a change of life?**
2. **Do absolute moral norms still exist?**
3. **Does objective grave sin still exist?**
4. **Is the teaching still valid that however much circumstances may lessen an individual's guilt, those circumstances cannot change an intrinsically evil act into a subjectively good act?**
5. **Does the Church's teaching that an appeal to conscience cannot overcome absolute moral norms still hold true?**

These five questions are so simple, their answers so obvious, they require no more than 30 seconds of Francis' time. (If it would make things easier, the five words could be spoken from the pressurized cabin of an airplane, an environment that seems to stimulate papal loquacity.)

Sadly, the only clarity Catholics now have from their shepherd-in-chief is the understanding that this will not happen. It has been nearly three months since Francis has been presented with the *dubia*. And what he has made obvious — through his own actions, inactions, and insinuations — is that even if he spoke, he would not answer in this simple, straightforward way. The stakes are just too high. For him to respond to the *dubia* in the orthodox fashion outlined above would be to undo the work of not just his precious synods, but his magnum opus, *Amoris Laetitia*.

If, on the other hand, he were to answer the *dubia* with the answers above inverted — as his exhortation seems to indicate is his thinking on these topics — he would, in essence, be making a public admission that he is a heretic — if we take as the [definition of heretic](#) that of St. Thomas: “a species of infidelity in men who, having professed the faith of Christ, corrupt its dogmas”.

So he does not answer. He cannot. And yet, not to answer *is to answer*. His silence, however, is anything but stoic. There are those who have been speaking on his behalf, acting like little better than henchmen, saying the things he is apparently afraid to say. Men close to him. Men such as a few of his [newly-picked cardinals](#) (or [old friends in the curia](#) or in [other influential positions](#) in Rome); certain useful [prelates](#) in the East; and certain advisers and allies in the media, such as Fr. [Antonio Spadaro](#) and papal biographer [Austin Ivereigh](#).

It is this last figure who seems to have taken point in the all-out assault against papal questioners. In an invective-laden and self-indulgent diatribe [at *Cruce*](#), Ivereigh

— who has constructed his own fortification against any personal criticism by [successfully suing the *Daily Mail* for libel](#) — tears viciously into the Four Cardinals and their supporters, impugning their motives and calling them “dissenters” from Church teaching akin to those who rose up during the papacy of John Paul II:

What to them seems entirely self-evident – arguments, logically developed from absolute first principles, backed by a few emeritus bishops, building to a case that cries out to be answered – almost always meets with silence from Rome. At this point there is a reaction of anger and stupefaction which over time coagulates into suppurating resentment.

Some will break off, claiming the one true Church lies elsewhere or nowhere, but most resentfully stay, “clinging onto my faith by my fingertips” as they like to say, or “still a Catholic – despite the pope’s best efforts to drive me out.”

Clinging to the pain of their betrayal, they take refuge in their progressive or traditionalist liturgies and incandescent websites, firing off [letters](#) and petitions from lobbies and associations, vainly demanding, as “faithful Catholics” that the pope do this, that, or the other.

[...]

Francis can no more respond to the cardinals’ *dubia* than Benedict XVI could answer a [petition](#) to ordain women as deacons: because the Catholic Church has its own mechanisms of development, based on consultation and spiritual discernment.

Put another way, whether it is a conclave or a synod, the Catholic Church likes to lobby-proof its deliberations, precisely to allow the Holy Spirit space to breathe.

Francis cannot answer the cardinals directly – although he has done indirectly countless times – without undermining that action of the Holy Spirit present in the most thorough process of ecclesial discernment since Vatican II. As he last week told the Belgian Christian weekly *Tertio*, everything in *Amoris Laetitia* – including the controversial Chapter 8 – received a two-thirds majority in a synod that was notoriously frank, open and drawn out.

Roma locuta, causa finita, as Catholics used to say. And the case is even more closed this time, because it is the universal Church which has spoken, not just the pope.

To respond to the cardinals would be tantamount to rewinding the clock, to refuting the very process of the synod, in order to rehearse arguments that the synod settled, if not resolved.

Accusations of schism, bitterness, impulsivity, and resistance to the “Holy Spirit” are thereby mixed with the cultivated deception of a “two-thirds majority” that even Msgr. Pinto inadvertently admitted, in [a recent interview with Edward Pentin](#), only came to exist after the rules were changed and the deck was stacked:

Given the clear manipulation at both synods, claiming they were the work of the Holy Spirit has disturbed some of the faithful. I therefore reminded him that the most controversial topics failed to obtain a two-thirds majority in the first synod, and so should customarily have been rejected (the Pope authoritatively instead insisted they be carried over to the second synod). To this, he replied: “Yes, but you bind the Holy Spirit to the two-thirds? That’s a bit special, no?”.

A two-thirds majority is required during a synod to offer reassurance that whatever passes is of the Holy Spirit. Synods also have [no authority to change doctrine and discipline](#), as stated in canon 342 of the Code of Canon Law, but rather to assist the Pope in safeguarding and promotion of sound doctrine concerning faith and morals.

To further argue his point, Msgr. Pinto referred to the “wide consultation” around the synod in the form of questionnaires, and pointed out that for the second synod last year, bishops’ conferences elected synod fathers to participate. He stressed that, for the second synod, every proposition passed by two-thirds. Therefore, for him, the two-thirds majority became an important sign of the Holy Spirit at work, but only when they all achieved the required majority to pass and did not need to be forced through from above.

Pentin, of course, reveals the way the papal cabal rigged the game:

Added to that inconsistency, he omitted to mention that not all the synod fathers were elected at the second synod: [45 were handpicked by the Pope](#) (exceeding the usual 15% limit of total delegates) because most of them supported controversial disciplinary changes in this and other areas. They included Cardinal Godfried Danneels, the archbishop emeritus of Brussels, Belgium, found to have covered up a sexual abuse case.

[...]

At the conclusion of the synod, the remarried-divorcee discernment and accompaniment proposition ended up [passing a two-thirds majority by just one vote](#), probably an impossible feat without the 45 unelected delegates and, it is argued, without the omissions in the text. [emphasis added]

It is of critical importance to remember that **not a single defender of *Amoris Laetitia* has attempted answer the *dubia***. They can't, for the same reasons Francis can't: it would ruin their momentum, embolden their opponents, and reveal their true agenda.

So their arsenal instead consists of threats, character assassination, misdirection, gloating, and scorn. Lacking any honest rebuttal, they are capable only of casting stones. Not one of these papal stand-ins has made an effort to appear concerned with truth; their only observable motive is getting what they want. And what they want will result in not just the complete destruction of sacramental discipline and institutionalized sacrilege, but also a critical wounding of all of the Church's claims — about Christ, about the Eucharist, about the infallibility of the Magisterium on faith and morals. Opening the door to those cases — however limited — in which the Church would allow those living in manifest grave sin to receive absolution and Holy Eucharist is tantamount to the removal of the cornerstone; a seemingly insignificant piece that brings the entire edifice tumbling down.

This has been the theme of the entire Francis pontificate: it is a non-stop attack on truth, on authority, on the Sacraments, on orthodoxy, on the very ability of the baptized Christian to know right from wrong with certainty and to form his conscience and act accordingly. It appears, in some strange way, to be an attempt to put back the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, to take away from us the belief that we can ever know such things as “good” and “evil” or ever live up to the Divine Law — while planting the doubt that such a law exists at all. It is a bizarre, solipsistic deception, seeming very much like something straight from the mouth of the serpent in the third chapter of Genesis.

Where the popes once named Doctors of the Church, Francis spits invective at “Doctors of the Law.”

Where the Church provided absolute moral clarity in a complex and fallen world, Francis rails against those seeking an understanding of “black and white”.

Where the Catholics of old stood athwart an empire, barbarians, and tyrants, suffering martyrdom before giving a single pinch of incense to a false god, Francis mocks any who are so committed to their faith that they appear “rigid”, deriding them as “fundamentalists” and slandering their desire to live out The Great Commission as proselytism, which, to his mind, is “the greatest sin”.

Already, the moral turpitude enshrined in *Amoris Laetitia* has already crept out fetid tendrils to pollute other teachings of the Church. Just this week, the bishops of Atlantic Canada [released a document](#) “allowing priests latitude to decide whether to give euthanasia seekers the sacraments before they are killed.”

Champagne also referred to the Holy Father’s *Amoris Laetitia* in explaining the Atlantic bishops’ vision of pastoral care for those contemplating or arranging for assisted suicide or euthanasia.

Amoris Laetitia affirms Catholic teaching while recognizing “there are people who are not yet there,” Champagne said.

Thus when it comes to people who are suffering and contemplating, or are arranging for assisted suicide or euthanasia, “we will welcome them, try to understand and journey with them.”

[...]

The Atlantic bishops’ document ... also quotes Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, or *Joy of the Gospel*.

The Holy Father “reminds us that the one who accompanies others must realize that each person’s situation before God and his/her life of grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without,” the Atlantic bishops write.

“Consequently, we must not make judgments about people’s responsibility and culpability.”

“To one and all we wish to say that the pastoral care of souls cannot be reduced to norms for the reception of the sacraments or the celebration of funeral rites,” they note.

Relativism. All is now relativism within the Church. The intentional obliteration of absolute moral values and the notion of objective grave sin is a gateway to the justification of every kind of evil. The true “Francis effect” is nothing less than the near-total erosion of the Catholic Faith in pastoral practice. And yet this revolution — for it most certainly is a revolt — is shrouded in cowardice. Its leaders are so accustomed to slinking around in darkness that they cannot bring themselves — even though they control the entire visible hierarchy of the Church — to make bold and unequivocal their heretical aims.

You want to unmake the Church? Say so. Stop conniving like snakes. Be men of action. Stake your claim. Make clear your purpose. See if you really can “be as gods,” triumphant and without the burden of consequence.

Cardinals and Bishops, Priests and Religious, laity of every kind who love Our Lord Jesus and His mystical bride, it is time to rise up together as a unified body and stand our ground. There is no more “wait and see”. There is no more benefit of the doubt, because *there is no more doubt*. No more trepidation about whether this, at last, is the hill to die on. There are no more hills.

Cardinal Burke, you — and by extension, those courageous prelates who joined you in issuing and supporting the *dubia* — promised us an act of [formal correction](#) in the event that Francis did not respond to the *dubia* as he should. We are awaiting the discharge of your sacred duty; we are anticipating the revelation to the Church of that which only the successors of the apostles can declare: whether the apparent material heresy of Jorge Mario Bergoglio — thus far accepted by the Universal Church as Pope Francis — is now manifest and obdurate, and whether the faithful have, therefore, a duty not to follow him.

Holy Father, time is running short, but you still have a chance to repent of what you have done. You could yet calm the storm with those five words: “No. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.” Our Blessed Lord made clear that no other answer will suffice. (Mt. 5:37) Otherwise, it is only a matter of time before a full-blown schism is upon us — and it will not be one of our making.

Correction: in the original article, we said “not a single defender of Amoris Laetitia has attempted answer the dubia.” While this is true of those who are speaking on behalf of the pope, Rocco Buttiglione did [attempt an answer](#) in defense of AL, which we [responded to here](#).